Too Bad: Sketches Toward a Self-Portrait
by Robert Kroetsch

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

The slender collection of tercets comprising Too Bad are witty and often mischievous, written not as an autobiography (which would be “quite a different kettle of fish,” as the poet himself avers on the fly-leaf cover) but “toward a self-portrait” of himself in his capacity as a poet. Such lifetime preoccupations of the writer as art, life, the nature of time and reality figure large in these surprisingly full pages. This is a mellow collection with its own refreshing humour and occasional blasphemy, purposeful colloquialisms and witticisms intertwined with paradox in the veritable quicksand of its easily shifting contexts.

In “Touch,” Kroetsch explains why he uses the three-line stanza so consistently throughout the collection. Applying the image of the poet as a metaphor, he posits that time itself is a “kind of poet,” writing “three-line stanzas” “on the “blank above our eyes.” Acknowledging the poet’s and everyman’s fear of aging, he remarks, “We read the lines / with our fingers. We rush to the pharmacy.” However, he points out with characteristic irony, the scars that mark such irreversible events also bring with them “boasting rights” (30).

Again working with this implicit dialectic underlying contradiction, Kroetsch suggests that the aging poet-everyman may also be secretly fascinated by the prospect of old age:

He tries growing old. His face maps
his terror in delicate lines, a path
to his secret longing. No one takes note. (34)

“Bad Timing” pokes fun at the yearning for the unanswerable when the speaker on an absurdist note questions the cashier at the 7-Eleven about the universe’s evident lack of a beginning or ending. The cashier’s casual reply, “I can see, he said / it’s going to be a long day” carries the perfect ironic understatement.

Time also figures in the elegant poem “Walking Backwards in a Blizzard,” in which the
speaker and his friend are late for school. “Trigonometry,” the speaker with mock seriousness reports his teacher as explaining, “is the study/ of angles,” and “Late for school is a failure / to connect two points with a straight line”:

The blizzard sealed our eyes, we said.
We had to walk backwards in order to see –
our tracks in the snow, the shape of the wind. (56)

The closing quip, suggesting schoolboy rationalization, that the past must be a “curved line” and that they “had arrived, by [their] calculations, early to class” also rings with the same paradoxical truth. Like the lines and angles in “Trigonometry,” the poem draws symbolic lines of logic in our imaginations that intersect with wit and recognition.

Many poems in Too Bad are about art and its intrinsically paradoxical nature. While in “Applause” the poet may cause his audience to laugh at tragedy and to cry at what is joyful in life, in “Terra Cotta Army” the figurines of the once terrible army guarding the wall of China are transformed into something beautiful. Using simple perceptions and examples, Kroetsch leads the reader smoothly toward the profound. Always favouring the concrete image over ungrounded philosophizing, Kroetsch in discussing the imagist poet “Doc Williams,” or William Carlos Williams in “No idea but in things,” avers with nursery-rhyme–bright simplicity, “I’d rather a rhyme that gives relief/ than a pie in the sky that gives belief” (61).

The poem “I Try to Steal My Identity” is generous in its address to intractable youth who refuse to learn from their educators. Reversing the expectation that we should encourage our youth to model their work on that of older writers, Kroetsch slyly points out that true originality comes from this very failure of youth to learn from role models:

We like telling stories to the young, but the young
don’t like to listen. It is their refusing to hear
that gives new syllables to their tongues. (78)

The poem ends with the speaker being shown by “kids” how to “hack into [his own] life” on the computer; but the line about there having been an “error” since back then “the rising sun” was an “oriole colour” suggests how, with the vivid but unreliable nature of memory, the past as it is remembered may not dovetail with this mechanical retrieval of facts.

Contingent with the artist’s interest in time and the nature of art is his preoccupation
with dream: In “Guesswork” the speaker talks about “ransacking” his life and dreams and “a city of books,” which leads him to the sphinx-like quandary of finding a way to solve this puzzle of finding something to write a poem about:

Lucretius says, of course there are gods; but the gods are as helpless as we. He doesn’t quite say it, but perhaps we should offer them pity. Done in by creation itself. (27)

Of course, the double entendre of “gods” and literary icons such as himself “done in by creation” becomes implicit in a tender stroke of self-irony. In a playful aside, Kroetsch specifies the gods, “not us,” and then retracts with tongue-in-cheek humour, “well, us too.” Since the gods “have moved into the books,” the speaker starts the realization in increments: “Who wrote the books?” and “into whose dream, then, are we dreaming?”

With unnerving common sense and irony, the poet-speaker in “Risking It” remarks that “your old leather coat will outlast you” but still considers the “risk” of art as worth it, perhaps because there is little else to do in the face of the inevitable (and therefore that “risk” becomes more a form of play than truly a risk per se). Although “salami,” that everyday favourite food “will bring you heartburn” and by association “heart attack,” the pizza bearing its cold cut decorations may after all be considered “a work of art” (however indigestible after that heart attack). (96)

Too Bad is a delightful collection that from its Charlie Brown–like cover design to the clean symmetry and strikingly fresh observations about perennial questions concerning art and life rings true with playfulness and wit.

Gillian Harding-Russell lives, reviews, edits, teaches and writes in Regina. Her latest collection of poetry is I forgot to tell you (Thistledown Press, 2007).

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