

***arguments with gravity.* Michael Crummey.**

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## VALERIE LEGGE

she loves the call and return  
between the singer and the sad guitar,  
.....  
and the way the singer's voice breaks  
over and over like a heart without  
letting go of the song  
Michael Crummey, "Mom's Blues"

IN *THREE STEPS on the Ladder of Writing* (1993), H el ene Cixous describes writing as a delicate, difficult process involving all those people with whom we feel a special affinity. During his apprenticeship years, Michael Crummey has kept good company. He has studied the "common magic," the quiet grace that comes from living and loving, from being fully engaged in the world. And he has learned his craft from extremely gifted teachers and guides, people who have shared with him the nuances of the spaces they have travelled through. He has learned from his father, who by age twelve "could clean a fish in fifteen seconds/ the gutting knife tracing the cod's spine/ beneath the scaling flesh./ his blind fingers working beside the blade/ pulling the back-bone clear with/ the wet web of fish guts" ("Apprenticeships"); from a mother who knows "that life is a study in the blues afterall./ how sometimes it's sweetest when/ it hurts the most/ how it hurts so good" ("Mom's Blues"); from friends and news makers; from fellow travellers and rogue lovers, whose intimate histories he carries like tattoos, like scars ("Three Pictures of Ann" and "Undomestic"); and from what Cixous calls that "sublime tribe" of eclectic artists who nourish and shelter him along the way: Roo Borson, Lorna Crozier,

Bronwen Wallace, Pat Lowther, Jeni Couzyn, David Donnell, Al Purdy, Michael Ondaatje, Leonard Cohen (the old and the 'New Canadian Poets'), Italo Calvino, Sharon Olds, Adrienne Rich, Carolyn Forché, Robert Bly.

It is fitting that Crummey, whose first collection of poetry evokes the moods and sentiments of Bronwen Wallace's work, should have won the inaugural Bronwen Wallace Award for poetry. She would have appreciated the honesty of this newly published poet, who despite his youth, convinces in nearly every song that he knows only too well the importance of resisting the pull of the center, of carrying longing and loss as gently as he can. The title, *arguments with gravity* (1996), is perhaps itself a tribute to Wallace's *Arguments with the World* (1992), an acknowledgement of how we are shaped by everything we meet, of "how we fill each other briefly, but perfectly and then uncurl ... as smoke uncurls across the sky" (Wallace, "Where the Sweetheart Rides the Rodeo Again"). In "Where the Words Come From" Crummey's tribute is explicit: "Sometimes it's as simple as ... / ... Bronwen Wallace in her last book / her head turned toward the camera / with an expression you can't quite place / a look that says she's told you everything / she's able to tell now" (15).

The poems are carefully arranged into five sections. Those in the first section ("The Air Around Their Bodies") focus mainly on technique, performance, process and change; as the persona in "Apprenticeships" muses, "everything begins with technique / with simple repetition" (10). But having studied the craft, there then comes that sudden, inexplicable something: "Something too obvious to be said simply / refuses to rise to the light of the words, / something as ordinary, as perfectly / proportioned as my father's hands / growing old" (10).

Some of the more personal poems in section two ("One of the Lives I Have Not Lived") are about the need to know our own people, and our desire to enter their dreams ("Cod (1)" and "Cod (2)"). Others, like "Morning Labrador Coast" and "Lilacs," celebrate the hardships of a past our fathers have spent their lives hoping we would never inherit: "he wanted nothing more for me / than that I should grow up a stranger to all this / that his be one of the lives I have not lived" (33). That past has now vanished, yet its "silhouette" lingers in the rhythms of their speech, in what we salvage from their stories.

As the Sharon Olds' epigraph to section three ("Part of It") indicates, in such urgent times as these and in countries ruled by brutal military regimes, poets have been given the dangerous task of bearing witness. "Victor Jara's Hands," "Witness," "Bullet" and "The Deaths of Oscar Romero" refer to some of the many "atrocities" that have become nearly commonplace during what the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam has called this "broken-backed century." These poems may not change the world, will not undo the brutalities they document, but they are powerful testimonies to a sensuous century that aches and shudders toward some kind of momentous close: "something remains / and will not die / though it is killed over

and over" (53). As Adrienne Rich writes in "Dreamwood," poetry "isn't revolution but a way of knowing / why it must come."

The only weak notes in this collection are in section four ("Redefining the Kiss"), which questions many of our culture's master narratives, but then resorts to the clichés of pop psychology for facile conclusions. For example, in "Redefining the Kiss: Men" Crummey writes, "Loving men is like listening to a song / on the radio / you can stand beside it and sing along / but it's hard to get any closer" (58). Popular guides like Robert Bly's *Iron John* and John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* may promise to heal broken psyches, to show us how to create healthier relationships, but ultimately they do little to advance the fractured dialogue between the sexes. "Precedents: A Meditation on the Bobbitts" is a dark, contemporary allegory about what happens when men and women abandon the old familiar stories completely, only to discover there is nothing of worth to take their place. In contrast, other poems like "David Donnell's Schlong" and "Redefining the Kiss: Wanda's Dream" are more playful and ironic in tone and intent.

The final section ("The River You Remember") brings together the personal and political threads evident throughout the collection in poems ("In Canada There is Already Snow" and "The Bath") that show how geographies collide and trajectories cross, how all borders are illusory. Cixous suggests that the true poet is an explorer, a border-crosser: "Writing is about travelling on foot and all its substitutes, all forms of transportation. It is about travelling to the heart of the country." In his first collection, Crummey has traversed much terrain and he has sung eloquently about the people and places that have embraced him, about discoveries made along the way.

The strongest poems in this collection are those that explore the complexities of blood-ties and heart-lines, those in which the poet, having placed his faith in the rhythms of the song and in the cadences of ordinary speech, is willing, as Leonard Cohen describes it, to "travel blind": "Apprenticeships," "Northern Ontario: Finnish Cemetery," "Mom's Blues," "Cigarettes (1)," "Lilacs," "Cigarettes (2)." Appropriately, *arguments with gravity* is dedicated to his parents. Though we grow up and away from our families, we continue to move in our parents' shadows, where we are haunted by the heart-break of their silences, where we carry along with us the strengths and passions of their bloodsongs, the "sweetness" of their blues. As the daughter in "Northern Ontario: Finnish Cemetery" discovers: "A father can be as difficult a love / as an adopted country" for "part of him always remains a stranger." In "News from Home: Metamorphosis" the persona affirms the importance of maintaining connections with those to whom our hearts are attached:

You can hear the difference in their voices when they call  
 how they have grown away from and toward me all at once  
 and I am changed too by this news from home  
 by the slow metamorphosis of the people I love;  
 together we are becoming something we barely recognize

something more fragile

something tougher than we imagined possible (17)

In *An Unspoken Hunger* (1994) poet-naturalist Terry Tempest Williams writes, "Each of us harbors a homeland, a landscape we naturally comprehend. By understanding the dependability of place, we can anchor ourselves as trees." While Newfoundland with its twined legacy of toughness and fragility is Crummey's birthplace ("the place I come from still / the place that made me"), the more ancient homeland he emerges from and moves ever steadily toward is the heartland.

Books that possess the ability to break our hearts—and then heal them—are rare. Describing the creative act some years ago, the late Bronwen Wallace wrote, "It's all in the hands." Granted, how we hold the things we love *is* important; but as Michael Crummey suggests, perhaps the real secret to holding rests in the voice, in how it shivers and sings as it negotiates the mysterious undertows of the human heart.