

*Hard Light.* Michael Crummey.

Victor Coleman

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### VICTOR COLEMAN

Much knowledge acquired within the Nippers Harbour family is bound directly with making a living. A large variety of methods and techniques must be learned concerning both the fishery and the operation of a household. This practical knowledge is learned through trial and error. Children seldom ask questions of how or why. Where offered, explanations are given after the fact. For instance, a child attempting to chop firewood will not be instructed first, but allowed to try. After observing him, his father may enter in, perhaps first teasing and cajoling, eventually offering advice and explanation.

Tom Philbrook, *Fisherman, Logger, Merchant, Miner: Social Change and Industrialism in Three Newfoundland Communities*, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1966.

IN MICHAEL CRUMMEY'S latest collection of writings it's not immediately clear whether we're encountering short fictions, elegant docudramas, memoirs once removed, family snapshots, or found poetry. Scattered with old snapshots from the family archive, my first impression was one of filial nostalgia. Only the final section of the book, "A Map of the Islands," relates anything of his own palpable experience. The rest tells straight out, or reinterprets, a familial narrative, or a closely parallel engagement with the sea.

To mirror the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador, Crummey's prose is very like the gutted cod of a now depressed fishery in better times; like the close-to-the-rock forest that quickly turns to barrens; or like the hard-to-get-at

minerals of inland and coastal mines: the language is clipped and quick in its delivery; relentless in its deliverance.

This is *Splitter*, from "Making the Fish":

A good splitter could clear his way through 5 or 6 quintals an hour if the fish were a decent size, a full boat load done in three and out to the traps for more. Two cuts down each side of the sound bone, curved keel of the spine pulled clear and the cod splayed like a man about to be crucified. Dropped off the cutting table into the water of the puncheon tub, the next fish in your hands. Two cuts down each side, sound bone pulled clear, splayed cod dropped into the puncheon tub. Two cuts, sound bone pulled clear, cod into the tub. Two cuts, pull, into the tub.

By nine o'clock it is too dark to see properly, eyes as tender as skin soaked too long in salt water. The wicks are lit in bowls of kerosene: oily flame, spiralling spine of black smoke.

Crummey somehow makes his little stories add up to a much larger, emotionally charged, epic of a narrative. The first section of the book, "32 Little Stories," consists of retellings of his father's and his grandfather's fishery lore, which is broken into sections representing the four elements. Listening carefully to these stories, one can hear the distinct lilt of the North Atlantic dialect; but it never actually thickens the language and it maintains that clear broth that always hits the ear like a brisk September wind.

From "Procession" in the Air section, he tells us "Mary Penny was twenty-one years old and almost nine months pregnant when she died of fright."

Her heart leapt in her chest, a panicked animal kicking at the stall door. The baby turned suddenly, dropped, like a log collapsing in a fireplace. She began running awkwardly, holding her stomach. She tried to call for her mother, her younger sister, but no sound came from her mouth; the shadow of the Zeppelin chasing her across the grass. Halfway along the path to her house she fell on her stomach, the pain pulling a cry from her throat. She lifted herself and began running again, the stitch across her back like a hook attached to a tree behind her.

Apprehension (in this case fear) of the unknown, is a persistent theme of the book, as Crummey plumbs the depths of stories passed down to him, directly or indirectly, as if he were opening some Pandora's Box of genetic connections.

It will be years still before the boy thinks to ask his father about that other life, the world his hands carry with them like a barely discernable tattoo. His body hasn't been touched yet by the sad, particular beauty of things passing, of things about to be lost for good. Time's dark, indelible scar. (From "Rust")

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The second section of *Hard Light*, “Discovering Darkness” is based on — or “inspired by” — the diary of Captain John Froude (1863-1939), which was first published in 1983 by Jespersen Press in St. John’s as *On The High Seas*. It turns out Crummey’s grandmother knew the old skipper when she was a young grocery store clerk in Twillingate after he had given up his adventures for retirement.

This sequence of poems, although true to their objective, is somewhat more programmatic than the rest of the book, a natural difficulty with this kind of found poetry. Nevertheless, even though, as he admits, he’s as much editor as writer here, he provides a valuable poetic precis of the kind of life that’s lost to us, as in “Arrived in Odessa, Russia./Bonaparte at Moscow.” (1889):

November fell like a building  
hollowed by flame.

Hands and feet of the retreating soldiers  
scorched by frostbite,  
exposed skin of their faces  
dead to the touch.  
300 thousand men fell to  
the cold and to hunger  
on the long march out of Russia,  
their frozen bodies on  
the roadside like a knotted string  
being unraveled all the way  
back to France.

One wonders whether Michael Crummey ever ran across the work of the American master of this sort of thing: Charles Reznikoff, whose harrowing poetic renderings of documents of the Holocaust and early American jurisprudence are the definitive benchmarks.

The last and most personal, section of this solid volume is called “A Map of the Islands” and it’s once again a chronicle of Crummey’s recent non-working trip on the Labrador coastal ferry, the MV *Northern Ranger*, with his father, and it properly tops off this collection of writings thoroughly infused with family. And, I guess not so oddly, this seems to be a moral stance on Michael Crummey’s part. Not that he’s making judgement as he goes along; far from it. The stories are given a completely objective, and almost painfully sincere distance; the ego subsumed in the gene pool. And the concept of memory, although essential to the making of this writing, takes a decided back seat to the writing itself, which is only part memory — an equal part: imagination, if not pure invention.

from "What's Lost"

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