

Henry Kreisel (1922-1990)

Born in Austria, Kreisel fled the Anschluss in 1938, going to England where he was interned and sent to Canada along with several thousand other refugees. He obtained an M.A. in English in 1947 from the University of Toronto, and became a lecturer in English at the University of Alberta. His first novel *The Rich Man* was published in 1948, followed by *The Betrayal* in 1964. "The Broken Globe" is taken from *The Almost Meeting and Other Stories* (1987), his collected short stories from 1954 to 1980. His essay "The Prairie: A State of Mind" from 1968 is considered one of the most influential theoretical essays on Canadian prairie fiction.

Henry Kreisel

The Broken Globe

Since it was Nick Solchuk who first told me about the opening in my field at the University of Alberta, I went up to see him as soon as I received word that I had been appointed. He lived in one of those old mansions in Pimlico that had once served as town houses for wealthy merchants and aristocrats, but now housed a less moneyed group of people – stenographers, students, and intellectuals of various kinds. He had studied at Cambridge and got his doctorate there and was now doing research at the Imperial College and rapidly establishing a reputation among the younger men for his work on problems which had to do with the curvature of the earth.

His room was on the third floor, and it was very cramped, but he refused to move because he could look out from his window and see the Thames and the steady flow of boats, and that gave him a sense of distance and of space also. Space, he said, was what he missed most in the crowded city. He referred to himself, nostalgically, as a prairie boy, and when he wanted to demonstrate what he meant by space he used to say that when a man stood and looked out across the open prairie, it was possible for him to believe that the earth was flat.

"So," he said, after I had told him my news, "you are going to teach French to prairie boys and girls. I congratulate you." Then

p. 29

the opening in my
field åbningen inden
for mit arbejdsområde

Pimlico kvarter i London

curvature krumning
cramped trang

In Tina L Bundgaard et al
"Inner and Outer Landscapes",
Systime, 1996, p 29-40

he cocked his head to one side, and looked me over and said:
"How are your ears?"

"My ears?" I said. "They're all right. Why?"

"Prepare yourself," he said. "Prairie voices trying to speak
5 French – that will be a great experience for you. I speak from experience. I learned my pronunciation in a little one-room school in a prairie village. From an extraordinary girl, mind you, but her mind ran to science. Joan McKenzie – that was her name. A wiry little thing, sharpnosed, and she always wore brown
10 dresses. She was particularly fascinated by earthquakes. 'In 1755 the city of Lisbon, Portugal, was devastated. Sixty-thousand persons died; the shock was felt in Southern France and North Africa; and inland waters of Great Britain and Scandinavia were agitated.' You see, I still remember that, and I can hear
15 her voice too. Listen: 'In common with the entire solar system, the earth is moving through space at the rate of approximately 45,000 miles per hour, toward the constellation of Hercules. Think of that, boys and girls.' Well, I thought about it. It was a lot to think about. Maybe that's why I became a geophysicist. Her
20 enthusiasm was infectious. I knew her at her peak. After a while she got tired and married a solid farmer and had eight children."

"But her French, I take it, was not so good," I said.

"No," he said. "Language gave no scope to her imagination. Mind you, I took French seriously enough. I was a very serious
25 student. For a while I even practised French pronunciation at home. But I stopped it because it bothered my father. My mother begged me to stop. For the sake of peace."

"Your father's ears were offended," I said.

"Oh, no," Nick said, "not his ears. His soul. He was sure that I
30 was learning French so I could run off and marry a French girl.... Don't laugh. It's true. When once my father believed something, it was very hard to shake him."

"But why should he have objected to your marrying a French girl anyway?"

35 "Because," said Nick, and pointed a stern finger at me, "because when he came to Canada he sailed from some French port, and he was robbed of all his money while he slept. He held all Frenchmen responsible. He never forgot and he never forgave. And, by God, he wasn't going to have that cursed language
40 spoken in his house. He wasn't going to have any nonsense

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cock dreje

wiry sej

devastate ødelægge

agitate sætte i

bevægelse

the constellation of

Hercules stjerneteg-

net Hercules

in'fectious smittende

scope spillerum

stern streng

about science in his house either." Nick was silent for a moment, and then he said, speaking very quietly, "Curious man, my father. He had strange ideas, but a strange kind of imagination, too. I couldn't understand him when I was going to school or to the university. But then a year or two ago, I suddenly realized that the shape of the world he lived in had been forever fixed for him by some medieval priest in the small Ukrainian village where he was born and where he received an education of sorts when he was a boy. And I suddenly realized that he wasn't mad, but that he lived in the universe of the medieval church. The earth for him was the centre of the universe, and the centre was still. It didn't move. The sun rose in the East and it set in the West, and it moved perpetually around a still earth. God had made this earth especially for man, and man's function was to perpetuate himself and worship God. My father never said all that in so many words, mind you, but that is what he believed. Everything else was heresy."

He fell silent.

"How extraordinary," I said.

He did not answer at once, and after a while he said, in a tone of voice which seemed to indicate that he did not want to pursue the matter further, "Well, when you are in the middle of the Canadian West, I'll be in Rome. I've been asked to give a paper to the International Congress of Geophysicists which meets there in October."

"So I heard," I said. "Wilcocks told me the other day. He said it was going to be a paper of importance. In fact, he said it would create a stir."

"Did Wilcocks really say that?" he asked eagerly, his face reddening, and he seemed very pleased. We talked for a while longer, and then I rose to go.

He saw me to the door and was about to open it for me, but stopped suddenly, as if he were turning something over in his mind, and then said quickly, "Tell me – would you do something for me?"

"Of course," I said. "If I can."

He motioned me back to my chair and I sat down again. "When you are in Alberta," he said, "and if it is convenient for you, would you – would you go to see my father?"

"Why, yes," I stammered, "why, of course. I – I didn't realize he

p. 31

medieval middel-
alderlig

per'petually uop-
hørligt

per'petuate himself
sikre sin egen fort-
satte eksistens

heresy kætteri

paper foredrag, fore-
læsning

create a stir skabe
furor, uro

con'venient belejlighet

was still...."

"Oh, yes," he said, "he's still alive, still working. He lives on his farm, in a place called Three Bear Hills, about sixty or seventy miles out of Edmonton. He lives alone. My mother is dead. 5 I have a sister who is married and lives in Calgary. There were only the two of us. My mother could have no more children. It was a source of great agony for them. My sister goes to see him sometimes, and then she sometimes writes to me. He never writes to me. We – we had – what shall I call it – differences. If 10 you went to see him and told him that I had not gone to the devil, perhaps..." He broke off abruptly, clearly agitated, and walked over to his window and stood staring out, then said, "Perhaps you'd better not. I – I don't want to impose on you."

I protested that he was not imposing at all, and promised that 15 I would write to him as soon as I had paid my visit.

I met him several times after that, but he never mentioned the matter again.

I sailed from England about the middle of August and arrived in Montreal a week later. The long journey West was one of the 20 most memorable experiences I have ever had. There were moments of weariness and dullness. But the very monotony was impressive. There was a grandeur about it. It was monotony of a really monumental kind. There were moments when, exhausted by the sheer impact of the landscape, I thought back with longing 25 to the tidy, highly cultivated countryside of England and of France, to the sight of men and women working in the fields, to the steady succession of villages and towns, and everywhere the consciousness of nature humanized. But I also began to understand why Nick Solchuk was always longing for more space and 30 more air, especially when we moved into the prairies, and the land became flatter until there seemed nothing, neither hill nor tree nor bush, to disturb the vast unbroken flow of land until in the far distance a thin, blue line marked the point where the prairie merged into the sky. Yet over all there was a strange 35 tranquillity, all motion seemed suspended, and only the sun moved steadily, imperturbably West, dropping finally over the rim of the horizon, a blazing red ball, but leaving a superb evening light lying over the land still.

I was reminded of the promise I had made, but when I arrived 40 in Edmonton, the task of settling down absorbed my time and

p. 32

agony smerte

agitate bringe i affekt

im'pose on trænge sig

på

weariness træthed

monotony ensformig-
hed

monu'mental stor-

slået, kolossal

sheer ren og skær

impact virkning

cultivated opdyrket

suc'cession rækkeføl-
ge

tran'quillity ro

sus'pended indstillet

imper'turbably uan-
fægtet, rolig

energy so completely that I did nothing about it. Then, about the middle of October, I saw a brief report in the newspaper about the geophysical congress which had opened in Rome on the previous day, and I was mindful of my promise again. Before I could
5 safely bury it in the back of my mind again, I sat down and wrote a brief letter to Nick's father, asking him when I could come out to visit him. Two weeks passed without an answer, and I decided to go and see him on the next Saturday without further formalities.

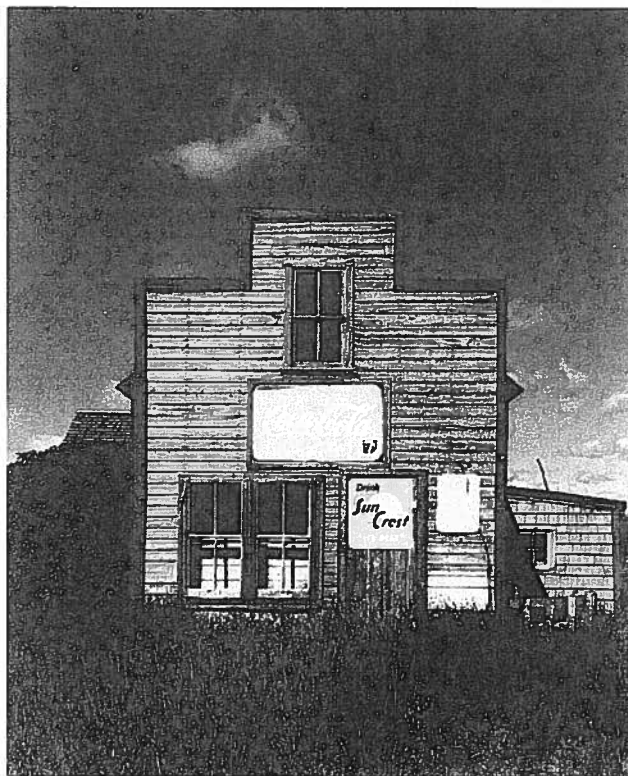
10 The day broke clear and fine. A few white clouds were in the metallic autumn sky and the sun shone coldly down upon the earth, as if from a great distance. I drove south as far as Wetas-kiwin and then turned east. The paved highway gave way to gravel and got steadily worse. I was beginning to wonder
15 whether I was going right, when I rounded a bend and a grain elevator hove into view. It was now about three o'clock and I had arrived in Three Bear Hills, but, as Nick had

p. 33

gravel grus
grain elevator korn-
elevator, -silo

hove into view kom
til syne, cf. heave

Prairie store,
Saskatchewan.



told me, there were neither bears nor hills here, but only prairie, and suddenly the beginning of an embryonic street with a few buildings on either side like a small island in a vast sea, and then all was prairie again.

5 I stopped in front of the small general store and went in to ask for directions. Three farmers were talking to the storekeeper, a bald, bespectacled little man who wore a long, dirty apron, and stood leaning against his counter. They stopped talking and turned to look at me. I asked where the Solchuk farm was.

10 Slowly scrutinizing me, the storekeeper asked, "You just new here?"

"Yes," I said.

"From the old country, eh?"

"Yes."

15 "You selling something?"

"No, no," I said. "I – I teach at the University."

"That so?" He turned to the other men and said, "Only boy ever went to University from around here was Solchuk's boy, Nick. Real brainy young kid, Nick. Two of 'em never got on to-

20 gether. Too different. You know."

They nodded slowly.

"But that boy of his – he's a real big-shot scientist now. You know them addem bombs and them hydrergen bombs. He helps make 'em."

25 "No, no," I broke in quickly. "That's not what he does. He's a geophysicist."

"What's that?" asked one of the men.

But before I could answer, the little storekeeper asked excitedly, "You know Nick?"

30 "Yes," I said, "we're friends. I've come to see his father."

"And where is he now? Nick, I mean."

"Right now he is in Rome," I said. "But he lives in London, and does research there."

35 "Big-shot, eh," said one of the men laconically, but with a trace of admiration in his voice, too.

"He's a big scientist, though, like I said. Isn't that so?" the storekeeper broke in.

"He's going to be a very important scientist indeed," I said, a trifle solemnly.

40 "Like I said," he called out triumphantly. "That's showing 'em."

p. 34
embry'onic uudviklet,
egl. foster-
scrutinize undersøge
nøje
addem = atom
hydrergen = hydro-
gen, brint
big-shot berømt, 'stor
kanon'
la'conically lakonisk,
kort og fyndigt
trifle smule
solemn alvorlig

p. 35
furrow fure
hinge hængsel
cluster klynge
ochre-coloured
 okker-farvet, gul-
 brun farve
mottled skjoldet
timbre klangfarve
dusk skumring

A kid from Three Bear Hills, Alberta. More power to him!" His pride was unmistakable. "Tell me, mister," he went on, his voice dropping, "does he remember this place sometimes? Or don't he want to know us no more?"

5 "Oh no," I said quickly. "He often talks of this place, and of Alberta, and of Canada. Some day he plans to return."

"That's right," he said with satisfaction. He drew himself up to full height, banged his fist on the table and said, "I'm proud of that boy. Maybe old Solchuk don't think so much of him, but you
 10 tell him old Mister Marshall is proud of him." He came from behind the counter and almost ceremoniously escorted me out to my car and showed me the way to Solchuk's farm.

I had about another five miles to drive, and the road, hardly more now than two black furrows cut into the prairie, was un-
 15 even and bumpy. The land was fenced on both sides of the road, and at last I came to a rough wooden gate hanging loosely on one hinge, and beyond it there was a cluster of small wooden buildings. The largest of these, the house itself, seemed at one time to have been ochre-colored, but the paint had worn off and
 20 it now looked curiously mottled. A few chickens were wandering about, pecking at the ground, and from the back I could hear the grunting and squealing of pigs.

I walked up to the house and, just as I was about to knock, the door was suddenly opened, and a tall, massively built old man
 25 stood before me.

"My name is..." I began.

But he interrupted me. "You the man wrote to me?" His voice, though unpolished, had the same deep timbre as Nick's.

"That's right," I said.

30 "You a friend of Nick's?"

"Yes."

He beckoned me in with a nod of his head. The door was low and I had to stoop a bit to get into the room. It was a large, low-ceilinged room. A smallish window let in a patch of light
 35 which lit up the middle of the room but did not spread into the corners, so that it seemed as if it were perpetually dusk. A table occupied the centre, and on the far side there was a large wood stove on which stood a softly hissing black kettle. In the corner facing the entrance there was an iron bedstead, and the bed was
 40 roughly made, with a patchwork quilt thrown carelessly on top.

The old man gestured me to one of the chairs which stood around the table.

"Sit."

I did as he told me, and he sat down opposite me and placed
5 his large calloused hands before him on the table. He seemed to
study me intently for a while, and I scrutinized him. His face
was covered by a three-day's stubble, but in spite of that, and in
spite of the fact that it was a face beaten by sun and wind, it was
10 clear that he was Nick's father. For Nick had the same deter-
mined mouth, and the same high cheekbones and the same
dark, penetrating eyes.

At last he spoke. "You friend of Nick."

I nodded my head.

"What he do now?" he asked sharply. "He still tampering with
15 the earth?"

His voice rose as if he were delivering a challenge, and I drew
back involuntarily. "Why – he's doing scientific research, yes," I
told him. "He's..."

"What God has made," he said sternly, "no man should touch."

20 Before I could regain my composure, he went on, "He sent you.
What for? What he want?"

"Nothing," I said, "nothing at all. He sent me to bring you
greetings and to tell you he is well."

"And you come all the way from Edmonton to tell me?"

25 "Yes, of course."

A faint smile played about his mouth, and the features of his
face softened. Then suddenly he rose from his chair and stood
towering over me. "You are welcome in this house," he said.

The formality with which he spoke was quite extraordinary
30 and seemed to call for an appropriate reply, but I could do little
more than stammer a thank you, and he, assuming again a nor-
mal tone of voice, asked me if I cared to have coffee. When I as-
sented he walked to the far end of the room and busied himself
about the stove.

35 It was then that I noticed, just under the window, a rough
little wooden table and on top of it a faded globe made of card-
board, such as little children use in school. I was intrigued to see
it there and went over to look at it more closely. The cheap metal
mount was brown with rust, and when I lifted it and tried to
40 turn the globe on its axis, I found that it would not rotate be-

p. 36

calloused barket
stubble skægstubbe
penetrate gennembo-

re
tamper with lave
fiksfakserier med
involun'tarily ufrivil-
ligt

com'posure fatning
towering tårnhøj
as'sent sige ja
in'trigue vække ens
interesse
mount fod

cause part of it had been squashed and broken. I ran my hand over the deep dent, and suddenly the old man startled me.

5 "What you doing there?" Curiosity seemed mingled with suspicion in his voice and made me feel like a small child surprised by its mother in an unauthorized raid on the pantry. I set down the globe and turned. He was standing by the table with two big mugs of coffee in his hands.

"Coffee is hot," he said.

I went back to my chair and sat down, slightly embarrassed.

10 "Drink," he said, pushing one of the mugs over to me.

We both began to sip the coffee, and for some time neither of us said anything.

15 "That thing over there," he said at last, putting down his mug, "that thing you was looking at – he brought it home one day – he was a boy then – maybe thirteen-year-old-Nick. The other day I found it up in the attic. I was going to throw it in the garbage. But I forgot. There it belongs. In the garbage. It is a false thing." His voice had now become venomous.

"False?" I said. "How is it false?"

20 He disregarded my question. "I remember," he went on, "he came home from school one day and we was all here in this room – all sitting around this table eating supper, his mother, his sister and me and Alex, too – the hired man like. And then sudden-like Nick pipes up, and he says, we learned in school today, 25 he says, how the earth is round like a ball, he says, and how it moves around and around the sun and never stops, he says. They learning you rubbish in school, I say. But he says no, Miss McKenzie never told him no lies. Then I say she does, I say, and a son of mine shouldn't believe it. Stop your ears! Let not Satan 30 come in!" He raised an outspread hand and his voice thundered as if he were a prophet armed. "But he always a stubborn boy – Nick. Like a mule. He never listened to reason. I believe it, he says. To me he says that – his father, just like that. I believe it, he says, because science proved it and it is the truth. It is false, 35 I cry, and you will not believe it. I believe it, he says. So then I hit him because he will not listen and he will not obey. But he keeps shouting and shouting and shouting. She moves, he shouts, she moves, she moves!"

40 He stopped. His hands had balled themselves into fists, and the remembered fury sent the blood streaming into his face. He

p. 37

dent bule

mingle blande

sus'picion mistænksomhed

pantry spisekammer

attic loftsrum, pulterkammer

garbage skraldespand

venomous ondskabssfuld, egt. giftig

disregard ignorere

pipe up opløfte sin røst

fury raseri

seemed now to have forgotten my presence and he went on speaking in a low murmuring voice, almost as if he were telling the story to himself.

5 "So the next day, or the day after, I go down to that school, and there is this little Miss McKenzie, so small and so thin that I could have crush her with my bare hands. What you teaching my boy Nick? I ask her. What false lies you stuffing in his head? What you telling him that the earth is round and that she moves for? Did Joshua tell the earth to stand still, or did he command the sun? So she says to me, I don't care what Joshua done, she says, I will tell him what science has discovered. With that woman I could get nowhere. So then I try to keep him away from school, and I lock him up in the house, but it was not good. He got out, and he run to the school like, and Miss McKenzie she sends me a letter to say she will send up the inspectors if I try to keep him away from the school. And I could do nothing."

His sense of impotence was palpable. He sat sunk into himself as if he were still contemplating ways of halting the scientific education of his son.

20 "Two, three weeks after," he went on, "he comes walking in this door with a large paper parcel in his hand. Now, he calls out to me, now I will prove it to you, I will prove that she moves. And he tears off the paper from the box and takes out this – this thing, and he puts it on the table here. Here, he cries, here is the earth, and look, she moves. And he gives that thing a little push and it twirls around like. I have to laugh. A toy, I say to him, you bring me a toy here, not bigger than my hand, and it is supposed to be the world, this little toy here, with the printed words on colored paper, this little cardboard ball. This Miss McKenzie, I say to him, she's turning you crazy in that school. But look, he says, she moves. Now I have to stop my laughing. I'll soon show you she moves, I say, for he is beginning to get me mad again. And I go up to the table and I take the toy thing in my hands and I smash it down like this."

35 He raised his fists and let them crash down on the table as if he meant to splinter it.

40 "That'll learn you, I cry. I don't think he could believe I had done it, because he picks up the thing and he tries to turn it, but it don't turn no more. He stands there and the tears roll down his cheeks, and then, sudden-like, he takes the thing in both his

p. 38

Joshua Josua, person skildret i Josuabogen i Gammel Testamente

com'mand påbyde
impotence magtesløshed

palpable åbenlys
contemplate overveje

hands and he throws it at me. And it would have hit me right in the face, for sure, if I did not put up my hand. Against your father, I cry, you will raise up your hand against your father. Asmodeus! I grab him by the arm, and I shake him and I beat him like he was the devil. And he makes me madder and madder because he don't cry or shout or anything. And I would have kill him there, for sure, if his mother didn't come in then and pull me away. His nose was bleeding, but he didn't notice. Only he looks at me and says, you can beat me and break my globe, but you can't stop her moving. That night my wife she make me swear by all that's holy that I wouldn't touch him no more. And from then on I never hit him again nor talk to him about this thing. He goes his way and I go mine."

He fell silent. Then after a moment he snapped suddenly, "You hold with that?"

"Hold with what?" I asked, taken aback.

"With that thing?" He pointed behind him at the little table and at the broken globe. His gnarled hands now tightly interlocked, he leaned forward in his chair and his dark, brooding eyes sought an answer from mine in the twilight of the room.

Alone with him there, I was almost afraid to answer firmly. Was it because I feared that I would hurt him too deeply if I did, or was I perhaps afraid that he would use violence on me as he had on Nick?

I cleared my throat. "Yes," I said then. "Yes, I believe that the earth is round and that she moves. That fact has been accepted now for a long time."

I expected him to round on me but he seemed suddenly to have grown very tired, and in a low resigned voice he said, "Satan has taken over all the world." Then suddenly he roused himself and hit the table hard with his fist, and cried passionately, "But not me! Not me!"

It was unbearable. I felt that I must break the tension, and I said the first thing that came into my mind. "You can be proud of your son in spite of all that happened between you. He is a fine man, and the world honors him for his work."

He gave me a long look, "He should have stayed here," he said quietly. "When I die, there will be nobody to look after the land. Instead he has gone off to tamper with God's earth."

His fury was now all spent. We sat for a while in silence, and

p. 39

Asmo'deus ond ånd i
det jødiske Gamle
Testamente

round on angribe
sur'vey se ud over
ex'panse udstrækning
a'vert vende væk
gnarled knudret
brood ruge over
re'signed resigneret
rouse oneself rejse
sig i vrede

then I rose. Together we walked out of the house. When I was about to get into my car, he touched me lightly on the arm. I turned. His eyes surveyed the vast expanse of sky and land, stretching far into the distance, reddish clouds in the sky and
5 blue shadows on the land. With a gesture of great dignity and power he lifted his arm and stood pointing into the distance, at the flat land and the low-hanging sky. "Look," he said, very slowly and very quietly, "she is flat, and she stands still."

10 It was impossible not to feel a kind of admiration for the old man. There was something heroic about him. I held out my hand and he took it. He looked at me steadily, then averted his eyes and said, "Send greetings to my son."

15 I drove off quickly, but had to stop again in order to open the wooden gate. I looked back at the house, and saw him still standing there, still looking at his beloved land, a lonely, towering figure framed against the darkening evening sky.

p. 40
survey skue ud over
vast enorm
dignity værdighed