

# Aritha van Herk

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## Bawdy Bodies : Bridging Robert Kroetsch and bp Nichol

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## BAWDY BODIES:

Bridging Robert Kroetsch and bpNichol

The landscape is locked deep inside my body.  
 Returning to the Battle River country, heart of the central Alberta parkland,  
 I endure a painful arousal,  
 the residue of those many thwarted couplings I knew as a young woman.  
 It was the size of my desire that troubled me,  
 the way it grew when I wasn't looking.  
 And waits now, to ambush my desertion.

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‘We may not be big but we’re small’ is the mantra for Canadian humorist Stuart McLean’s variety show, *The Vinyl Cafe*, and the motto for the record store that his fictional character, Dave, runs. The double-back of negation for the catchphrase is as telling as the ironic definition that won the contest held on Peter Gzowsky’s popular radio show, *This Country in the Morning* in 1971; the call was sent out to complete a parallel to the phrase, ‘As American as apple pie’ by completing ‘As Canadian as – – –’. The winning answer still speaks volumes: ‘As Canadian as possible under the circumstances’. These two aphorisms gesture toward the always ironic interface of Canadians in terms of size and influence, credibility and plausibility. Our determination to invert our own expanse and measurability results in a tautology of essence and existence. A Canadian is likely to mumble an embarrassed excuse that sounds something like ‘we may not be small but we’re big’. In fact, the nation is so overwhelmingly large that

Aritha van Herk  
 University of Calgary  
 Canada

we (Canadians) don't know how big we are or might be, how small we need to grow to understand the space we occupy.

There is continued and continual discourse on Canada's large and unwieldy body, an over-traded discussion that inevitably reverts to sizeist essentialism. Size has become Canada's excuse for incoherence, a rationale for the regional discussions that paper the nation's house. The magnitude of the country's dimensions suggests intrepid unmanageability at best and lumbering obesity at worst. Here is a country where one province can be the size of four European nations, the largest of those provinces measuring more than a million and a half square kilometers. Canada performs, in all of its efforts to accommodate such dimensions, a fetishistic reliance on numbers, for it seems that only numbers can communicate this experiment that has sewn itself into a quilt-like country still stitched together one hundred and forty-four years after 'confederation'. And Canadians succumb to that *idée fixe*. We brag about the distances that separate citizens as if they were connections. But what has not been addressed is the extent to which the preoccupation with Canada's largeness—if not its largess—has perversely created a Foucauldian counter-discourse of docility, some gentle-giant throwback endorsing the inherent innocuousness of size. Canada is too big to be anything but benevolent and placid. And it is certainly too mild-mannered to be bawdy.

Gothic yes. Laurentian certainly. Ambiguous without a doubt. Cross-gendered possibly. Ambidextrous conceivably. But bawdy? Unlikely. In truth, the bawdy only pretends to be vulgar. It is less Fescennine than alert to its voluptuous potential. Bataille declared that the larger sense of eros to transcend the smaller thanatos, reminds the bawdy about 'the interdependency between systems of power and the limits of the body' (Turvey-Sauron, 2007: 198), all exposed by the erotic experience. This largess is the hallmark of the Canadian bawdy, nervous about the contents of the body but excited too about how big the body feels, how bodacious and lubricious the whole idea of body and its bawdy performance proclaims.

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In terms of the erotic body, Canada has been inscribed as impenetrable expanse, a mass of land and water that cannot be explored with the delicate attention that smaller countries incite. Distance and its amplitude effectively resist microscopic scrutiny, and so thorough analysis becomes impossible, a task of such magnitude that the observer or explorer throws up his or her hands and resorts to generalization. The complexity of the Canadian experience may not be cosmopolitan, but it is overwhelming, and as such, cannot accommodate much 'noticing'. A marked resistance to the delineation of detail facilitates that tendency. Viewers intent on the intimate facets of Canada are doomed in advance; their efforts to reduce an enormous canvas to a molecular scale or to move from panorama to attenuated cincture result in frustration. This size-distortion has the effect of directing body-awareness in Canada toward language. In Canadian historical terms, respected critic W. H. New contends that ethnicity, region and gender 'all fastened on language as a means of redefining the parameters of power and the character of available history' (New, 1989: 214). And if language is a vast domain, its syntax and semantics provide a canopy of camouflage, perfectly suited to the Canadian topography—and yet by default male. If writing in Canada articulates any erotic female gesture, it is, as New so astutely observed, because women 'regarded language as a *body* rather than a *landscape*' (New, 1989: 265) and wrote their body as a *doppelgänger* to the nation. The consequent 'durations of silence' (New, 1989: 266) take as their embarkation work by writers seeking to '*touch* rather than to *explore*; they resist the controlling, imperial implications of the related images of mapping/exploration/penetration' (New, 1989: 267). But those master narratives of cartography and expedition are difficult to elude in a space, political and imaginative, that is simply—well, bulky—and not just immense, but Brobdingnagian. However much Canadian theorists relegate venture and document to the colonial impulse, they nevertheless return to its codes, even when smithed by parody and irony.

Aritha van Herk  
University of Calgary  
Canada

By inverse reasoning, it becomes useful to circle the idea of the diminutive as an expression of the Canadian bawdy. Any Canadian bawdy falls inevitably on the failsafe side of indecorous, toward the muted district of Rabelaisian, and into the mannerly sector of lewd. The nation is not only accursed with magnitude, but retro-starchy in its allegiance to vintage Victorian principles. Baudrillard would have made a fine Canadian politician; having found it useful to embrace instability, Canadians practice his version of delusion. But to engage with the question of bawdy bodies in the competing and complementary narratives of nation and gender, it becomes necessary to practice selective myopia.

Two examples of liminally-mapped bodies argue for a corporeal overture toward a tentatively articulated Canadian bawdy. bpNichol published his irrepressibly funny anatomical autobiography, *Selected Organs: Parts of an Autobiography*, in 1988, just before he died. An icon of Canadian literature, Nichol subverted form in every way possible. He produced poetry, novels, comics, images, musical scores, children's books, short fiction, collage, concrete poetry and translations, all of his works intent on blurring borders. Nichol is revered by writers in Canada, both for his wide-ranging production and for his personal magnetism; his influence continues to the present time. Robert Kroetsch published his ironic and self-mocking *Too Bad: Sketches Toward a Self-Portrait*, in 2010, having moved himself into an assisted living home as preparation for old age. Another version of iconic Canadian wordsmith, Kroetsch has been billed as 'Mr. Canadian Postmodern' by critic Linda Hutcheon for his engagement with different theoretical motives and motifs. He too has produced multiple volumes in many different genres: poetry, fiction, non-fiction, chapbooks and travel writing, and he too has influenced the body of Canadian writing. Yet both writers are, like the country itself, almost invisible. So large that they can be ignored, they inscribe an arc on the body of the nation's literature. And they both articulate bodies preoccupied with language because the space of the nation cannot be drawn. Indubitably and self-consciously male, Nichol and Kroetsch are nevertheless

embodiments of the unwieldy male body aching to subvert its identity, yearning to map by touch and tenderness rather than roads, bridges or monuments. Their bawdy is shy, almost reticent, and comic, resisting inevitable self-aggrandizement through a self-mockery that makes both endearingly über-Canadian. They incarnate the clumsy, desiring body fantasizing the bawdy while necessarily occupying an inescapably mortal body. And the mortal body's limitations address how the body in Canada struggles to know itself.

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bpNichol stood on a bridge.  
 It was the letter H he was fondest of, two I letters linked, *pontine*.  
 The bridges of Canada, historic and soaring as well as  
 ramshackle, mean to connect,  
 leap across our inevitably too much water as if they are lovers  
 meeting after years apart.  
 The dazzle of bawdy bridges, the snug of two shores.  
 I didn't get a chance to know beep well.  
 I knew his bawdy as a snort of laughter, deep and  
 engaged, rewarding conversation.

I know Kroetsch well. He is my grandfather in  
 disguise, my old lovers grown young.

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bpNichol's *Selected Organs: Parts of an Autobiography* declares itself an 'interim autobiography' (Nichol, 'Some Words of Introduction': n.p.) partial, unfinished, and contingent. Robert Kroetsch's *Too Bad* refuses to perform the task of autobiography and instead declares itself a compilation of sketches: 'A disclaimer: This book is not an autobiography. It is a gesture toward a self-portrait, which I take to be quite a different kettle of fish' (Kroetsch, 2010: epigraph). But whether their authors' deflections are disingenuous or devious, these texts perform as effectively articulated *dinggedichten*, poetic forms that attempt to describe objects from within rather than externally. *Dinggedichten* insist on the intimacy of occupation, of the poetic within the 'thing'. In this

Aritha van Herk  
 University of Calgary  
 Canada

case, *dinggedicten* arise from the body, the body as implement and instrument, entity and commodity. That the body is not a 'thing', not an article but a soma, a living, breathing organism, makes the premises inspiring *Selected Organs* and *Too Bad* even more interesting. Here are two quintessentially Canadian texts that occupy the bodies of the writers describing those bodies (occupied by the authors) from within their experience. The double entendre at work here is wonderfully evocative: the body is thus bawdy-fied by the ironic distance employed as a means of inhabiting the body in order to write that body. The negotiation between and across subject and object becomes part of the body's bawdy.

That Kroetsch and Nichol are iconically male writers does not inhibit the delicacy of their *dinggedicten* as counter to their bodily biographs. In 'no ideas but in things', Kroetsch depicts the essence of the *dinggedict* with reference to William Carlos Williams:

Ideas are things, Doc Williams said  
 He was a poet. Now he's dead.  
 Desire done with, appetites fed. (2010: 61)

And yet, the appetite becomes the catalyst for the faux-autobiograph, the examination of the parts as a means of avoiding the body and its life entire. These two texts, *Too Bad* and *Selected Organs*, hypostatize what some might consider self-regard or even narcissism. But as archetypal Canadian bodies, they see themselves as partial, fragmented, and incomplete, not always readable, and certainly never knowable. Like every concept of space, they rub against each other and ignite in order to inscribe somehow a body of Canada, a body in Canada, a bawdy strip-down of the body in Canada. Kroetsch's playful interrogation of the persona's penis amplifies this conceit in his poem, 'The Unnameable'.

He called his thing his thing.  
 What a thing to call his thing.  
 Thing, in a way, is nothing. (Kroetsch, 2010: 93)

That ludic mockery betrays an anxiety about the unnameable and unknowable body, the body as mysterious force that pro-

pels its occupant in unexpected directions. Desire is a curse, but also a driver, an inspiration for the bawdy outcomes that seek if not satisfaction at least relief. And not coincidentally, the 'thing' itself performing, showing off.

He called his dink his dink.  
He said it liked to bonk.  
Too bad it couldn't think. (Kroetsch, 2010: 93)

The tussle between the physical and the intellectual is a constant point of interest for the *dinggedict*, worrying at the thingness of things and their relation to understanding. And arouses a similar worry about the absences of the body, what it lacks in its performance of itself. In tabulating what we are missing, we give voice to hunger. bpNichol opens the autobiographical *Selected Organs* with 'The Vagina', lamenting, 'I never had one' (1988: 9). Having lived 'inside this male shell all of my life' (9), he yearns for that mysterious muscle as a complement to his own 'thing'. His interest goes far beyond the bawdy to the extent that language declares itself the *dinggedict*.

I always wanted one. I grew up wanting one. I thot that cocks were okay but vaginas were really nifty. I liked that name for them because it began with 'v' and went 'g' in the middle. I never heard my mother or my sister mention them by name. They were an unspoken mouth & that was the mouth where real things were born. (Nichol, 1988: 10)

That mouth where 'real things' are born is the articulating instrument, the portal that signs its relation to subject and citizen, declaring a body. Nichol's wanting a vagina as a strategy for explorations of the body becomes the doorway through which connection occurs: the enabling of the bawdy for the body.

When sex happened I realized it was all a matter of muscles. I liked the way her muscles worked. She liked the way my muscle worked. It wasn't the one thing or the other thing but the way the two of them worked together. (Nichol, 1988: 10)

The 'thing' here is only satisfying in relation to the other 'thing', the two together performing the *dinggedict* of pleasure.

Aritha van Herk  
University of Calgary  
Canada



In his seminal discussion of *Selected Organs*, entitled 'Stretch Marks: Conceivable Entries into bpNichol's *Selected Organs*', Mark Libin argues that the book serves as a textual body inseparable from the living, breathing body that incited its pages, and that the two together shape an entirely reinvigorated and specifically identified material body. He references as well how these 'entries' provide an interesting contrapuntal reading to the *blasons anatomiques*, 16<sup>th</sup> century French micro-poems of exaggerated mode addressed to individual parts of the female body. Critics contend that the authors were poet-painters intent on displaying their own ingenuity as much as dis-membering (in literary terms) the female body (Vickers, 1997: 5). More germane perhaps is the interesting connection between the isolationist approach to this 'described body' (Vickers, 1997: 18) and the unspoken desire of the blazoners for the touch of the whole. Surely that is the key behind these emblematic micro-poems: as *dinggedichte* serving to catalogue desire, they attempt a touch that articulates the parts and the whole in concert with one another, actually suggesting a way to access a Canadian erotic. And in a country like Canada it is necessary to be polyamorous, for we can never quite see the body we love entirely, only parts, fractions, segments and splinters. Mere components.

It is the bawdy delight of touch that language explores; and it is language that can take on the size of life. Robert Kroetsch's essay, 'For Play and Entrance: the Contemporary Canadian Long Poem', strategizes reading the long and 'large' Canadian poem with the rhetoric of love-making. From delay to a tempestuous incompleteness, the essay celebrates the 'life-long poem' (Kroetsch, 1983: 94) for its interest in the discrete, the identifiable that refuses to gesture toward the symbolic. Talking about Nichol's *The Martyrology* (the life-long poem that only stopped with Nichol's death in 1988), Kroetsch says, 'In Nichol we have, supremely, against the grammar of inherited story, the foregrounding of language. But the limits of language are such (the spirit become flesh; the Word become words) that *all* should be written down. The failure of language becomes its own grammar of delay' (Kroetsch,

1983: 94). And thus its own seduction and its own *dinggedict*, a telling of the story from within the story, through the rhetoric of the limited and liminal body, with the medium of language, the bawdiest of all instruments. Critic Smaro Kamboureli argues that within his many different texts, bpNichol's 'autobiography functions not as a genre that seeks to encompass the life of the self by encompassing meaning and an ordering shape to it, but as a writing activity that unravels the complexity of the self by exploring its signification' (Kamboureli, 1991: 152). The relation of that actively curious signification in relation to its 'thingness' is the provisional field enabling then a bawdy body.

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The old axiom about the disappearing author offers a detour.  
I think of disappearance as power: the ability to come and go as I please,  
to pass through closed doors and locked windows.  
Invisibility is a country worth visiting.  
And why can't the body fulfill a symbolic function?  
The sculptors knew it could.  
Yet, I've no wish to play the part of Rodin's secretary, like Rilke;  
even less his muse, stranded Camille Claudel,  
Give me a vanishing author over a sculptor busy turning bodies into stone

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The body is a bewildering site, full of trickery and impatience, apt to stumble or to fall at unexpected moments, performing as betrayer or savior, sometimes both. And such spectacular treacheries remind its inhabitants of the secret life that all bodies harbor, the genes and combinants that comprise the whole, the parts that conspire to perform the bawdy. Kroetsch examines the confounding solipsism of who we are in "Just Be Yourself 1."

Lucretius had hit it dead on: we are all made up of atoms. We can't see the atoms of which we are made. The self is unlikely. (2010: 28)

As a nation that can't see the size of what we declare, we look inwards to decipher the secret that we Canadians are certain is hiding within the body politic, the figurement of invisibility the

Aritha van Herk  
University of Calgary  
Canada

source of our disquiet. We should by now have learned from the Americans. As Eleanor says in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, 'The biggest secrets are staring us in the face and we don't see a thing [...] the bigger the object, the easier it is to hide it' (DeLillo, 1997: 316). Our very largeness makes us invisible, as dismissible as sky and earth. Too big to hide, we do not need to be hidden but block the view that would discover us. The larger the presence the more likely it conducts absence, vanishes without leaving an impression. In Kroetsch's poem, 'Making an Impression', about a list of the persona's various falls, he moves from the innocent position of 'I was standing still when I fell off my feet' (Kroetsch, 2010: 84) to

You've got to appreciate my predicament,  
I'm a ghost. No one can see me until  
it's too late. Lying in the snow.

I'm an imprint. An indentation.  
Lying in the snow I'm an absence  
that anyone should recognize as me. (Kroetsch, 2010: 84)

The fall is both the fall from grace that expels humans from the garden and the fall from self-esteem that occurs with any fall, the terminal velocity of humiliation when the body ends up 'lying in the snow'. For sure this is a Canadian body (the snow carefully underlines that fact), but it is also an aged body, invisible until it needs to be noticed, the fall betraying the body's reliability in a sadly bawdy display of loss, the body sprawled in the snow.

That ghostliness serves as metaphor for what is both unpredictable and unseeable, turning to the dark interior of the body, through what Nichol describes in 'Sum of the Parts' as 'the old problem of writing about something you know nothing about' (Nichol, 1988: 52). And here is another source for the bawdy's delicious lewdness, its cryptic and salacious secrets, their incipient ribaldry. How to explore the unknown world? Close your eyes, reach out and feel the edges of the canorous song it sings. For there is the biggest mystery, the mysterious life of the body that goes on without consulting us, we who are the owners and occupants of that strange anatomy. 'So many

things inside me I am not in touch with. So many things I depend on that I never see, pray I never see' (Nichol, 1988: 51). Nichol articulates the virtually erotic trust that the body inspires as it performs its inevitable and invisible work within: 'this is the real organ music, the harmony of these spheres, the way the different organs play together, work, at that level beyond consciousness of which all consciousness is composed, the real unconscious, the unseen' (Nichol, 1988: 5-52). Mysterious and yet utterly compelling for our having to rely on the cooperation of the components we billet, the signifiers for the organs are not the same as 'the collected workings I think of as me' (Nichol, 1988: 52). These invisible 'parts' are connected to an interiority of hope. Silently they perform important roles, but are best kept anonymous, mysterious. Nichol notes, 'If you're unlucky you get to meet them. If you're lucky you never get to meet them at all, they just nestle there, inside your body, monitoring, processing, producing, while you go about your life, oblivious' (1988: 51). The intimacy of 'meeting' the parts of the body that one shudders at is another reflection of the extent to which the body requires its own privacy to function. If the organs of the body are over-scrutinized, they articulate an incompleteness that decries the body as a whole. The surprises of the body are the synecdoche to Canada's regions. This may be a Canadian malaise: we keep dissecting the nation in an effort to understand it, and so we do damage to the perfectly functioning organs. Leave them alone, no incisions, no X-rays, no annual checkups. Just blind trust.

*Aritha van Herk  
University of Calgary  
Canada*

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My scars are more subtle than plentiful:  
Some cross-hatchings on my knees from pitching into gravel when I  
was learning to ride a bike;  
my smallpox vaccination;  
an inverted Y on my left thumb from an aggressive paring knife;  
the half moon on my neck from a small surgery.  
The invisible scars are more visible, longer lasting.

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And yes, the bawdy Canadian comprises what we bawdy Canadians can't see, the view from without, how we are regarded by the rest of the world, those others who serve as mirrors. Or who casually observe what we need mirrors to see. 'Like your back. Every stranger on the street has had the chance to look at it but you only know it thru mirrors, photographs that other people take of you' (Nichol, 1988: 53). The broad back of Canada: you make a better door than window, we used to say to people who were in the way, meaning we wanted them to move. But Canada can't move. It is iced in, held by the Atlantic and the Pacific and the Arctic oceans, keeps trying to peer around itself, see if it can catch a glimpse of what it looks like from behind. Eager for a camera to catch it off-guard, walking down the street all jaunty and anticipatory. Canada is the invisible nation, so big that it can't be seen, and certainly can't be read. Still searching for a way to draw itself, achieve the self-portrait that captures its essence.

In his meditation on masturbation, 'Mirror', Kroetsch declares the mirror as accomplice to the crazy impossibility of naming the double.

It was the improvements in mirrors that improved  
the portraits of self. Titian as an old man.  
Rembrandt over and over. Schiele masturbating. (2010: 20)

We are desperate to register our own desire, are compelled to watch ourselves in the mirror to ensure that we are not a mirage, that one movement matches another. But in Canada, our bawdies refuse to imitate themselves exactly and the reflection is always making a small gesture different from the original-although we are confused about that image, never sure which is the original.

How would you paint your image while dying?  
How would you teach others to copy your self-portrait?  
How would you paint your image while wacking off?

The glass turns your right hand into your left.  
You will be judged nevertheless. (Kroetsch, 2010: 20)

And doubtless found wanton. There's no point covering the mirrors in rooms where the writer writes. And bareness has nothing to do with that particular image.

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I'm distracted by the Rembrandt reference in Kroetsch's poem. The Dutch painter with his determined repetitiveness, trying to change his looks by painting self-portrait after self-portrait. He becomes more and more frightened as he grows older, the mirror no kinder than time. But he is determined to turn himself into Amsterdam; he teaches a nation to record its own golden age. Rembrandt's eyes do not align perfectly. Experts have used those portraits to diagnose him with stereo blindness, or divergent strabismus, a disability that actually advantaged the painter because it enabled him to translate a three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional canvas. (Or perhaps he gave that slight asymmetry to the characters in his portraits as a subterfuge.) So does the body align itself with fate, however much we despair of its imperfection. Fallen arches lead to long sessions in a library; Chickenpox leaves random coins of scar.

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Ultimately, it is the body that decrees the writer. The 'Workman hips', bpNichol claims, turned him into a writer. As a boy in Grade 4, he tried to jump across a ditch full of icy slush, and landed

like some bad imitation of a ballet dancer, struck, my left leg burying itself in that slush right up to my hip, stuck, my right leg floating on the top. My hips kept me afloat [...]. The fireman said that that ditch was so deep and the sludge so like quicksand I would've drowned if it hadn't been for the strange position of my legs and hips. And the cold I caught from being stuck in the ditch turned into bronchitis and they kept me home from school for over two weeks and during that time I wrote my first novel, *The Sailor from Mars*, all 26 chapters written by hand in a school copy book. (1988: 39-40)

The body of Canada invents the scribes of the bodies of Canada, frostbite and bronchitis, chilblains and snow blindness,

*Aritha van Herk*  
University of Calgary  
Canada

all an erotic of nature in concert with the body that learns to survive its accidents. “Whenever people ask me “how did you become a writer”, I always tend to say “I just fell into it” (Nichol, 1988: 40). Or ran toward it, as fast as possible.

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I envy long-distance runners,  
the triathloners who can persuade their bodies to do more than anybody can.  
They claim that it’s all about oxygen uptake, whatever that means.  
Another example of an element so big it can’t be seen, atmospheric.  
Endurance is a stoic fatigue,  
the bawdy of exhaustion another conversation entirely.  
Intensity is replete with strength, amplitude, magnitude.  
The largess of a body.  
More like the body makes accommodations for its location,  
then sets out to fit that goal.  
Get me from point A to point B.  
And make it snappy.

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*Dinggedict* or not, the body lives within us as we live within the body and the marks it displays as witness to character. This is a reciprocal gesture, and so we pore over its pores, its infinitesimal renewals and negotiations with itself, acts that we are bystander to and yet curiously contaminated by. We feel the need to confess and yet cannot confess that which we do not know, our bodies revealing us in ways that we cannot access, and yet, try to surprise with the various tools at hand, the x-ray or the blood pressure cuff, the paper cut that proves our blood is still red. ‘We cherish our scars for their boasting rights’ (Kroetsch, 2010: 30), our bodies revealing us in ways that we cannot suppress. Scars signal a body’s past, bawdy or not, earned *in extremis* sufficient to leave a lasting mark. Vision provides its own fragmented version, but the best bawdy of body locates itself as touch, the body touching itself as if to ascertain existence or reassure itself of its own corporeality. ‘Why do we so often touch our own faces?’ asks Kroetsch’s persona of himself, his many faces preparing to meet the faces that they meet.

Psychologists have lots of theories. I figure  
Our fingers are checking for damage. (Kroetsch, 200: 30)

Or pleasure. Nichol enumerates the fingers holding, playing, writing, fingering. 'Early on he learned the fingers gave you pleasure. You could feed yourself, play with yourself, finger things out, as you had to' (1988: 35). Make those fingers do what digits are required to do, the integers of bawdy, intent on reaching for what they want, snaring what they need.

And then one day he realized that of course he was always staring at his hand when he wrote, was always watching the pen as it moved along, gripped by his fingers, his fingers floating there in front of his eyes just above the words, above that single white sheet, just above these words i'm writing now. (Nichol, 1988: 36)

The *dinggedict* is intent on its reading, being read in the writing, caught in the act of writing down its writing down, and even caught in the bawdy act of enjoying itself.

A kiss, that too is a kind of scar; we are certain  
the world can read our rejoicing. (Kroetsch, 2010: 30)

The risk of pleasure is that it will leave a mark, a clue, a trace, ambivalent, private or shared.

And then there are the body's remnants and fluids, dead cells and metabolic excretions, gaseous and extra-cellular, the work of maintaining homeostasis. A cleansing going on within and without, and the leftovers soiling our apparel. Robert Kroetsch's 'Laundering the Poem' in *Too Bad* picks up on the desirable erasures of cleanliness and writing, with a gesture toward laundry's own incipient bawdiness.

I wrote the idea on a serviette;  
I put the serviette in my shirt pocket;  
I put the shirt and the serviette,

in the washing machine [...] (2010: 69)

Of course, the words are erased by the laundering, as is the persona's 'memory of the idea/I had put on the serviette

Aritha van Herk  
University of Calgary  
Canada



and into the pocket' (69). But in a last ditch effort to rescue his own lost poem, he claims, 'I just want the censors to know. At last, I have written a clean poem' (69). The 'lost' poem is an erasure of dirt, the persona at last shriven, the bawdy undone by the miracle of soap and water, a censorship of the body's effluent and aging, stains and sweat. Laundry is an occasion for jocularity, the task that makes us claim blamelessness.

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Beep's laundry.  
I had to drive home from the writing retreat,  
an hour and a half in the car to check my mail and water my tomatoes.  
That's a short distance in Canada, a mere errand.

I was at the retreat with Fred Wah and bpNichol.

I asked Fred Wah if he needed anything from Calgary.  
No, he had his owner's manual with him, he said,  
enough pictograms to last, and a few rooftops on the side.  
I asked Beep if he wanted anything. That's what we called him: Beep.  
He blushed.  
I couldn't read his mind,  
thought he was thinking bawdy beep thoughts,  
but he asked me if I could meet him outside.

Beep was the kind of man you'd agree to meet anywhere.  
We stepped out the door onto a green lawn.  
'I'd never ask this usually', he said,  
'but I didn't bring enough clothes along and I need to do some laundry'.

I looked at him and it dawned on me.  
'You want me to do some laundry for you?'  
He nodded shyly. 'If it wouldn't ruin your reputation'.  
I fell over laughing.  
The lawn was crowded with dandelions.  
It was that time of year.  
Dandelions are the most cosmopolitan of trans-plants, part of our national  
[mosaic.

I took Beep's bag of t-shirts and rather saggy briefs home  
and threw them in the washer  
while I inspected and then watered my garden.  
I knew it was an unlikely story, my doing Beep's laundry.  
I'd keep it quiet.

When they were clean and dry I folded his clothes  
neatly into squares, and drove the hour and a half  
back, windows wide open, speeding and singing  
along to Leonard Cohen's *I'm Your Man*.

I handed over the bag of laundry without contraband, and beep took it and thanked me, a little breathlessly, I thought for a man of such aplomb.

I wanted to tell him that in Canadian French, briefs are called *bobettes*, but that seemed too personal, too pompously national a reference and so I left the annotation undersaid.

I've been known for my obsession with laundry ever since. If you want a laundress, I'm your woman. That would be synecdoche more than metonymy. And in truth, dirty laundry is redundant.

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'Too bad!' declaims the persona behind the lost virility of Robert Kroetsch's sketches, 'too bad' that the body fails us, refuses to do what it's told, becomes grouchy and recalcitrant, discontinues its bawdy adventures. 'Argue against the charms of immortal life' (Kroetsch, 2010: 96) we may, because the body does choose to deceive itself, to imagine that it will escape death by virtue of its engagement with the oldest of bawds, life itself, even knowing that the larger the life, the harder it falls. bpNichol dedicates the section entitled 'The Lungs: A Draft' in *Selected Organs* to Robert Kroetsch. Once a guest at Kroetsch's home, he describes waking early and getting up to read when Kroetsch appeared at the top of the stairs and 'came down the stairs [...] muttering to himself, "life, the great tyrant that makes you go on breathing". And I thought about breathing. I thought about life. I thought about those great tyrants the lungs, about the lung poems I've tried to perfect in various ways. [...] I thought "life's about going the lung distance"' (Nichol, 1988: 26). No pun intended.

Even the bawdy body grows old, gets tired of the risk. Kroetsch depicts death as a cartoon character, comical rather than frightening. In 'Comic Book' he writes,

Death is a small intruder. He is painted red.  
Yes, he is male. Look at the extended scrotum  
(it's the heat), balls the size of avocados.

He has webbed feet (evolution gone haywire),  
six fingers on each hand, but no thumbs.  
The poet bpNichol might call him St. Ark. (2010: 6)

Aritha van Herk  
University of Calgary  
Canada

This final observation, that Nichol would know what to name the bawdy figure of death as it appears in a comic book, depicts finally the ekphrasis of the nation's fascination with its own body. Only a bawdy saint can reflect how our Canadian salvation and damnation are figments inspiring laughter and disgust at this nation's large and indefinable corpus. We scrutinize our parts in an effort to understand the whole. We can't figure the geography out. We stumble through love and lust and life, enumerating the parts that we recognize. At least they will explain a fraction of the whole, a fragment of the entire. We settle for a *dinggedict*. At least that will explain the unexplainable. At least, it will etch a pictograph on the enormous map of Canada.

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What is inside the body, hiding in its dark space?  
I have an organ I call grief.  
It could be vestigial like my appendix, which I still have,  
or tonsils which are not vestigial, but which I still have,  
or glandular like a thyroid.  
He's thyroidal, they say, about someone with protuberant eyes,  
as if the thyroid were pushing from within, determined to get noticed.

But this grief gland is not tubular or alveolar,  
not endocrine but serous.  
It waters itself with waiting, with the memory of waiting,  
desire for its own extinction.

Grief plays the same game as desire; it yearns to be extinguished.  
It pays regular visits to my father's hope, my mother's determined  
eloquence, and then comes back to me, as if to trick the passage of time.  
I struggle to imagine my parents as bawdy, but they  
were, the two who made me, lurking  
inside my body, where they play together, now.  
My father cultivates the back quarter,  
the land that had a view of Dried Meat Lake. My mother has brought  
my father lunch and he climbs down from the tractor.  
They sit in the shade of the big rear wheel and eat Gouda  
sandwiches unwrapped from wax paper, apples and a jar of tea.

That was their form of foreplay, a promise  
of the slow long evenings that followed June.

I didn't understand that they were Canada in  
love, having left the mangled body of the old country in  
order to make a new body here.

I am that body.  
Here.

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*Aritha van Herk  
University of Calgary  
Canada*

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