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The Odd Sanity of Stones — Brian Edwards

Timothy Findley, *Stones*. Markham, Ontario. Penguin, 1989.

The stones at Dieppe are mostly flint - and their colours range from white through yellow to red. The red stones look as if they have been washed in blood and the sight of them takes your breath away. I hunkered down above them, holding all that remained of my father in my fist. He felt like a powdered stone - pummelled and broken.

I let him down between my fingers, feeling him turn to paste - watching him divide and disappear.

He is dead and he is gone. (pp.219-220)

The narrator is Ben Max, son of a Toronto florist who enlisted, became an heroic leader, and then failed awfully, if judiciously, in the carnage on the beaches of Dieppe in 1942. Satisfying the dying father's request that his ashes be scattered upon this site of his shame and constant nightmare, the place from which he retreated ignominiously but to which he returns incessantly in long years of penance and deterioration, the narrator is a figure of appropriate ambivalence; he is the one who, like Kroetsch's Anna Dawe in *Badlands*, scatters remnants of a father who was both loved and despised, a protector who becomes destructive. And the storyteller's position is important. Presenting a narrator in his fifties, one who recalls childhood pre-war experiences and encloses personal tragedy of the war and its long aftermath within better memories of family life, the story emphasises very precisely, and powerfully, not only the threat of violence but complexities of results and motivation as well. Particular in detail, discontinuous in structure, and touching upon cultural history, it is fiction that addresses forms of lived experience making a case not for the authority of its representation (for that way lies a minefield) but for the sensitivity and interest of its presentation.

Last in the collection, the title story demonstrates qualities characteristic of the collection generally - perceptiveness, curiosity, and very careful ordering of the components. In Findley's fiction, there are indicators of the subtle evasions associated with postmodern sensibility and they are presented with sufficient attention to recognisable cultural practice for the intersection to be compelling. The stories invite emotional and intellectual engagement, attention and reflection, empathy and abstraction: 'The stones are treacherous. But they are also beautiful' (p.218).

One of Canada's most admired contemporary writers of fiction, Timothy Findley has published six novels, including *The Wars* (1977), *Famous Last Words* (1981) and, most recently, *The Telling of Lies* (1986), and two collections of short fiction - *Dinner Along the Amazon* was published in 1984. *Stones* includes nine stories. Apart from the first, 'Bragg and Minna', which is set partly in Australia, they refer to locations in Southern Ontario, particularly Toronto; each one addresses complexities in understanding, communication and relationships, and mainly by exploring forms of hurt, disaffection and separation; they indicate

the interest in violence evident in so much of Findley's earlier fiction and, as in that fiction, (particularly in *The Wars* and *Famous Last Words*), the elegance of presentation comes from a combination of exact detail and very finely controlled prose. The effects are powerful because they are not over-played.

There are two pairs of stories in *Stones*, pairings that allow extensions across stories of the interest in point of view, temporal displacements, discontinuities in narrative arrangement, and the shifting tensions of human relationships, evident within the stories. The writerly interest in connections, in constructing a chronology from carefully dislocated fragments, that is evident in 'Bragg and Minna' is complicated by inclusion of 'A Gift of Mercy'. Whereas the first begins with Minna's death and concentrates on Bragg's reflections as he travels between North America and Australia with a male lover to bury his wife's ashes, at Ku-Ring-Gai, the second presents the peculiar uncertainties of their meeting and the torment, despair and strange productivity, and destructiveness, of a relationship. The dossier of disrepair introduced in the first story is laid out in the second. About homosexuality and cultural difference, tensions, rituals and hurt, and about writing, the stories are sharp in detail and artfully arranged. The 'experience' is the more interesting for the ways in which frames affect reception, commencing with a death in the first, the death of Minna who was brought up with a 'silver spoon in every orifice' (p.11) and who thereafter resented 'ladyhood' and turned to the down-and-out of street culture, and with a meeting in the second, the bizarre meeting between waitress Minna Joyce and urbane Stuart Bragg. If the stories deal with violence and resentment, they also speak a language of sorrow and need. Avoiding furry sentimentality, they are notable for their precise focus on consideration as well as hurt and, implicitly throughout, on writers and writing.

In the second pairing, first-person narrator Neil Cable directs attention to his brother Bud, and the easy complaints of 'The Name's the Same', a story that is relatively light though effective, are altogether complicated and deepened in 'Real Life Writes Real Bad'. The strategies are familiar - a narrator who 'talks' about family matters, fills in a few scenes, and moves about in time; approximating the fragmentariness of memory and the attempt to put details in order, the shifts attest formally to a writer's contrivance while presenting the question marks of life-seemingness and cultural importance. In the first story, the well-read narrator worries about his brother's drinking and tries to improve his reading habits. The second presents Bud's dissatisfactions, alcoholism and withdrawal; it ends in self-consciousness, with a reflexiveness precisely appropriate to the detail of the narrative:

On either side of the fireplace, back in the living-room, all of Bud's books had been lined up in rows on shelves. When I thought of them I thought of how Bud had loved them and been nourished by them all those years and years ago when he was young and wanted to be a writer. That was when he'd progressed from Erle Stanley Gardner to Joseph Conrad, Evelyn Waugh and F.Scott Fitzgerald. And I thought how unjust it was that all the mad and alcoholic heroes of whom these men had written should pass along through time forever, with their tragedies perfectly formed around their names and their lives set out in lucid prose with all the points well made

and all the meanings clear. And I thought if only some great, compassionate novelist had been assigned to flesh out Bud and Katie's tragedy, they might have had a better ending to their lives than this.

Really, I thought, as I stood that afternoon and stared at Bubastis down among the forget-me-nots - real life writes real bad. It should take lessons from the masters. (p.170)

The irony need not indicate immodesty; the reflection raises, as all fiction does, the issues of its own conjuring and processes, and the never-ending questions about cultural-relatedness, meaning, significance and value. It is better to persist, selfconsciously with the questions, themselves a form of answer, than to presume the answer.

'Foxes' presents a communications expert with a fascination in masks, a researcher whose peculiar appearance is matched by eccentric behaviour, and whose investigation of Japanese fox masks in the Far Eastern Collection of the Royal Ontario Museum may, or may not, have transformed researcher into fox. Darkly comic, parodic, and crafty, it makes a short play on old themes. Similarly, and differently, curious, 'Dreams' presents two psychiatrists, Everett and Mini Menlo in a story about dream and waking, empathy and fear, transference, and explicable attempts to make sense of apparently inexplicable phenomena. As in 'Foxes', its surreal edge is not dulled by closure. Artfully constructed, as are all of Findley's fictions, and presenting as confessional the revelation of long-protected family secrets, 'Almeyer's Mother' is arranged in time-shifts. Details of her snobbery, despotism, and discontent precede Mrs Almeyer's declarations to her son and the story's power comes as much from the astute order of its arrangement as from the signs and explanations of tension between members of a family with skeletons in the closet.

Offering not so much those displacements of 'the real' to be found in magical realism as the insider construction of a paranoid, 'The Sky' presents an engagingly comic, darkly comic, exploration of apparent delusion. In this third-person narration that presents Morrison's point of view, the issue of his wife Cynthia's infidelity remains uncertain. Is she having an affair with his brother David, a practised roué?

Whereas David had enjoyed the playing fields of their father's Forest Hill Playboy Mansion, Morrison had been ensconced as the wailing wall of their mother's Riverdale Leper Colony. (p.81)

Is she providing telephone sex talk to his business associate?

That's what she does. She gives out our number in the papers. That's how she gets her lovers. Over the telephone! Maybe Teddy Grainger doesn't even know its her! (p.88)

Is Morrison, this husband/father/signifier suffering paranoid delusions stimulated by his fear that, as Chicken Little says, 'the sky is falling'? Do a piece of ice and a dead pigeon falling at Morrison's feet signify a 'real' threat of falling things, even the sky itself? An active if not skilful semiotician, Morrison finds signs everywhere to fuel his obsession. Replacement figure for his old fascination with a red-headed

violinist in the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Cynthia is the inspiration for his singular readings: 'Oh, he thought, when will it ever end? And he wished that she would wither and be ninety!' (p.94). Again the text is sharp in detail and revealing for what it offers, in comic extremities, on the irresistible subject of human instabilities and absurdity.

It is a pleasure to read Findley's prose. There is in this collection, an interesting correlation between his construction of those seemingly small but arresting details in individual lives (and in the culture) that provide cause for concern, delight or uncertainty and his construction of subtly modulated prose. The significance of detail is always problematic; in these stories the complications are presented stylishly and the 'answers' are usually provisional. For any Australian (or other) readers who find pleasure in *Stones*, turn, if you have not done so already, to Findley's *Famous Last Words* to see what he manages in the novel this fictitious account of the last words of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Pound's character) inscribed upon the walls and ceilings of the deserted Grand Elysium Hotel in the Austrian Alps where the liberating army discover his frozen corpse in 1945. It is the ground for a fascinating exercise in reading, for the intext reader Quinn who reads the extraordinary murals but also for each reader of the text in its interrogation of the forms and the boundaries of fiction and history.

The Eloquence of Silence — Brian Edwards

Robert Kroetsch. *Completed Field Notes: The Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch.* Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989.

Since the eloquence of failure may be the only eloquence remaining in this our time, I let these poems stand as the enunciation of how I came to a poet's silence. And I like to believe that the sequence of poems, announced in medias res as continuing, is, in its acceptance of its own impossibilities, completed.

From the 'Author's Note' p.269

This pronouncement, like the poetry itself, is provocatively ambiguous. Kroetsch situates it with respect to 'the project (I leave it nameless) announced by Wordsworth and Whitman and rendered impossible by the history and thought and art of the twentieth century'. So, epic inclusiveness and completion, the naming of self and culture in perfect totality, as if the presentation of a god-authored whole scheme of things, become impossible. The fall into language and knowledge and scepticism and resistance, the questioning of certain certainties, loss of the (ambiguous) comfort of guarantees, and the entrance (recognition) of uncertainty, provisionality, fragmentariness and the constructedness of systems, meanings, and understanding - these interrogate perfection, and perfectability, and, with the exhilaration of imperfection, of becoming the Promethean maker (and rebel), perhaps there goes a loss that is significant. Making poems, resisting completion and working in fragments, charting and creating the vicissitudes of memory, desire, understanding and possibility, the poet acknowledges the continuing departures of an ideal that was always an illusion, unless you could believe in it hard enough, but according to some semblance of which nostalgia and sadness have their purchase. In their presentation of childhood, family, lovers, travel, the cartographies of place, relationships, literature, and always of writing, Kroetsch's long poems are variously related. They interweave. It is a very interesting exercise to read them together, allowing their separateness while remarking the interrelatedness, the plays of similarity and of difference, the shifts in allusion, rhetoric and feeling... How read a Kroetsch long poem? Now, with this text, they can be read dialectically, with boundaries undone.

The poems invite (and they have received) close reading and analysis. It would be presumptuous to attempt that detail in this review; rather, I wish to offer some more general observations, a few reading 'instructions' and snippets of very selective critical response. 'I live by a kind of resistance' says 'the sad Phoenician' (p.65); and, while inviting the entrance of readers, the poetry, too, lives by its kinds of resistances.

Generally, the poems present formally, in their arrangement, a strong sense of the making and the un-making processes of their address, the processes of

archaeological exploration, allusion, reference, quotation and exchange, of invention and re-invention, that are held to be characteristic of cultural formations and of writing. Tricks of construction, of line shape, ordering, punctuation and grammar, denote movement against completeness, against ending. In the restlessness of words, and in the hesitations of meaning, 'to be continued' is the reader's imperative and the writer's prerogative. Even so, lest the 'deconstructive' affiliation seem altogether too vacuous, Kroetsch's poetry is rich in substance, detail, meanings; it is the status, value and meaningfulness of meanings that are asserted and questioned. Lyrical, comic, erotic, robust and sensitively searching, the long poems present a displaced or discontinuous narrative, or a narrative of displacements which, in its skilful inclusion and use of documents, acknowledges and transcends the documentary. Distinguishing between poetry and journal, between writerly explorations and autobiographical documentation (these uneasy distinctions), while allowing the power of 'both' - this is one of the challenges, and the fascinations, that the poetry presents. When so many indicators of 'the life' are offered, and apparently confessional intimacies, particularly in the later poems, there is always a temptation to read reductively, with the danger of collapsing difference, of missing the artifice. But as the poetry resists the temptation of meaning, in any simple mimetic sense, it offers its own reading instruction in the exploratory rhetoric, the edge, of its own processes as language construction. Re-reading childhood experience, Kroetsch creates it, in its fragments, allowing the significance of detail while interrogating its places in the continuing attempts to understand change and alteration and value. Addressing questions relating to love, travel, relationships, and traditions, the poems deal in revelation tricked out in artful dress, the (ad)dress of language arranged in the phrases, lines, stanzas, paragraphs of poetry and complicated by the play of supplements, extras, figurality and other such resistances to summation.

Completed Field Notes is arranged into three parts, 'Field Notes', 'Advice to My Friends' and 'Country and Western', with 'Stone Hammer Poem' as prologue. Each part includes a number of pieces, most of them first published separately, and the arrangement is basically chronological.

When Kroetsch put together a collection of poems written prior to 1975, 'Stone Hammer Poem' provided the title; then in 1981, when the long poems were assembled as *Field Notes*, 'Stone Hammer Poem' was placed as prologue to the book. First published in 1973, its significance as a signal piece is obvious. In the numbered sections and procession by fragments, its formal and thematic interest in continuities and discontinuities, in exploring, creating, remembering and acknowledging - against ending - and with its attention to questions of origins, time, priorities, precedence, use and succession, this poem introduces ideas and strategies that remain important throughout Kroetsch's long poems. An object on the writer's desk, used as a paperweight, the stone hammer was a farming implement, an instrument of war, a piece of stone 'old as the last Ice Age', its genealogy a mazy narrative of cultural imprints that provide pause for reflection on leading questions about landscape, history, change, meaning and

value; and as the poem's arrangement indicates, the fragments and the patterns may be read in various directions. A tribute to family and to stories, reflective and reflexive, the poem enacts an at least double process of making and unmaking, or, as Kroetsch might say, it unhides the hidden - not providing the assurance of finalities but as a continuing process of uncovering as recovery. The stone hammer is lost and found, passed on, a piece of shaped stone that marks a passage of cultures, different uses, and:

The poem
is the stone
chipped and hammered
until it is shaped
like the stone
hammer, the maul.

If the stone hammer is a legacy from the father, the one who was 'lonesome for the/hot wind on his face, the smell/ of horses, the distant/ hum of a threshing machine/ the oilcan he carried, the weight/ of a crescent wrench in his hind pocket', the one who found it in his wheatfield, the poem is its tribute to both, its words, its 'stone' to endure in time too.

Whereas 'Stone Hammer Poem' proceeds from the found object, 'The Ledger' and 'Seed Catalogue' proceed from the found document, from relics that provide their small 'histories' of the past and opportunity for rediscoveries and new craft. Kroetsch found his grandfather's ledger for a sawmill in the 1880s and 90s in Carrick, Ontario, a keeping of accounts that did not always balance. 'The Ledger', this later balance sheet of debits and credits, with its incorporation of parts of the old document, together with letter extracts, fragments of community records, anecdotes and reflections, presents another record of family, and community, of settlement and farming and building a society. A procedure in fragmentation, its columns and its incorporative structure invite cross-reading, a vertical as well as a horizontal process of creative construction as dismantling. There is pleasure in this indebtedness, a fascination in hard material detail and in the less easily accountable fragments of lives. Dealing in constructions of the past, and of the 'present' as debtor, the poem is always about the making of the poem too, about language and its uses.

'The Ledger' looks westward from its 'Ontario' base. In the westward glance, as in the reflexive processes of its making, it anticipates 'Seed Catalogue'. This time the document is a catalogue for farmers, for gardeners, an advertising brochure with its own style of art, which provides the metaphors - seeds, growth, garden - inviting reflection upon Adam and Eve and the archetypal garden to attempts to garden the prairies and to grow communities. In its numbered parts and mixed forms, 'Seed Catalogue' addresses ontological questions; it is an archaeology of texts, a discourse on writing. Musing and amusing, energetic, humorous and insistent in its explorations, its refrain of questions presents a rhetoric that mediates past and present. The movement from gardener ('How do you grow a gardener?') to garden ('How do you grow a garden?'), first and last in

the sequence, is complicated by the 'How do you grow...' of 'lover', 'prairie town', 'past', and 'poet' most insistently 'poet', the one who may incorporate the others in the building of new constructions upon old sites, new possibilities for old sights. The poem may be read as an answer to the main question: 'How do you grow a poet?', an answer that proceeds by compilation of documents, memories, stories, reflections, these source materials of the poet's work, but also wondrous 'biological' necessities:

How do you grow a poet?

For appetite: cod-liver
oil
For bronchitis: mustard
plasters.
For pallor and failure to fill
the woodbox: sulphur
& molasses.
For self-abuse: ten Our
Fathers & ten Hail Marys.
For regular bowels: Sunny Boy
Cereal.

If the list is a particular cultural record, a reminder of a number of things, it also places writer in community by placing poet in farmboy. The poet is a collection of memories, stories, perceptions - a language-shaper who makes do with materials at hand. Kroetsch as poet creates the poems from this rich file of resources; but there is always the challenge of recognising where the poem may come from and giving it shape, of making the garden grow.

These are early poems in the collection. Also within 'Field Notes', 'The Sad Phoenician' and 'The Silent Poet Sequence', with their 'but'/'and' structure, this formal emphasis on accumulation and qualification, invite attention together. Inviting the reader, 'you', in terms of their address, they present reflections upon love and desire, loss, alienation, and the language itself as it holds and resists meaning in the processes of construction. The Sad Phoenician, a trader in language, says that he lives by 'a kind of resistance'; the Silent Poet, punning and restless, resists silence: 'touch your typewriter, poet, she whispered, then I can sleep in the morning'. This first part includes, as well, 'Sketches of a Lemon', with its fine epigrammatic wit, tonal variation, and shifts between the materiality of 'home' reference and the play of allusion. Part II, following 'Advice to My Friends', presents a variety of 'travel' pieces, examples of journal made poem and further evidence of Kroetsch's resourceful emphasis on the fragmentary and allusive as indicative of the ways in which language works and meanings are created and undone, always existing/resisting on the edge of promise. 'Letters to Salonika' is the log-book of a separation, narrator to absent lover, in which the you of address is invited to participate in constructions of desire, memory, place, and imaginings. Inevitably, the 'Letters' are also about texts, reading and writing, from May 27 and 'A typewriter full of words. I should buy a new one, a typewriter packed with words, packed full' to June 28 and 'We write books to

avoid/writing books'. By turns erotic and anguished, prosaically chatty and poetically engaging, concerned with domestic lists and with the complexity of imaginings, the sequence is rhetorically varied. It becomes a discontinuous narrative in which the banal logic of common sense gives way to the flights and changes of a narrator fixed on memories and uncertainty, the memories of shared life and the uncertainty in absence. The writing fills a space. By contrast, 'Postcards from China' 'documents' the responses of the writer as traveller, as does 'Delphi: Commentary' in formal variations that recall typographical presentations in 'The Ledger' and 'Seed Catalogue'.

Jokily titled 'Country and Western', ambiguous, Part III includes, in 'Excerpts From the Real World', a further variation on the journal form. The entries are short and stabbing, often ironic or grimly comic, often insistent and hostile in their form of narrator to lover on desire and betrayal, the passions of love and the passions of language:

16/2/85

I want to explain. Words surface from inside, bringing with them vinegar and whales.
Your eyes grow darker when you eat figs or when you flirt with other men.

20/2/85

In the switch-blade of your tongue, the fish hawk studies mayhem. Tell me again
that you love me. Which of the three roses did you put into the spaghetti?

16/6/85

The sky takes on the colour of what you and I, mistakenly I'm told, call the crocus.
Why don't we, then, by way of recompense to both Nature and Language, find a
small bluff of poplars and have a slow quickie?

There are one hundred and fifty two entries and, drawing attention so overtly to turning constructions on a theme, the variations in a relationship, they show, as most times in Kroetsch's writing, that the writer can be Coyote. And that Coyote can make a phrase, or a poem. The 'ten related lyrics' of 'Spending the Morning on the Beach' present another poetic 'record' of a journey, this time to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji, while taking up the challenge of 'relating' or narrativising the lyric. Inserting the traveller into the landscape, these lyrics express interweavings on disaffection with poetry (or with writing it), gardens and growth and the metonymy of gardener and poet, and entrance into the detail of new cultural landscapes. Narrating the lyric involves mustering the impulse to write.

Completed Field Notes ends in the rich image-making of 'After Paradise'. For many reasons, this nine-part sequence is an appropriate end-piece: in formal terms, the numbered pieces, fragmentary constructions, interweavings, disruptions and variations in arrangement complement the earlier writing; in terms of subjects of attention, garden, fall, erotics, separation, change, time, imagination, metaphor, passion, curiosity, fancy, memory and uncertainty recall, with appropriate difference, items discovered in the other long poems. The provocation of the title 'After Paradise' keeps the possibilities open; the fall *from* is a fall *into* (language, knowledge, the dangers but the possibilities of new endeavours, the challenges) - or, despite the weariness, the end is deferred:

Periodic fits of paradise exhaust him.

For instance. There is, he either knows or imagines, in the midst of her body a tropical island.

For instance. He sits on a bench in Old Market Square, his bottle of sugary wine concealed in a Gucci bag.

He cannot decide which text to take with him on the long read, and therefore consults the patterned flight of her painted toenails.

The directions of thought change; the figures of their expression are precise and provocative, and fancy cheats as well as she was ever feigned to do, deceiving elf. It is a particular attraction of this poetry that it colludes knowingly in the process. There are touches of magical realism here, 'A speedboat walks on the water', old puns, 'Peephole will say we're in love', conceptual antics, 'Drifting paddleboats on the Red claim to be arks and offer a night of music and romance to all drowning lovers who come in pairs', repeated erotics, 'Your hands are the feast of my body', and the ending in sadness:

I'm sorry,
I said, I thought

I wanted

(you)

to be happy.

But if the poem is about incertitude, change, and another eternal note of sadness, its energy turns as well back into creative shapings, into the experience of beginning, again.

Including in its title, as Kroetsch says, the 'dreaded "c" word of postmodernism', *Completed Field Notes*, in its incompletions, is an impressive achievement. Using while resisting the catalogue, reconsidering the resources of personal and cultural memory against identity, un hiding the hidden in language while conceding the inevitability of continuing evasions, mixing 'plain speech' and figurative dashes, the texts present a sort of record, a recording, that lays many cards on the table (to mix another metaphor) while holding in reserve, as it were, the disarming joker of self-conscious process. Maybe the promise of incompleteness, always there in the language, will yet mock the title of this volume with more notes in the field. Many readers welcome the possibility.