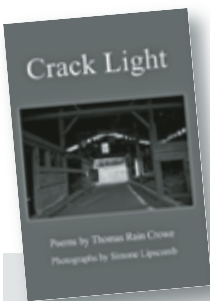


poetry & poets



THOMAS RAIN CROWE'S POETRY:

The soul of Appalachia

BY TED OLSON

Crack Light features poems by Thomas Rain Crowe and photographs by Simone Lipscomb.

I'm just letting it happen... Kerouac said often, 'first thought, best thought,' and that concept has stuck in my head all these years. It's true, that I'm part of that tradition, the Beat tradition, but organically, that's really just the way that I work best. I've found that you can revise the heart and soul out of a poem if you're not careful, and I have seen this done often by my more academic friends. It's about the process for me—it's not so much the results. I'm not as concerned about 'the perfect poem.' I do want what I put out into the public to be as good as I can get it, so there are changes and revisions from time to time, but . . . it's always a spontaneous process."

Granted Crowe's extensive Beat affiliations, his writing is far from imitative. He has long immersed his imagination in the natural and cultural life of Appalachia, yet his work has universal implications. As poet and critic Jim Wayne Miller put it, "Crowe is a new kind of literary voice in which both local and global perspectives are compatible, even requisite."

Returning to his native Appalachia from California in 1979, Crowe drew inspiration for his poetry from the work of major regional literary figures, including James Still, Fred Chappell, and Marilou Awiakta; simultaneously, he read and learned from such nationally prominent environmental writers as Wendell Berry and Thomas Berry. In two non-fiction books, *Zoro's Field: My Life in the Appalachian Woods* (University of Georgia Press, 2005) and *The End of Eden* (Wind Publications, 2008), Crowe presented nuanced interpretations of environmental issues affecting Appalachia today, and the poems in *Crack Light* grapple with similar concerns.

In the poem "Seed," for example, Crowe identifies the redemptive power of a seed in healing a compromised place, and he suggests that, figuratively, people are seeds of a healthier future (see page 27).

'Crowe' continued on page 27

Rapid River Magazine's

1ST PLACE

Offering Up the Main Course

Lobster Cove, Monhegan Maine, oil on board, 1913,
George Bellows, American, 1882-1925

I stand challenging the ocean waves
slapping against my bare skin
cold on my conscience
rough on my resolve
salt exfoliating layers in the labyrinth
of my mind, a maze
of underwater caverns
too dark to see where I'm going,
too many walled memories
blocking where I've been
I close my eyes
slip under the white foaming bubbles
bath water warm on my womb,
stretched and striated
now withering, wrinkling, retreating
gentle on my Southern genes
soothing as slippers fur-lined flat to the carpet
bringing me down comfortable
not raising me up against
his wishes knocking me down
I lift my weight to my knees, crawl to my feet
stand up without thinking
until I'm knocked down again
the waves pushing me beneath oxygen and
regard for human life
crashing my bones against rocks
shattering life into dead silence
a fish with no feet to stand on,
no language to voice
what I want to say
"rub my scales in one direction,
towards home"
my womb gutted by a fisherman's knife
discovering the white flesh of my meat
only my small, delicate bones pierce
the conscience of his tongue
interrupt the feast

~TRACY DARLING



Many excellent poems were submitted for the 14th Annual Rapid River Magazine Poetry Contest, and the selected winners, whose poems are printed here, reflect the fact that poetry is alive and well in western North Carolina and among Rapid River readers.

2ND PLACE

Winter Highway

Rolling, rumbling, rhythmic
highway travel
Past wild winter
bramble
Crawling up high hills,
dipping into valleys.

Brown vines twist
over boulders,
Up bone-white trunks
whose ghost arms
Reach
And branches curve,
caressing sky
With skeletal fingers.

I hear whispers
of pale blue mountains
That fade
into grey-mist sky.
Hints of blue
peek from hiding
Behind snow clouds
that shroud
Summits.

We're rolling still
past noisy box machines—
Monster-like
With huge round feet
and grimy breath.

Past columns of faded tan
Doric and dormant
And collage of boughs
in gnarled tableau
Of withered affirmation.

A flood of memories
floats me
In this dry winter sea
of frozen earth and asphalt.
My younger self
reaches through time,
Finds me here
where soft snow
Still lies
fine
As powdered sugar
on shriveled leaves.

~KIRSTEN M. WALZ

14th Annual Poetry Contest Winners

3RD PLACE

What Matters?

What is important?
How far to look ahead?

To your next meal?
The next day?
A month or a century?

Cosmic question with multiple answers:

More than a full stomach is luxury
~Li Po

What will it matter a hundred years from today?
~Dinah Washington

Or somewhere in between?

Most of us find our own level...
Be it a gutter or an executive suite

Don't mess with Mister In-between
~Bing Crosby

In the end, only the struggle matters, for after

Endgame, the
Pawns, Knights, Bishops, the King and Queen—
All end up in the same
Box

~KENNON WEBBER



**Woo or woe on the go with the poem
flow mobile app at poets.org/m**

FIRST HONORABLE MENTION:

Ecology Is a Complicated Subject

I
The Chemical Lawn Maintenance company
calls in February to offer their
preventive services that will save us
from our ground cover of Creeping Charlie,
our spring glory of violets,
and nitrogen-fixing clover. "That's
not chic around here," we say.

II
Ours is a place for composting
coffee grounds, potato peelings,
the outer leaves of cabbage
that warm in scientific leisure inviting crows
who appear, as if by magic, from corn fields
and woodland plenty to carry
city parings to the crest of our roof.

III
Building a squat snow man,
Tara says sticks make good arms,
dry leaves will do for eyes and
Grandma can wash the red hat.

IV
We push and pick up snow
with a light plastic tool,
curved, expendable,
and remember heavy steel shovels
that lasted lifetimes of men
paid fifty cents an hour and who were
expendable at forty.

V
The hemlocks outside my office window
bear a weight of snow and do not break.
Oh, the humble beauty of bowing.

~LENORE MCCOMAS COBERLY

SECOND HONORABLE MENTION:

Antique Cameo

I went to an antique show
All the old unique merchandise had arrived
Upon careful examination
Of the many exquisite handmade items
I came upon an assortment of cameos
All very distinctive in a
combination of different colors
A pinkish cameo stared at me
What beauty came from that face
Chiseled by the artistry of man
From long ago worn by someone in the past
Which was a gift given by a loved one
Handed down the generations
to their dear family
To show their sentimental love for them
It's a remembrance of time lost forever
A completely unique work of art
Cherished by all who wore it
Not for its monetary value
But for the memory of who it came from
Beloved ancestors that are a part of us

~RENATA DAWIDOWICZ

April is National Poetry Month

Celebrate by carrying a poem in your pocket on Thursday, April 14, 2011! Select a poem you love during National Poetry Month then carry it with you to share with co-workers, family, and friends.

Visit the Academy of American Poets's mobile poetry archive at www.poets.org for poetry at your fingertips. The site includes biographies, poems, and a list of 30 great ways (one for each day) to include poetry in your life.

'Crowe' continued from page 26

From hands that have learned to scratch the
soil like another skin,
the seed slips into the wounded earth.
Like a prophet who lies down by water
and begins to dream...
the seed starts to take on new life.

We are all seeds.

Also characteristic of Crowe's poetry is its frequent invocation of the spirit of Cherokee culture. Presently residing in the heart of ancestral Cherokee territory near the Tuckasegee community (Jackson County, North Carolina), Crowe honors the eternal, ecologically

grounded traditions of native Appalachian people in his poetry. One example in *Crack Light* is the poem "Planting Corn" (at right).

Consistent with the central metaphor that infuses the book's title poem, *Crack Light* offers readers a range of profound if at times shadowy glimpses into overlooked or neglected places across Appalachia, and in the process the book illuminates the essential nature of those places. Crowe's poems and Lipscomb's photographs work in tandem to transport the reader into the heart—and, if the reader opens his or her heart to the book's charms, into the soul—of Appalachia.

When the moon
beds warm and silver in the sky, and
the signs are in the hands:
it's time to plant corn.

When crow starts
in spring with his breakfast songs
and cotton meal lies golden in the row:
it's time to plant corn.

As the bluebird feeds
its first batch of young and
the sky takes earth in hand,
and I dance in the darkness of
a moonlit field where spring now rules the land
to the tune of Kanati's horn:
plant corn!



Ted Olson is the author of such books as *Breathing in Darkness: Poems* (Wind Publications, 2006) and *Blue Ridge Folklife* (University Press of Mississippi, 1998) and he is the editor of numerous books, including *CrossRoads: A Southern Culture Annual* (Mercer University Press, 2009). His experiences as a poet and musician are discussed on www.windpub.com/books/breathingindarkness.htm.

Poets who would like for their poetry to be considered for a future column may send their books and manuscripts to Ted Olson, ETSU, Box 70400, Johnson City, TN 37614. Please include contact information and a SASE with submissions.