

ENDINGS BE DAMNED

Robert Kroetsch's "Gone Indian"

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IF ROBERT KROETSCH AND HIS WRITING have become a “cottage industry” in western Canada,¹ it is for good reason. Kroetsch recreates his *place* every time he writes; this is a profoundly interesting activity to the people who live in that place. In a sense, he accomplishes again and again what Sheila Watson did when she made the Cariboo “real” in *The Double Hook*. The difference, of course, is that Watson has been determined to maintain a distance from her work, while Kroetsch has demanded recognition of the complex relationship between himself and his texts. One reason for that difference may be simply a function of personality. The more interesting reason has to do with Kroetsch’s self-conscious and public exploration of the writing process. Kroetsch does not allow that the processes involved with literature — the writing of poetry and fiction, or the acts of criticism or reading — are closed. If writing reinvents the world, reading reinvents the text. His poetry, fiction, and criticism function as commentary and extension of each other: he demonstrates his theories of culture and literature by reference to his own texts. In Kroetsch’s own words, all are part of the story: “It’s the story, its treatment, the narrative itself, that’s the model, not an outside conception. . . . I think criticism is really a version of story, you see; I think we are telling the story to each other of how we get at story.”²

Kroetsch demands recognition of the self-reflexive nature of his work early in his writing career: in fact in his fourth novel, *Gone Indian*, published in 1973. Although it is a major novel, there has been very little critical attention paid to *Gone Indian*;³ much more attention has been given to the other two novels of the Out West triptych, and to the novels and collections of poetry since *Gone Indian*. The point remains, however, that Kroetsch highlights issues and ideas in *Gone Indian* that have preoccupied him in his subsequent work: play with traditional imaginative forms, and with the stability of the structures of language;⁴ interrogation of the nature of author, of fiction, of place. *Gone Indian* maps the territory that Kroetsch has travelled since the early seventies.

Discussion of Kroetsch's work involves a discussion of place. The particular place of his writing is western Canada, often Alberta. The *idea* of place is not so simply defined. E. D. Blodgett argues that the frontiers of English-speaking western Canada were drawn in linear patterns of railroad, survey lines, and sections that enforced a geographic and psychological closure even as they opened the West. He extends this contradiction to include a further contradiction between the geometric design of place and the genres of English-Canadian fiction of the West.⁵ In a sense the linear design does apply to Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*: Jeremy states his horror of "the inevitable circle" just before he vanishes, and his movement throughout the novel is not cyclic. The point, however, is made explicit that linearity does *not* require closure. It is precisely this contradiction between the perception of place and the manner in which place is presented in literature that Kroetsch addresses in *Gone Indian*. Jeremy wants to carry his quest further and he can: he is *not* trapped, either in the northwest or in reality. Because Kroetsch deliberately makes the place more real in language than in fact, Jeremy can transfigure himself *out* of it into what can be seen as an extension of the tall tale world he has encountered from his arrival: Jeremy goes Indian, and disappears. For Kroetsch, and for Jeremy, then, "to go west [is] to enter the mind's geometry, a long journey, one might say, of self-reflection, of finding one's self lost."⁶

Kroetsch's texts raise the question of place, an important question in Canadian writing. In a very real sense, Canada itself does not exist until it is written. Until that happens, until Kroetsch and Watson and others write the new world into existence, we remain mired in a middle passage⁷ — caught in the movement from the old world of Europe, the source of Canadian colonists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to a secure and authentic existence in the new world. The middle passage is figured in absence, of both public and social structures of organization, and private and individual structures of belonging and identity. It is also figured in silence: silence is the logical and necessary condition in the middle passage, the pendulum swing between somewhere and nowhere, between old and new worlds. As the pendulum pauses — for a moment, forever — personal and cultural identity, history, memory, language do not exist. The middle passage raises questions about the nature of place, *this* place, and the nature and possibility of human being in it. To move from Canada as nowhere to Canada as somewhere involves finding a language, and using it to describe — to name — place.

Kroetsch's work is positioned at this point of the middle passage. For Kroetsch Canada, and especially the Canadian West, is nothing if not an idea; to use Henry Kreisel's words, it is a state of mind.⁸ Much of Kroetsch's writing comes out of that idea: he is convinced that we can — *must* — make a new literature out of the new experience,⁹ new land, new place, and new language. As he says of himself and of naming: "Naming a new world has intrigued me . . . it's been a primary concern, that sense of a misnamed world or an unnamed world that had to be named."¹⁰

He begins by un-naming and un-inventing, and reinvents place, as he makes language the site of his writing.

Kroetsch's awareness of the significance, possibilities, and limits of literary and social construction is developed in the dialogue that occurs within and between his literary texts and his critical writing, a dialogue which often bears on the nature of writing in this country. The distinction between forms is frequently blurred: in *Gone Indian*, as elsewhere, fiction is the subject of his fiction.¹¹ Kroetsch uses the idea of the critical act as a way to write fiction: ¹² *Gone Indian* is a novel made out of Madham's commentary on Jeremy's taped text. Kroetsch denies the convention that the novel is not a fiction by engaging the reader in the fiction-making process.¹³ The fiction becomes *fiction*, and at the same time becomes more *real* than fiction. As Kroetsch has it, we create the world by naming it: the translation into fiction makes our identity and experience real. Robert Lecker argues that the border is a key to Kroetsch's work: it is the point at which opposites unite and undergo a metamorphosis, and is always in the process of transformation as it defies the static structures of a fixed world.¹⁴ In *Gone Indian* Kroetsch signals his interest in the border between security and diffusion of personality; in ontological terms between existence and annihilation; in language between creating and uncreating words and worlds.

WE SEE KROETSCH, with Jeremy, inventing the Canadian northwest in the writing of *Gone Indian*. The novel is an exercise in the creation of self and place, a point that Kroetsch makes explicit: one of Jeremy's unfinished doctoral dissertations begins with "Christopher Columbus, not knowing that he had not come to the Indies, named the inhabitants of that new world —."¹⁵ Like Columbus, on his trip to Canada Jeremy does not *really* know where he has landed but soon finds out that the strangeness and possibility of the place equal, if not surpass, his expectations. His transformations, from graduate student to Grey Owl, from weakling and victim to the Winter King, and from impotent human to buffalo bull are aspects of his invention of what becomes *his* northwest.

Jeremy defines himself in his tape recordings and the notebooks he has ready for another attempt at his dissertation. In a similar manner Madham creates himself in his letters to Jill Sunderman and his purportedly scholarly comments on Jeremy's work. Madham's definition in words may well be more significant than Jeremy's, although Jeremy seems to be the main character: everything we see and hear of him, however, is filtered through Madham's eyes and words. Madham's is the controlling consciousness of the novel, and he is clearly not reliable in the traditional sense. Of course this is part of Kroetsch's design: through Madham's slanted telling of the novel we come to question not only *his* assumptions and beliefs but our own

perceptions, as well as the place and experience we thought we knew and understood. Madham's narration is also the source of irony and humour in the novel: "*It is my own opinion that everything he [Jeremy] says can be taken at face value. He was as surprised as are we by the course of events, failing to understand, as he did, the nature of freedom*" (2). Of course nothing that Madham says Jeremy says can be taken at face value, nor can Madham's comments about himself; we learn later that it is Jeremy, not Madham, who understands the nature of freedom.

Jeremy is preoccupied with the necessity of his own self-creation in language: after nine years as a graduate student in the English Department of an American university, his unwritten dissertation threatens to ruin his life — as it has his sexual performance. He has many failed attempts at the dissertation to his credit:

"Going Down With Orpheus."

Eighteen months and four hundred pages. Abandoned.

"The Artist as Clown and Pornographer."

Nine months of reading and three hundred index cards. Sold to an M.A. candidate for twenty dollars.

"The Columbus Quest: The Dream, the Journey, the Surprise."

Eighteen weeks. I couldn't get past the first sentence. (62)

Unable to write he carries a tape recorder so that, in Madham's words, "he might commit to tape the meditations and insights that would help him complete his dissertation" (1). He finally sets out on his own Columbus quest in imitation of his childhood hero, Archie Belaney. The ostensible reason for his trip west is a job interview which Madham has arranged for him "at that last university in the last city on the far, last edge of our civilization" (6) — the University of Alberta. However, at the airport he answers the Customs officer's "Purpose of trip?" with "I want to be Grey Owl. . . . I want to become —" (6). Only in Grey Owl's country — Canada — can his dream of transformation come true:

"Sadness," old Madham says to me one day, "there's only one problem in this world that you take seriously."

"Right," I said.

"No," he said. "I mean yes. Why did Archie Belaney become Grey Owl?"

"How," I said. I raised my right hand, the palm facing the good professor's beaming face. Why he was sweating I do not know.

"The story of a man," I agreed, "who died into a new life."

"He faked the death."

"But he woke up free nevertheless."

"Be serious."

"One false move, Professor, and instead of addressing you, I'll be you. That's serious." (62)

That is, of course, exactly what happens: the twist in the novel is that it is Madham's quest that Jeremy lives out. All the discussion of identity comes from Madham, who controls the content of the book by presenting his edited transcrip-

tions of Jeremy's tapes: "Of course I have had to select from the tapes, in spite of Jeremy's instructions to the contrary: the mere onslaught of detail merely overwhelms" (13). Of course he also controls and disrupts chronological time in his presentation. Jeremy becomes real as Madham tells his story — and Madham does too. At the beginning of the novel he sums up Jeremy's motivations for the reader:

Jeremy believed that his whole life was shaped and governed by some deep American need to seek out the frontier. A child of Manhattan, born and bred, he dreamed always a far interior that he might in the flesh inhabit. He dreamed northwest, that is undeniable. Only let me assert: it was I who sent him there. (5-6)

Madham is preoccupied with the transformation of identity because *he* has died into a new life. His words about Jeremy apply equally to himself: "The possibility of transformation, I must recognize, played no little part in Jeremy's abiding fantasy of fulfilment. It gave him, in the face of all his inadequacies, the illusion of hope" (7). Madham's hope is that he can go home again, and through Jeremy he does.

The random naming of Jeremy after Jeremy Bentham is no less bizarre than Madham's assigning of his own new name: Kroetsch seems to be saying that all identity is accidental, relative, random, and changeable. Curiously Jeremy is trapped into living out "the accident of his name: that one portion of identity which is at once so totally invented and so totally real" (51) — his mother tells him that his absent father "wanted [him] to grow up . . . to be a professor" (52). Like Madham's, Jeremy's status is figured according to academic standards. He has yet, however, to complete his degree and become a success in Madham's terms: "Professor Madham, you did this. You sent me out here. You, with your goddamned go-get-a-job syndrome, publish, head a committee. Become a dean and die" (19). He has spent his years of graduate school being guilty about the academic work he is not doing, which results in his inability to perform sexually:

Guilt. Old-fashioned guilt. Every time I lie down I feel guilty because I'm not up and studying. Work on your new dissertation, Sadness. Review for the final oral. Retake that German exam. Write that paper that's four years overdue. I'M TOTALLY GUILTY. (35)

His rebellion against his eastern life is also figured in academic standards. On his trip west he begins by reacting against Madham and the university: "*Instead of doing as I instructed, he [Jeremy] used the recorder to insult everything the university must stand for*" (1). Naturally enough, he addresses his tapes to his thesis supervisor. After missing his job interview twice he gradually surrenders himself to the principles of the new order, which results in his discarding the tape recorder and disappearing. His problem of guilt is solved in the process: he and Bea Sunderman become lovers and disappear together.

After trying to live up to his namesake, and then to his supervisor, Jeremy tries to become his own hero. Like Madham, Jeremy eventually invents his new name and makes it and his new identity *real*. Like the reborn Grove, Jeremy is the quin-

tessential Kroetsch hero. He and Grove create a past while their real journey is into a future of possibility.¹⁶ Like Grove, Jeremy is not acting out the quest for identity as the given authentic self, but the belief that the chosen fiction is the fullest and most free imaginative act.¹⁷ Kroetsch says of Grove that “as his reality, so to speak, comes into doubt, he comes more and more to represent our own predicament.”¹⁸ We might say the same of Jeremy.

Madham attributes one thing to Jeremy which is corroborated by Jeremy himself: his need to seek out the wilderness. Jeremy substitutes the border for the frontier, and performs the liberating but risky act of crossing it.¹⁹ He is very like Melville’s “judicious, unencumbered travellers . . . who cross the frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpet bag, — that is to say, the Ego”²⁰ except that he has left his suitcase — and “himself” — behind. Jeremy fastens on the dream of Grey Owl and wilderness when he is playing the Indian with the other children on the street:

I didn’t want to be the Indian at all. They told me, You be the Indian, Sadness. We’ll hunt you down. No matter where you hide, we’ll hunt you down. We’ll kill you. And they threw broken bricks and they tied me up. . . . So the tailor across the hall from my mother’s apartment brought me in his books of Grey Owl; one by one, he brought them. Unfolded them. Unveiled them. He gave me his dream of the European boy who became . . . pathfinder . . . borderman . . . the truest Indian of them all.

When I was old enough, brave enough, a teaching assistantship in my bedroll, I fled Greenwich Village. . . . Yes, to the wilderness. To a labyrinth of streets and highways and corridors through which, in nine years, I did not learn to find my way. (94)

What Jeremy sees as wilderness is Binghamton, the centre of cultivation and civilization that Madham fled to from the northern prairie. Jeremy’s and Madham’s imaginations *make* Binghamton signify whatever it does for each of them: in Lecker’s border metaphor, it would constitute a border between prairie wilderness and Manhattan civilization.²¹ As Kroetsch points out repeatedly, truth is not absolute: “A lie, I thought to myself. A downright lie. What has happened to truth?” (70). Kroetsch would say that nothing has happened to truth, but much has happened to our *idea* of it, and whether or not we even believe that it exists. Much of *Gone Indian* illustrates that, especially in the new world, truth, reality, and individual existence are not fixed and are not what we may have thought them to be.

MADHAM OFFERS NUMEROUS CLUES to his “real” name and identity: Robert Sunderman, the young man who disappeared playing hockey on a frozen slough. He and Sunderman both have “the perfect physique”; Madham is the same age as Sunderman would be; at the end of the novel he grieves that

Worlds End, which he has come to love as well as if it were his own (154), is deserted.²² When he tells us that Jeremy dreamed northwest he says of himself: "I am a western boy who ever dreamed east" (95):

The forest of my own intent is inhabited by strange creatures, surely. The figure of Roger Dorck for one comes to haunt me. He was a dedicated man who spent his life caring for the family of a drowned friend. I cannot for a moment accept the notion that his "accident" was motivated by disappointment in love. Accident is a part of our daily lives; if not, then all of modern physics is madness. Are not explanations themselves assigned almost at random? (51)

Of course Madham assigns explanations at random to Jeremy's actions, but Kroetsch is pointing up a more widespread disorder. Most revealing is Madham's admission that he has caused Jeremy's trip to "his" northwest. He casts it as a fulfillment of Jeremy's childhood dream, but clearly it is his own quest that Jeremy fulfils vicariously for him:

The truth is, I was myself born out there on those wind-torn prairies, on the ripped edge of that northern forest — the details are unimportant. Perhaps I never mentioned as much to Jeremy. But no, he was the student, not I, and it was I who set him his demanding task, his continent's interior to discover . . . I sent him out there as on a mission, as on a veritable quest for something forever lost to me and yet recoverable to the world. (13-14)

That something lost to Madham is not only his wife, with whom Jeremy disappears at the end of the novel, but the magical possibilities which are opened up in the West. Bizarre events begin even before Jeremy is mistaken for Roger Dorck: in the Customs room at the airport he encounters the young blond smuggler disguised as a woman, who says he was a buffalo in a previous life. Jeremy responds by leaving the Customs quarters *disguised as himself*, but is mistaken for Dorck due to an exchange of luggage — and egos? The series of events thus started cannot be stopped. The ending has been determined: "Mr. Dorck must have read in this notebook, trying to discover who took his suitcase. And he printed across the bottom of the page: 'THIS, THEN, IS HOW IT ENDED'" (23).

In contrast to Jeremy, Madham appears to be satisfied with the civilized life which he sought and found. Madham escaped that strange western place, and as mysteriously as Jeremy eventually does: no one knows whether or not he actually went through the ice, and if he did, whether or not it was deliberate. His father's "[n]ever found hide nor hair of my boy" (131) heightens the comedy — a body could not *disappear* in a frozen slough. Nevertheless, Madham vanishes as completely as Jeremy does later, and with as little explanation. There are some similarities: Madham/Sunderman leaves a hole in the ice; Jeremy's tape recorder from which Madham constructs them both is left hanging from a bridge over a frozen river. Their ends are prefigured early in the book: "You [Jill] knocked a hole in the ice with your laugh. He [Jeremy] leaped. He plunged in at the broken edge. Re-

turned, returned. Into the bath of cold, and down. The white world around him turning black" (43). Madham is sure that Jeremy perished rather than escaped in the way he remembers because if Jeremy got away like *he* did, another exchange of the carpet bag/ego would occur and their identities would emerge — Jeremy would experience the same metamorphosis and *be* him: "It would surely seem impossible that anyone might drown in all that ice and snow. God knows, I shall never forget it. And yet, Robert Sunderman went through the ice. Or knocked a hole in the ice and disappeared. . . . No; it is just possible" (155). At the end of the novel Madham is "persuaded" by his jealousy and envy that the lovers could only have disappeared into death:

She [Carol] would have them hop down from the train, even as Grey Owl and Anahareo might have jumped headlong out of a boxcar with their few surviving beaver. With all the unbounded wilderness rolling to the north. Making a clean break into the last forest. . . . "No," I told her. "Not ever. . . . I came east on that same line, rode through a hard winter. I waved at the section hands who only stood stock still in the blistering cold air and let me go. I saw the rivers running north. Under the ice and snow: locked —" (153)

He is unwilling to believe that Jeremy may have escaped as he did, or that the possibilities he denied himself could ever have become real for Jeremy. Madham's apparently concluded self is dearly won by exile and denial.²³

Madham carefully cultivates his persona as the dignified professor. He "grasps" at "the professor's domain: the world of reflection, of understanding. The insight born of leisurely and loving meditation. The word made human. Jeremy, it would seem, only uttered a curse" (13). When irritated or threatened by Jeremy's tapes, however, his dignified demeanour lapses and with it his language: "The poor fucker finally flipped out. He was a buffalo's ass from the word go" (106). Madham must claim prior ownership — authorship? — when Jeremy makes Madham's northwest his own: "I must break my silence, Miss Sunderman. Your idiot lascivious student knew *nothing*: and yet would dare to dream *my* northwest" (101). When his control slips he gives away his past:

Is it not odd, this impulse in the erring man: this need to divulge, to confess? This little need assumed immense proportions as Jeremy let himself be propelled by unconscious desires into self-revelation. To get into a corner on those vast prairies is not easy. And yet the words of self-betrayal flowed like a spring flood, like the waters from a breached dam, rolling and tossing and breaking a lost body into oblivion . . . (95-96)

The entire novel is a function of *Madham's* need to confess. What he says about Jeremy can be said of himself: Jeremy not only becomes Madham, but Madham in a sense becomes Jeremy as he is revealed through him. As Jill bends over Jeremy's open suitcase and creates him out of its contents (20), she is creating Madham as well: his life is on display in his comments on Jeremy's work. When Jeremy enters

Madham's former world he shares parts of his life, and other people's as well. Eventually he becomes Madham/Sunderman with Bea: "You came back. I have been waiting. It was a long time" (148). In the diffusion of personality we are left with, in Arnold Davidson's words, two unclear self-portraits joined in one blurred double exposure.²⁴ The diffusion of personality is completed when Jeremy disappears.

In the northwest Jeremy enters completely into the carnival world where the usual rules of behaviour and logic do not apply. Kroetsch presents this in the form of the Notikeewin Winter Festival, to which Jeremy is irresistibly drawn. All identity comes into question in the carnival world, until Kroetsch seems to be asking if we know who we are, or if we exist at all. It is an ironic and absurd world: in his Grey Owl outfit Jeremy is the one who looks most like an Indian — Joe Beaver's children giggle and ask why his hair is that way (65) — and is eventually mistaken for one: Jeremy and Grey Owl are the truest Indians of them all.

Jeremy discards his identity and his hold on reality: all things are possible as the boundaries between humans, and between humans and animals are dissolved. Mistaken for Dorck, who is the winter king, Jeremy re-enacts Dorck's snowmobile accident and finds another world under the snow: "Snow on my eyelashes told me that I was inside a snowman, looking out on a strange, distant world. . . . Say no more. Listen to the fall of silence, hear your own last breath and know for one instant you are no longer" (40). He wins the snowshoe race, although he has never worn snowshoes before: "like a bear that was learning to dance" (82) he runs right out of himself (90) and has to be dragged down at the end of the race as he heads farther west to the Rocky Mountains. During his race his human identity comes oddly close to the earth and the animal kingdom: he is urged on by a magpie that travels with him, he passes other runners by swerving to follow a rabbit, he dreams a buffalo and stumbles with it at the old buffalo jump. He cannot "connect," however, either visually or linguistically, with the men who look like muskrats and beat him for being the *Indian* who won the race: "Again I did not answer. When I might have saved myself, simply by speaking. But I would not speak. For if I had tried, it would have been a tongue I did not understand" (93). The transformation is complete — the next time Jeremy loses language he will disappear.

The diffusion of identities is complicated by the repetitions in the novel: the cowboy and Roger Dorck are both injured by wild fights and falls through the air; Dorck is Bea Sunderman's lover both before she marries Sunderman and after his disappearance, and Jeremy replaces Dorck with Bea and as Winter King; Sunderman telephoned Bea after his disappearance, which is re-enacted when Jeremy calls for Dorck after Dorck's accident; Bea's daughter becomes Dorck's lover after Bea's disappearance because he thinks she is a younger Bea; Bea disappears as her husband did, while Carol says that *she* would have gone with her husband; Mad-

ham replaces Jeremy with his wife, while Jeremy replaces Madham/Sunderman with his; Madham, with Carol, acts out the buffalo mating that Jeremy dreams; Carol is the same age as Madham/Sunderman's daughter Jill. Jeremy is acting out Madham's conflicting desire to return to the open possibilities of a disordered realm which he will not undertake precisely because of its lack of limit: "Carol, in her own delightful way, fails to grasp the consequence of the northern prairies to human definition: the diffusion of personality into a complex of possibilities rather than a concluded self" (152). Madham will not risk that diffusion — even though he may occasionally be "suffocating in this place [Binghamton], saturated, walled in, drowning" he will not go back, or even leave Carol's bed (152).

As well as rites of transformation, the carnival includes ritual tests of strength and endurance: "Combat, goddamnit, that's what it is. Trial by strength. Trial by chance. Trial by wager. Trial by drowning in your own sweat. Trial by freezing your balls off. Trial by falling. Trial by flying" (75). The highlight of the carnival occurs when Jeremy has to choose the Winter Queen from three identical contestants: "I mean, they didn't just bear a striking resemblance to each other. They were impeccable duplicates. They might have been Xeroxed copies of some lost original . . ." (112). He agonizes over the impossible choice, not knowing until afterward that the contest is rigged: "You're a figurehead. . . . You're not supposed to judge. . . . They sell tickets. The person who gets the most buyers is the winner" (120). Which reminds us of Dorck's comment in Jeremy's notebook at the beginning: this, then, is how it ended.

Jeremy's personality is, of course, diffused into a complex of possibilities which he finds at least as fascinating as they are frightening. Kroetsch delights in the skewing of reality he achieves in his fiction, by drawing on carnival:²⁵ rather than writing as if Jeremy's, and our lives depended on it, he celebrates the possibility of the dissolution of order. The carnival — the Notikeewin Winter Festival — reverses the usual order of things and raises uncommon questions and possibilities. Jeremy is plagued by problems of identity: they might be said to define him. His clothes, his idea of what Grey Owl should look like, are both a disguise and a reflection of his own identity. When he tries to be Grey Owl, Madham casts him instead as a savage: "He is sloppy, uptight, unclean: your version of a savage. . . . Jeremy is unshaven and wears no shirt over his bare chest. He has come in out of the icy sunlight in his levis and moccasins and his buckskin jacket. For your scalp. For your maidenhood" (21-22). His real Indian transformation happens only when Joe Beaver and his wife rescue him after his beating, dress him in Joe's clothes, and tell him "Grey Owl would be proud. . . . He was brave like you" (100-1).

The most radical questioning of the nature of existence and reality occurs in Jeremy's buffalo dreams. The buffalo seem to Jeremy to be a symbol of a positive, primitive force in mythical and historical as well as personal terms. The settlement

of the West is undone as Jeremy dreams the return of the buffalo to the prairie and a reversal of history:

And the buffalo came back in his dreaming. Out of the north they came. . . . And the herds moved onto the bald prairies. The wheatfields were gone. . . . Tell the Bloods. The cattle are gone from the prairie ranches; the ranches are gone. Tell the Piegans. The wolves are come from the north, are waiting to eat. The grizzly comes down from the western mountains. Tell the Stonies to build the buffalo pound. Tell the squaws to gather buffalo chips. Tell the dogs to be silent. Tell the hunter to get for his medicine bundle FIRST a decorated pipestem, THEN . . . the skin of a grey owl, THEN a painted buffalo robe. . . . (101-3)

He also dreams the scalping of Edmonton, an undoing of white settlement, and his new name:

“Now,” he [Poundmaker] said, “you are Has-Two-Chances.”

It was as if the calling of the name itself awakened him. Or perhaps it was only the motion of the moving truck. But he found himself in a dark so dark he might have been in a womb. Dreaming the world to come. (106)

His transformation is made complete by his sexual success with Buffalo Woman: “Lumpish and swollen, he could not tell the real from the feigned. The beast imagining the beast imagining the beast” (108). Madham thinks that Jeremy is fascinated by buffalo because they “*make love standing up*” (106), but the incident is clearly more than simply a solution of his physical problem: it signifies the potency and power he does not have in his Jeremy Sadness life and has found here, which is his reason for refusing to go back.

THE QUESTIONING OF HISTORY, existence, and identity in Jeremy’s dream and throughout the novel calls into question the nature of place and reality. Kroetsch suggests that Jeremy’s and Madham’s northwest has many of the characteristics of the carnival because the physical place, the *landscape*, causes a change in existence, perception, and reality. Here is Jeremy on the topic: “It was my own theory at the time that man living in wide-open spaces had a different relation to objects: because he could see where he stood, where he was going” (87). Jeremy certainly has a different clarity of vision here and seemingly Madham did as well, which would explain both their actions. Humans are not simply transformed into other people or animals, but are connected with the earth: at one point Kroetsch describes Jeremy and Jill, covered in snow, as “moving landscapes” (57). Madham explains the mysteries of the place in terms of physical conditions, and ascribes to Jeremy the symptoms of arctic hysteria: “The extreme cold, the long nights, the solitude of *unbounded* space: these are the enemies that induce that northern ecstasy. . . . At any rate, the afflicted person, quite commonly,

senses the presence of another who is not in fact there" (123-24). As well as being boundless and curiously immaterial (surely a reference to Jeremy Bentham), the landscape is timeless: at World's/Worlds End all the clocks are stopped. Madham as much as admits that the presence of unbounded space and the absence of time have driven him east:

Your Jeremy, growing up in the east, felt compelled to play Indian; I can only assure you I have been Indian enough. I prefer to forget the experience, and yet I do recollect the sense of being — how shall I say? — *trapped* in the blank indifference of space and timelessness. And I would insist it was just that — the pressure not of time, but of its absence — that horrified those brave men who stumbled onto the central plateau of Antarctica. (124)

The physical nature of the place affects the perception of it, as well as the nature of existence there. The blank indifference of space and timelessness is *real*, and determines what human efforts will succeed: clearly in Kroetsch's opinion it only *just* allows individual existence. Silence is related to space,²⁶ and it is silence that Jeremy enters at the end of the novel.

From the start Jeremy has seen that "this is a peculiar land, Professor. Illusion is rife" (8). In such a place the only shared reality is brought into existence *in language*: "That's when the driver said, 'Notikeewin.' As if by speaking the name he had created a place on the blank earth" (16). Kroetsch suggests, though, that the world thus created is a mirage, where Jeremy at least could disappear: "They [the telegraph poles] made me notice the space — they or their shadows on the snow, on the horizon — and I couldn't even pretend to sleep. Because if I did I might wink out and be gone forever" (15). Of course that is exactly what he eventually does — the place makes him disappear into itself. Jeremy is positioned on the boundary between reality as he knows it and some other order — like Madham, one false move and he becomes something else. In the "virulence and vise of his fatal impulse to seek out the unknown" (72) Jeremy, with Columbus, invents his new world: "The Columbus quest for the oldest New World. The darkest gold. The last first. I was lifting my hidden face. To the gateway beyond. To the place of difficult entrance. To the real gate of the dreamed cave. . . . I had tongued the unspeakable silence" (147). The sexual metaphor functions both for the process of creation and the limit of language: Jeremy loses words for the second time when he is in bed with Bea. His final transformation occurs as he moves out of language:

I shall, at last, commence my dissertation. Christopher Columbus, not knowing that he had not come to the Indies of his imagination. Imagined that he had come to the Indies. . . . I am going to lie here for the rest of my life, talking, recording everything. Until I can think nothing that I do not speak. Speaking. Until the inside and the outside are one, united — (149)

When the inside and the outside are the same, Jeremy no longer exists, which is

where he has been tending throughout — reaching through the mirror to touch his own skin, fearing that Dorck's suitcase may contain his own possessions (19), metamorphosing from human to beast and back. Jeremy rejects the method of his self-creation and turns off the tape recorder. He discovers the failure of the word and rejects metaphor and language,²⁷ which has large significance for the world that language has created. Bea's house is truly Jeremy's world's end.

Madham would have it that Jeremy and Bea flee to be cornered like animals (157), run down by a train that was “both *off schedule* and using a track it was not supposed to be *on*” (153). In the middle passage where structure, organization, and meaning are in question, such circumstances are not only possible, but likely to occur. The strangeness of the place appropriately enough persists, and Jeremy is literally and metaphorically gone. In a sense he has the same problem as Johnnie Backstrom and the boy on the bull in *The Words of My Roaring*: since they don't lose they have to find a way to get off.²⁸ Jeremy jumps. Grey Owl makes a new life as an imposter and an illusion; in Jeremy's jump between illusion and reality,²⁹ which way is which? After he tongues the unspeakable silence of the Columbus quest for the oldest New World, he ceases to speak and thus ceases to exist — his taped and transcribed words are all that are left of him. He escapes into story: “the rest is fiction” (157). Jeremy becomes a fiction, the title of the novel. To go Indian is his fictive naming: the fiction makes him — and us — real.

Kroetsch raises a serious and complex issue here: if we make our place in language, and language is a game, what is the nature of place? Clearly place — and self — can be spoken out of as well as into existence. It is an unstable balance to maintain, a difficult negotiation of the middle passage — between somewhere and nowhere, in and out of silence — which threatens to become permanent. That appears to be what Madham feared, being mired between worlds, yet the trip into the middle passage is a positive move for Jeremy. In a sense Jeremy is an older new-world man than Madham, and after having experienced the so-called civilization of the East first-hand wants to return to a more golden place and time: *in illo tempore*. The release from identity which he welcomes is a risk Madham will not take; he opts instead for security, antiques, and the dignity of his grey temples. Who wins and who loses we cannot, and Kroetsch does not, tell.

Kroetsch raises the question not only of what this does to language, but of what it does to the speaker: Jeremy ceases to exist when he does not talk; Madham, having disappeared once, talks incessantly. Kroetsch circles back to language, and construction in language: his northwest exists only in his, Madham's, and Jeremy's words. The ending of *Gone Indian* must be as it is: we are left with a teller we do not trust and a tale we cannot realistically believe. If Jeremy is on the pendulum swing between worlds — not unlike the bridge which spans the abyss between the two worlds, the British garrison and the Indian encampment, in John Richardson's *Wacousta* — Kroetsch shows him swinging so far out that he disappears. He does

not so much enter the middle passage as exit the process entirely — or fall out of cosmologies.³⁰ As Kroetsch says, to go into pure chaos is to vanish.³¹ For Jeremy, the Icarus flight — fall? — is infinitely preferable to cyclic repetition, a kind of closure:

And then I was afraid. Frightened of the inevitable circle. . . . Remembering a passage from Grey Owl: a wall of snow . . . a hissing mass of snow-devils . . . caught in the grip of one endless circle . . . the deadly circle . . . always the lost man circling blindly, come back upon himself . . . finding himself only, his own tracks mocking him . . . the dark labyrinth become a place of phantasma and fevered imaginings . . . possessed by a shuddering dread . . . the endless circle his end — (144)

Early in the novel Dorck's, the cowboy's, and his own wild flights through the air show Jeremy that the difficulty is not in breaking out of the circle, but in the seemingly inevitable return: "Learning to fall, I was thinking: that's the trick. Flying is easy. The whole, the absolute mastery resides in knowing how to fall" (78). At the end Jeremy refuses that return. In Kroetsch's voice as cultural critic: "in our very invisibility lies our chance for survival."³²

Kroetsch holds that we create our place, and our selves, in language. The place, the past has no meaning until it is dealt with — accounted for, if you will — in the writer's ledger. Occasionally the account balances: often it does not. And often the results seem to be inconclusive. Such is the case with *Gone Indian*. Jeremy remains in motion: endings be damned (24) indeed. Kroetsch believes that the absence of certainties is not a disadvantage or a falsehood: the absence of limit is the presence of possibility. As Madham says, getting into a corner on the prairie is not easy.

NOTES

¹ D. B. Jewison, Nov. 24, 1986, in conversation.

² Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton: NeWest, 1982), 30.

³ The novel gets complete treatment in Arnold Davidson's "Will the Real R. Mark Madham Please Stand Up: A Note on Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 5:3 (1980), and in Robert Lecker's 1986 study of Kroetsch. It comes into discussions of Kroetsch's aesthetic: see notes *infra*.

⁴ Peter Thomas, "Robert Kroetsch and Silence," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 18/19 (Summer/Fall 1980), 36-37.

⁵ E. D. Blodgett, "Gone West to Geometry's Country," in *Configuration: Essays in the Canadian Literatures* (Toronto: ECW, 1982), 187-218.

⁶ Blodgett, 215.

⁷ The term comes from R. T. Robertson, "My Own Country: Prairie Immigrant Literature," in *The Commonwealth Writer Overseas: Themes of Exile and Expatriation*, ed. A. Niven (Brussels: Didier, 1976), 75-85.

- ⁸ Henry Kreisel, "The Prairie: A State of Mind," 1968; rpt. *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (1971; rpt. Toronto and Buffalo: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977), 254-66.
- ⁹ Robert Kroetsch, "A Conversation with Margaret Laurence," in *Creation*, ed. Robert Kroetsch, James Bacque, and Pierre Gravel (Toronto and Chicago: New Press, 1970), 53.
- ¹⁰ Neuman and Wilson, *Labyrinths*, 32.
- ¹¹ Louis MacKendrick, "Robert Kroetsch and the Modern Canadian Novel of Exhaustion," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 11 (Summer 1978), 10.
- ¹² Geoff Hancock, "An Interview with Robert Kroetsch," *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, 24/25 (Spring/Summer 1977), 40.
- ¹³ Hancock, "Interview," 42.
- ¹⁴ Lecker, "Bordering On: Robert Kroetsch's Aesthetic," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 117:3 (Fall 1982), 125.
- ¹⁵ Robert Kroetsch, *Gone Indian* (1973; rpt. Toronto: General, 1981), 21. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and are cited within the text.
- ¹⁶ Susan Wood, "Reinventing the Word: Kroetsch's Poetry," *Canadian Literature*, 77 (Summer 1979), 37.
- ¹⁷ Peter Thomas, *Robert Kroetsch* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980), 3.
- ¹⁸ Robert Kroetsch, "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition," in "Robert Kroetsch: Essays," *Open Letter*, 5th ser., no. 4 (Spring 1983), 14.
- ¹⁹ Russell M. Brown, "Crossing Borders," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 22 (Summer 1981), 159.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Brown, "Crossing Borders," 161.
- ²¹ Shirley Neuman, in conversation.
- ²² See Arnold Davidson's "Will the Real R. Mark Madham Please Stand Up: A Note on Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 5:3 (1980), 135-39.
- ²³ Thomas, *Robert Kroetsch*, 69.
- ²⁴ Davidson, "Will the Real R. Mark Madham," 136.
- ²⁵ In "Carnival and Violence: a Meditation ("Robert Kroetsch: Essays," *Open Letter*, 5th ser., no. 4 [Spring 1983], 111-22), Kroetsch acknowledges his debt to Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva.
- ²⁶ Robert Kroetsch, "Introduction," *Boundary 2, A Canadian Issue*, 3:1 (Fall 1974), 1.
- ²⁷ MacKendrick, "The Modern Canadian Novel of Exhaustion," 25.
- ²⁸ P. L. Surette discusses the dilemma of Johnnie and the boy on the bull in *The Words of My Roaring*, and argues that Johnnie is made Fortune's fool through good rather than bad luck: "The Fabular Fiction of Robert Kroetsch," *Canadian Literature*, 77 (Summer 1978), 17-18.
- ²⁹ Roderick Harvey, "The Limitations of Media," *Canadian Literature*, 77 (Summer 1978), 24.
- ³⁰ Neuman and Wilson, *Labyrinths*, 25.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Kroetsch, "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition," 15.