

A Piece of Hard Light: Excerpts from Michael Crummey's Hard Light

John Steffler

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Article abstract

In 1998, Newfoundland-born writer Michael Crummey published *Hard Light*, a collection of poems and short prose narratives which explore his ancestors' experiences in outport Newfoundland and on the Labrador fishery in the 19th and early 20th century. This essay explores the dominant themes in *Hard Light*, including the experience of work, the power of landscape, and the persistence of culture. It is followed by a selection of Crummey's poems.

POETRY / POÉSIE

A Piece of *Hard Light*: Excerpts from Michael Crummey's *Hard Light*

John Steffler

BORN IN THE MINING TOWN of Buchans, Newfoundland, Michael Crummey was raised there and in Wabush, Labrador. His first book of poems, *Arguments with Gravity*, was published in 1996. *Hard Light* appeared in 1998 and was followed by a book of stories, *Flesh & Blood*, and another collection of poems, *Emergency Roadside Assistance*. A novel, *River Thieves*, was released in 2001 and was short-listed for the Giller Prize, a prestigious award for Canadian fiction. He currently lives in St. John's.¹

As a writer, Crummey approaches characters not as isolated individuals but as beings whose identities are inseparable from their landscape and culture; and culture for him is inseparable from the work people do, inseparable from the tools and routines they have devised to exploit the resources and ward off the dangers in the places where they live. This approach is especially apparent in *Hard Light*, a collection of poems and short prose narratives having to do with his ancestors' lives in rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

¹Michael Crummey, *Arguments with Gravity* (Kingston 1996); *Hard Light* (London 1998); *Flesh & Blood* (Vancouver 1998); *Emergency Roadside Assistance* (Stratford 2001); and *River Thieves* (Toronto 2001). *Labour/Le Travail* would like to acknowledge the generosity of Michael Crummey and Brick Brooks for allowing the re-publication of several poems from *Hard Light*. Page references to *Hard Light* will appear in parentheses in the text.

Crummey announces his subject and suggests something about the way he is going to handle it at the beginning of *Hard Light* in a piece called "Rust," where he describes his father's hands and tries to imagine the lifetime of work that has given them their scarred and callused shape.⁽⁹⁾ For one thing, rather than the mere facts, it is a sense of the physical immediacy of his father's past he is after, the way he had to grapple with the world and its economic imperatives, and what that felt like from the inside. The concrete particulars of daily life are prominent in all the poems and stories that *Hard Light* contains. People are always involved in physical activities: splitting and salting fish, digging potatoes, baking bread, making fires, and handling the rigging on storm-tossed ships. Their activities define them more than any account of their property or social status or personal appearance.

Throughout *Hard Light*, Crummey uses whatever fragments of evidence are available to conjure up the past: scars, photographs, and family lore. Above all it is his father's stories he uses. In the poet's mind these take on a life of their own. At first it is his father's voice telling the stories. Then other people are mentioned; other voices enter in. Soon a woman is speaking, a mother or grandmother perhaps; nameless men from the 19th century join the sequence, men who operated trading ships on the Newfoundland coast or roamed the world as sailors. The implication is that human identities are not neatly contained things but diffused, cumulative, and inclusive. Just as the author's life blends into his father's, his father's voice links back through time with those of his forebears and with others branching out through community and work. Who these people were can not be separated from what was physically around them, what they handled, their customs, ventures, and practical strategies. In this way the history of his father's hands becomes a concise, poignant social history of Newfoundland.²

Yet the anonymous voices in *Hard Light* speak to us as distinct individuals. What comes through again and again in the foreground of their short tales is their determination and awareness. They are in charge of the enterprise of their lives. They struggle and improvise, very aware of their dependence on community, focussed on the notion of home, and yet solely responsible for their own survival and integrity. In fact it is that paradoxical tension between self and surroundings which constitutes one of the most subtle and moving issues in *Hard Light*. Crummey's characters depend on a harsh environment. To be strong they have to love things which are dangerous and undependable. It starts with the sea, of course, which is the main reason his people are in Newfoundland. The sea directly or indirectly supports them all, and can not be trusted one bit.

This gives their culture a strange insubstantiality. It is at once intensely physical — primitive actually given the way they have to wrestle with the material world for survival — and yet somehow theoretical or abstract, because so much of the structure of their culture exists in their minds rather than in a concrete form they can

²On the literature of Newfoundland in general see Patrick O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Toronto 1979).

return to or rely on. They are poor. Time and the sea constantly erase their work. They are scattered. It is the ties amongst the people themselves — family, friends — and their stories, and the native bedrock landscape underneath the ephemeral things they have built and done, that provide the structure and foundation for their lives. They have one another, they have their stories, and they have a god-like, brutal landscape that they are continually face to face with. Their culture does not screen them from much. In “A narrow escape almost but saved,” a man recalls being knocked overboard in a storm, then luckily saved when he happened to touch some trailing lines from the ship’s rigging. He says he does not remember being afraid, only the certainty of knowing he was about to be drowned, and then “the peculiar darkness of discovering/ there is nothing that is certain.” (88)

An underlying pattern in these poems and stories is of life’s unpredictable variety and power in opening people’s minds to a kind of wry and appreciative humility. This engenders in Crummey’s characters and their culture a sophistication and suppleness of spirit, which in affluent urban society generally only comes to those who have taken many chances, loved and lost extravagantly, and ventured beyond the safe norms of middle-class conformity. The seemingly simple rural people of Crummey’s Newfoundland, because of their precarious existence and the way in which the open sea connects them directly, if distantly, to a world of ancient foreign cultures, are tolerant, experienced, and unglamorously sophisticated in ways unknown to the safer, richer, and more rigid people living in the towns and farms on the solid continent to the south-west — where it has been easier to believe in the fabrications of law and religion.

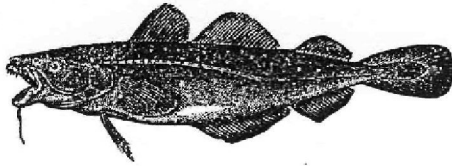
Home often is the one thing they own: a birth place, a hub where family and family stories connect, a kind of magnetic pole or centre that allows for direction and order in an otherwise too large and chaotic world. The notion of home is what makes it possible for the sailors and itinerant workers to exist anywhere; it is what their perceiving, experiencing selves are anchored to, a place to store what they know. Above all it is the sharing and keeping of stories that constitutes this concept of home, a diaspora of people sharing a body of memories. Even a stray, obscure person like George Porter, whose body was lost on the Carey Islands in the Arctic, once his whereabouts is known and included in a story, is gathered back into this extensive mnemonic home and saved from being lost forever. (94-5)

In “What’s Lost,” a poem near the end of *Hard Light*, while travelling with his father on the Labrador coastal boat to revisit the landscape of his father’s youth, the narrator writes:

Most of what I want him to remember
lies among those islands, among the maze
of granite rippling north a thousand miles,
and what he remembers is all I have a claim to.

The phrases “what I want him to remember” and “all I have a claim to” are powerfully telling. (115) The narrator would like to pull his father’s stories out of him the way the woman in an earlier piece recalled pulling newborn calves from their mothers’ bodies. The stories are the narrator’s inheritance. To record them, to reclaim the lives lived, is to make a human map of the bewildering landscape which is his ancestral home. More than a map, it is to make the home itself, the walls and roof, and how to find it again once we have left it.

The poems that follow are from *Hard Light*’s last section which includes a range of anonymous voices describing experiences from the late 19th century.



‘And now to make a start as a boy of very little understanding.’ (1876)

After a single season jigging cod
I gave up on the ocean,
boarded a steamship bound
for Little Bay Mines where
I secured a position
picking for copper;
kept at it through the winter,
a long shadow working
effortlessly beside me
while my back was shaken crooked
by the jabber of pickhead on rock,
my hands too numb
at the end of a shift
to properly hold a spoon

In June I jacked up and went
back to fishing, shipping out
with a crew headed to the French Shore,
happy just to be on the water
after seven months discovering darkness
in the mine

Salt air like a handful of brine
held to the face of an unconscious man
coming slowly to his senses

'The price of fish.' (September, 1887)

I have had a fair trial on the fishing line now,
being 3 summers out from home, 2 summers on
the French Shore, 4 down on the Labrador,
and three trips this year to the Banks of Newfoundland,
and this is what I have learned to be the price of fish

Shem Yates and Harry Brown lost with the *Abyssinia*,
making through slack ice 60 miles NE of the Grey Islands
when the wind turned and she struck hard on a block,
the vessel split like a stick of frozen kindling —
May, 1886

Tom Viven out of Crow Head, his boat running
loaded down through heavy seas that opened her up forward,
going down just off Kettle Cove and a good trip of fish lost besides —
August, 1884

My last trip to the French Shore, Luke Brumley and Fred Strong
sent out to take in a trap set loose in a gale,
the rough weather filling their skiff with water
when they hauled up the span line, the two men
pitched under only a good shout from the *Traveller*
but neither one could swim a stroke —
June, 1882

Show me a map and I'll name you a dead man for
every cove between home and Battle Harbour

I am twenty four years old,
there is no guarantee I will ever see twenty five

'A narrow escape almost but saved.' (1892)

Aboard a Scotch boat shipping a cargo of
marble and alabaster across the Gulf of Lyons.
Three days out we came on a perfect gale,
the seas running above the mast heads
and the Captain had us clew up the topsails,
haul in the jibs and bring down the mainsail to reef it tight.
I was running out on the boom to make fast the outer jib
when the ship dropped away like a gallows door
and came up hard on a swell, chucking me
fifteen feet into the air and overboard;
I was lost but for falling into the outer jib whips
rolled four feet underwater by the gale,
like a dip net after capelin.
I hung fast to a rope as the ship rolled back,
got hold of the martingale whisker
and heaved myself in over the bowsprit to see the Captain
running about the deck with a life buoy
shouting he had lost a man.

We had a fine laugh about it afterwards —
when I climbed back aboard, they said my face was as white
as the 4 ton blocks of marble we had wedged in the hold.
But I don't remember being afraid when I fell,
only the certainty of knowing I was about to be drowned
a thousand miles from home,
and then the jib whip in my hands,
the peculiar darkness of discovering
there is nothing that is certain.

I came out of the water a different man than I had been
though I would be hard-pressed to say the difference.
The scar of that rope on my palms
for weeks after the storm had passed.

'Useful information, the Holy Lands.' (1893)

Desert the colour of winter sunlight,
a yellow that is almost white, shadowless,
constant shift of sand like
a tide swell beneath your feet.
Hills on the horizon as red as blood.

The Commandments carried down Mount Sinai
by Moses in sandals, his feet blistered
by the heat of God's presence,
lettered stone scorched by the sun,
his bare hands burning.

All of this was once under water —
mountains rose from the parting flood
like the Israelites
marching out of the Red Sea
to walk parched into wilderness,
sucking moisture from handfuls
of hoar frost.

I have spent my life on the ocean,
seven years now I have worked
on the high seas,
my hands blistered by the water's salt,
my tongue thick and dry as leather.
The desert was familiar to me,
I knew something of what it
demands of a person,
what it can teach.

I understood that it is mostly thirst
that makes a place holy.

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'Boat Building.' (1899)

Before the snow settles in
have your wood cut and
carried to the dock yard where
you can work away at her
through the winter.

Scarf the joints to frame her out,
fit the beams, sides and stanchions,
then caulk her timber tight with
old rags or moss chinked in
with maul and chisel.
Give her a name before you
fit her out with rigging,
christen her bow with a prayer.
When the spring drives off the ice
launch her into the harbour
and hope for the best
when you let her go.

Remember this if you can:
a boat on the water belongs
to the water first
regardless of her name
or who it is that names her.

*'Distance from Newfoundland.
Northernmost grave in the world.' (1913)*

A cairn of stones tells the story,
broken oar and a sledge runner
roughed into a cross
where the remains of George Porter lie,
the end of an expedition to Ellesmereland
1800 miles from St. John's harbour,
the vessel found wrecked
and nearly forgotten
on the Carey Islands.

I have travelled 12000 miles
to Van Dieman's Land,
crossed the line and lost sight
of everything I had looked upon,
the North Star put out like a pauper
when the Southern Cross
appeared in the sky;
the Water Bear, the Albatross,
the South Sea Seal guiding overhead,
so many strange things that seemed
strangely familiar
as if I was visiting an old city
I knew well from maps and stories.

In Constantinople I stepped into
the Dardanelles that drowned Leander
swimming for the light of Hero's torch;
I walked the streets of Salonica
where a seller of purple and fine linens
became Europe's first Christian,
a convert of shipwrecked-St Paul,
the two of them praying together
among bolts of cloth, Lydia
was the woman's name.

George Porter lies under stone
only 1800 miles from Newfoundland
and almost further than a man could travel –
an initialled watch beside the cairn
where sailors stumbled upon it,
a notebook with the dead man's name,
how close he came
to being lost forever.

What's Lost

The Labrador coastline is a spill of islands,
 salt-shaker tumble of stone,
 a cartographer's nightmare —
 on the coastal boat 50 years ago
 the third mate marked his location after dark
 by the outline of a headland against the stars,
 the sweetly acrid smell of bakeapples blowing off
 a stretch of bog to port or starboard,
 navigating without map or compass
 where hidden shoals shadow the islands
 like the noise of hammers echoed across a valley.

The largest are home to harbours and coves,
 a fringe of clapboard houses
 threaded by dirt road,
 grey-fenced cemeteries sinking
 unevenly into mossy grass.
 Even those too small to be found on the map
 once carried a name in someone's mind,
 a splinter of local history —
 a boat wracked up in a gale of wind,
 the roof-wrecked remains of a stage house
 hunkered in the lee.

Most of what I want him to remember
 lies among those islands, among the maze
 of granite rippling north a thousand miles,
 and what he remembers is all I have a claim to.
 My father nods toward the coastline,
 to the bald stone shoals almost as old as light —
That was 50 years ago, he says,
 as a warning, wanting me to understand
 that what's forgotten is lost
 and most of this he cannot even recall
 forgetting

Painting the Islands

At first glance the coast of islands
 is treeless, a monochrome beige or grey,
 the hills in the distance flayed
 or worn smooth like a whetstone worked by a knife.
 Narrow valleys of green emerge from shadow
 as you sail into them,
 stands of dwarf spruce in thin soil,
 their toots tendrilled to stone;
 white antlers of stone glitter in high crevices,
 meadows of moss cover the sway-backed headlands
 clean as a freshly mown lawn.
 In the brief three months of a northern summer
 fields of White Heather and Honeysuckle
 find grace enough to bloom,
 bushels of blueberries ripen
 in the wet of August rain.

To paint the islands properly
 you have to see them up close,
 to know the light that inhabits their darkness —
 moments of rust and bronze in
 the dull granite rock,
 the Neapolitan swirl of molten lava
 fissured through the grain of hillsides.

Approaching Nain, the islands
 are bare and burnished black,
 metallic glint of the afternoon sun
 caught by long blades of mica
 imbedded in the surface
 and for the few minutes it takes
 to sail beyond them the stones
 are alive with light.

Company

Saddle Island, Red Bay, August 19th

The island would rather be left alone:
arthritic crag of stone, dry tufts of scrub,
contrary old man with his back to the world,
ignoring the steady drizzle of tourists drawn
by a minor stable of heritage sites:
Dorset midden harbouring a scatter
of bone and chipped stone tools as old
as the house of God,
the graves of Basque whalers weighted
with rows of granite rock like crude buttons
on the cold coat of the earth.
Visitors stilled by the diminishing heft
of those lives, their silence keeping company
with other, longer silences.

The island, meanwhile, is busy forgetting,
the whalers stripped of faces by a thin shroud
of acidic soil, their stone firepits fallen in
and swallowed by a dark mouth of bramble.
Abandoned freighter tilted in the lee, burnished orange
with rust, her name eaten from the bow.

Last stop, a whaler's lookout stoved in
and rotted on a bare rock ledge,
the black earth remains of wood and baleen
seeded by the wind, a patch of sod now
plush as shag carpet underfoot.
The shallow impression lodged in moss
by the weight of each new arrival
erased before the island is left behind.