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# Review of Crabtree's "The River Hills and Beyond"; Depta's "The Silence of Blackberries"; McCormick's "When It Came Time"; and Rasnake's "Necessary Motions"

Bill Jolliff

*George Fox University*, [wjolliff@georgefox.edu](mailto:wjolliff@georgefox.edu)

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Lou V. Crabtree. *The River Hills and Beyond*. Introduction by Lee Smith. Abingdon, VA: Sow's Ear Press, 1998.

Victor Depta. *The Silence of Blackberries*. Martin, TN: Blair Mountain Press, 1999.

Jeri McCormick. *When It Came Time*. Cliffs of Moher, Co. Clare: Salmon Publishing, Ltd., 1998.

Sam Rasnake. *Necessary Motions*. Abingdon, VA: Sow's Ear Press, 1998.

It has been two decades since George Ella Lyon risked these claims about contemporary Appalachian poetry: "Two things can safely be said. First, it most often concerns itself with revaluation or reclamation of the past, which includes a strengthening or at least an exploration of the bonds between generations. Second, its strong tie to the land has continued." Lyon's words were at the heart of her article "Contemporary Appalachian Poetry: Sources and Directions," which presented an overview of tendencies up to 1980. They still accurately describe much of what is published. If, however, the four books reviewed below represent a new wave, then the ways poets express their ties with the Appalachian past—and the ways they demonstrate their grounding in the region—are turning increasingly inward.

Of the four books to be considered here, Jeri McCormick's *When It Came Time* travels the straightest route along Lyon's orientation, portraying a formative bond with the past and a love of the region. It is a collection with a strong Appalachian theme—displacement—and, for the creative and engaged reader, it tracks as a story. Although it is a collection of lyrics, the subtle narrative cohesion carries the reader beyond the aesthetic effect of the individual poems, and quietly suggests the progression of one woman's relationship to Appalachia.

McCormick's frame indicates the intentional unity of the collection. The opening poem, "The Arrival," personifies the speaker's personal history as a not-quite-welcome guest, yet one with a weighty claim: "You will have to take me in. / I know too much." Similarly, "The Magpies of Dublin" closes the book with another characterization of the speaker's pioneer ancestors, portrayed this time as critical birds on her Dublin roof. At last they give her a "guttural benediction," then fly once again to the west with an emigrant's purpose.

Like many other Appalachian poets, McCormick seeds the early pages of her collection with pieces that offer historical background, painting with a few well-chosen strokes the socioeconomic factors that created hardship in her home country, suggesting, albeit briefly, something of the social history of the region. With convincing sorrow, she refers in "Rails" to miners as "hirelings who give up the slow, sweet hours of day in exchange/for a new century's murky promise, deep, deep/where the tiny finch releases its flickering song." And she recalls them as men who each day face "the chilling descent they'd never choose / if miners believed in choices" ("Miners' Morning"). But even these overtly political poems are intertwined with the speaker's own earliest experiences of life in the mountains: she was a child "born to a landscape / of furrowed progressions," and her childhood has remained with her, "an intimate history / snug as a featherbed's dream" ("A Country Childhood"). Her displacement soon becomes clear, however, as her family crosses the river to "Ohio, the next galaxy." That life would never be the same is evident in the beautifully crafted "My Mother's Guitar." Once in Cincinnati, we are told, "she never again opened the coffin case, / never again rested the guitar's / wooden hip against her own." Though visits to the mountains kept the speaker's link alive, her life was now in the city, where estrangement and alienation were inevitable parts of life. She spends her "First Christmas in the City" without a tree, "in a herd of displaced children" who "watch 'Tom Sawyer' free and take home / the dole of gift-wrapped peppermint."

Part of the Appalachian immigrant community, the narrator's poverty separates her from the city's children: In "On Mobility," she wears the wrong shoes, along with "an outlandish coat / from missionary rummage"; in "Piano Lessons," she must practice at the kitchen table on a "cardboard keyboard." Too, she suffers beneath another kind of poverty: a deeply flawed system of public schools. Several of her poems touch upon this area, and several are good. Best perhaps is the brief "To Delbert, Fellow Inmate, Grade Six," in which

old Miss Warren “dragged you up by your dirty red collar / cracking her paddle / on your corduroy bottom.” Recalling her classmate, and regretting her own lack of empathy, the speaker notes, “I knew you were just a crummy boy / who couldn’t talk right, your Daddy dead that year / and your Mom not making it.”

Still, the link to her Appalachian roots is never broken. Her immediate family has left the hills, but the tie to their extended family and their region remains, as portrayed in “Swinging Bridge.” Depicting the family’s return from city to homestead, the central images are, first, the bridge across the Ohio River, and then, more suggestively, the swinging bridge, “the homestead’s only portal.” That passage becomes a synecdoche for all that binds the displaced people of Appalachia to their homeland. When the speaker’s father kisses his mother and she “smiles at her first born, the first / to go north, takes his hand, “ the speaker knows “we have reached the other side.” The significance of these visits is characterized by “The Porch,” in which the comforts of home, so far removed from the alienation of Cincinnati, are drawn in sympathetic detail:

we kids sleep the easy sleep of the cared-for,  
waking at dawn to the aroma of coffee  
and biscuits and that good rumble of voices  
we’d gone to sleep to.

But there is whiplash in the final line—she refers to her sleeping generation as “the one that will lose the mountain.”

Still, so strong is the tie that even in the painful sophistication of her teen years, it is sustained, although she complains that because of a great-grandmother’s visit, you must “share your room, likely your bed/hide your lipstick, listen to hillbilly talk/of folks you’d never known or ceased to care about.” She also tells us that when the old woman leaves, you “hurry upstairs / to cry your mixed-up emigrant eyes out” (“Your Mother’s Grandma”). However, it isn’t only the goodness of the folks who stayed back home that McCormick celebrates. One of her more unique insights is the discovery of nobility, even within the decadence of her displaced family. In “The Uncles: An Album,” for example, she maintains that while her people have had to give in, they do not give up:

My Kentucky uncles launched their careers  
with the hand-held plow, lowered their dreams

into the man-eating mine, then abandoned  
all that for the assembly line.

Because it is so strong and engaging, I have emphasized the thematic, narrative aspect of this collection. Suffice it to say here that McCormick's craft is worthy of her material. Though ultimately they succeed in their cumulative power, the poems all stand on their own—including those (like the masterful "Inventing a Sister") that apparently lie outside the thematic center of the book. Throughout, McCormick's sense of the line break is superb, she uses stanzaic forms with variety and pattern, and her attention to sound is keen. But most importantly, her style allows her to recall and relate the emotion-laden images of Appalachia by intertwining the sensitivity of the child with the mature insight of the poet. As she reveals in "Horizon's Hold,"

I've kept the  
landscape that gives me  
back the child I was,  
dreaming in a porch swing  
up the mountain.

Less successful in terms of poetic craft—but nevertheless extending a strong appeal to devotees of Appalachian poetry—is Lou V. Crabtree's *The River Hills and Beyond*. Whereas McCormick creates a collection with a strong Appalachian theme, Crabtree's claim to our interest is largely in the Appalachian surface details, details which not only demonstrate a strong tie to the land but which also become her figures for broader truths. Hence she is most metaphorically powerful when she is most thoroughly Appalachian, and the first of the book's two sections, "The River Hills," is the stronger. Her first two poems show her at her narrative best, chanting in her most engaging voice. "Smith Creek No. 1," a lamentation of the hard life lived by a woman on a mountain farm, presents an understandable bitterness that cries without whining. McCormick chooses details which portray at once a pained aloofness and a determination to become part of the place, to go beyond simple resignation. "I was the foreigner who wanted to remain a foreigner," she tells us, and "I could never see any proper mates for my young/ from those old maids and dirt farmers asking/ is it going to rain or not going to rain." Apparently she hated her life there, "the years of borning five young ones/by myself with no doctor/and washing for five on a board." Yet she confesses a passion for the place:

"The only thing I can say is—/I stuck." While the poem centers on hardship, that final affirmation communicates its thematic energy.

The motivation behind the implied paradox becomes clearer still with "Smith Creek No. 2," subtitled, "feeling bad about writing 'Smith Creek No. 1'." This poem presents some of the bliss of Smith Creek, and, we assume, some of the reasons—in addition to pure cussedness—the narrator stayed:

Have you seen a locust hill by moonlight  
Or, the morning after it rained,  
A field of purple phlox?  
To think a flicker came as he did that year  
And from all the fallen trees and cliffs  
He chose my apple tree to live . . .

A red salamander from his frozen sleep  
Creeps around his winter bed of rock,  
The warm sun drenching him  
As my lover drenches me with delight.

The complexity of Crabtree as a poet is nicely captured in this pair of poems (many others enrich the ambiguity further). Possibly the most singularly effective piece in the volume is the haunting, "He Cut My Garden Down." There the speaker relates the desperate action to which she has been forced through a combination of hard luck and conjugal malice. Her dissolute husband has gone beyond his customary debauchery and destroyed her garden; then, to make matters worse, he has managed to get himself killed in a drunken accident, leaving the family wholly without means. So the speaker is reduced to putting out her starving children with strangers. Yet even that might not be the greatest price: though "Old granny honed me, 'Don't let his rage into you,'" she replies, "*He did not have to cut / my garden down.*" The narrative is riveting, particularly the metaphorical richness of the garden and the formal echo of the refrain. Clearly, hatred reaches beyond regional particulars.

If the "Smith Creek" poems are at least partially autobiographical, as suggested in Lee Smith's introduction, then one result of Crabtree's eventful life has been a hard-won wisdom of human nature. Though she delivers her load in a double-handful of brief and memorable lyrics, grounded in Appalachian detail, she has earned the right to tell us, wherever our locations, something about the way we live. Our own

limitations are reflected in the speaker who confesses, "I never saw my husband / naked" until he was sick and yellow with cancer, so that "[n]ot even in dreams / does he ever come / Gloriously in naked good health" ("Husband"). Equally compelling is the story of an elderly woman drawn to the casket of a childhood friend who had "pressed his hardness upon me." We are drawn to the fact that this dead man, a carpenter, has one finger missing, and, further, that the speaker "felt a kinship with" that missing finger, "like that finger was lost in me."

The "And Beyond" section of the book follows a different trajectory, both thematically and stylistically. Crabtree's work has a theatricality which is at its best when grounded in Appalachian settings, but pales when it reaches further afield for its persona. Her poems in the voices of soldiers, prostitutes, and other characters are entertaining in the first reading or—especially—first hearing, but they do not deepen with repeated readings. The best works in the second section are those which keep at least one boot in Virginia, even if the other boot is somewhere in ancient Israel, hiking down Mount Ararat, or patrolling Pluto. By far, Crabtree's most successful poems are spoken by a loving, angry, and brilliant old woman from Virginia.

Searching the bookstore shelves, one might come upon Sam Rasnake's *Necessary Motions*, note that it was published by Sow's Ear Press, read the back page which states that the author was a founding member of the Appalachian Center for Poets and Writers, observe that he lives in Bluff City, Tennessee, and assume that this must be the stuff: contemporary Appalachian poetry.

Maybe not. It is immediately apparent that he doesn't wear his accent on his sleeve. Next, it becomes clear that geographical and topographical references to the Appalachian region are few and far between—are in fact outnumbered by references to time spent on the Atlantic coast. Not only is the surface unbound to the Appalachian landscape, but little here speaks to any particularly Appalachian theme, present or historical. One might suggest that if this is "Appalachian" poetry, the domicile of the author must be the only qualifier. More important, however, to the browser who buys the book, is that this is a fine collection of poems.

Compared with the other volumes here reviewed, this collection is less thematically unified, a fact that needn't be negative. One gets the impression, however, that the author is not quite at peace with his multifarious offspring, and is striving in this collection for a unity not quite intrinsic to the texts. The thirty-six poems are divided into five sections, each section titled and given a suggestive epigraph.

Naturally, the section title and epigraph become part of a unifying reading experience readers carry into their interpretations of the individual poems. At times, though, Rasnake's divisions suggest a claim to unity that is not quite consummated.

However, when one of his divisions works, it works very well, as in Section V, "The Roaring Alongside." In that unit, the connections are enriching: the section title, taken from the epigraph to Elizabeth Bishop's "Sandpiper," is also the name of a fine and brief poem in the section that falls somewhere between an affirmation of the human condition and a dismissal of its significance: when all is said that can be said of our experience, the poet tells us,

Throw it all away.  
What remains is relentless:  
perfect sounds of wave on wave, driving in,  
shaking loose the last grain of the world.

In his tone, in his relationship to the natural world (especially the sea), and even in the title of one of his poems, "Sunday Morning," Rasnake offers comparison with the romanticism of Wallace Stevens. Whether or not that is a beneficial comparison (for any poet), the section fulfills its unifying pretense to make such talk possible.

Similarly successful is Section II, "Finding the Center," introduced with the epigraph from Amy Clampitt's "Dancers Exercising": "at the center / of that clarity, what we saw / was not stillness / but movement." Clampitt's line (which itself must be understood in the context of T.S. Eliot's, "at the still point, there the dance is") helps the reader anticipate what is to come, to ask what will be found at the center of this poem. The section responds with a varied set of poems loosely joined around the idea of seeking meaning. They range from the child-toned longing of "If My Feet Were Wings," to the existentialist remembrances of "At the Down Home While Guy Clark Sings," and the embattled inevitabilities cataloged in the masterful title poem, "Necessary Motions," where

Channels take their turns.  
Here, the sea comes back,  
spirals of fire dust space with an ancient light,  
and lovers give up their bodies to the war.

One trait that makes Rasnake a pleasure to read is that even when discursive, his discussions fall among a plethora of images, and we feel



that he is earning the right to make his claims. He never sermonizes, but allows us to discover alongside him.

Of course, part of that reading relationship is secured by Rasnake's mastery of his craft. He has a thorough control of free-verse technique. Most immediately noticeable is his strong sense of the line as the unit of composition. It is easy to find in the journals today some pretty good poems—pretty good poetic sentences—without a memorable line. Rasnake does not fall into that ditch: his lines are not simply broken sentences, but crafted units. A good example is his use of transformative line endings in "The Graveyard." That poem begins, "Those graves didn't seem to mind." We assume they didn't mind being graves, until we read the second line, "us or even take small notice / of the car. . . ." Thus the meaning, apparent as an independent line, is modified by the completion of the sentence. Such is the stuff of free-verse excellence. The satisfying level of ambiguity keeps our readings interesting and complex. This technique (and many others) is used with considerable facility. As a result, even when Rasnake seems too idiosyncratic, one continues to enjoy each poem, a line at a time. Still, chances are that many definitions of Appalachian poetry would exclude this book, even though Sam Rasnake is an Appalachian who writes very fine, very personal poems.

Many pieces in Victor Depta's *The Silence of Blackberries* are still more idiosyncratic than Rasnake's work, edging at times toward egocentrism. His poems are relatively unpopulated. One senses almost no reaching out to the human culture of the region in these poems. Nevertheless, by at least one of Lyon's measures, Depta's work is thoroughly Appalachian. Though his idiom is not, like Crabtree's, overtly regional, and though his collection does not, like McCormick's, embrace one of the great human themes associated with Appalachia, Depta's commitment to place is made clear by his precise presentation of the Appalachian landscape.

In "Our Age Speaks Bitterly," a poem which notes the tendency of contemporary poets to

wound themselves  
page after page  
as if their themes were a sacrifice  
flagellant with grief and guilt  
for existence,

he responds with this weighty particular:

but the harmless, perhaps  
the leaves of the sweet gum on the sidewalk  
wined with autumn, pale red, freckled  
vital with dying  
perhaps they are small enough to praise without shame  
to be the scattered, small, edged fans of our plenitude  
and joy.

In "The Beech Twig and the Dragonfly," he writes with similar agility of a ramble during which, "I heard the solace of cicadas, and the warm night breeze/and the beech tree in her pity personified, sorrowing for me." Better still is "The Bottomlands," in which he writes of

a little splash among the insect's wavering chirr  
and the sighing ferns and cattails  
the scraping oaks and cypress  
rasping and sweet-hoarse like consonants  
such a little sound, the frog-fright and splash  
rings, ripples darkening in the water, the bottomlands  
like vowels I seldom listen to  
yet concentrate on again  
in my lack of being.

Depta's descriptions of nature make his work worthy of broad attention, but he is not, at last, a nature writer. As this last line suggests, his relationship with nature is a mystical one. In fact, mystical experience, not the Appalachian landscape, is the core of the book. The purpose of his rich catalog of images is seldom, ultimately, to display the value of the particulars. Those particulars instead form the world in which the mystic lives, and just as frequently he writes not about his mystical experience in nature but about the nature of mystical experience.

The more didactic mystical poems lend themselves less well to Depta's occasionally cryptic style. When images from nature pile upon one another with an abandon of conventional sentence structure, the results can create, in a sensual rush, a richness and density that cover a multitude of sins. But that's not quite the case in a passage like this one, from "The Fallacy of the Absolute":

When one is alone  
with the ecstasy of the extrovertive mystical experience  
detached, floating on the rippling, glittering creek  
as a yellowed beech leaf  
when one is alone  
with the quiescence of the introvertive mystic experience  
emptied, after the woman has left with her peck basket full  
as a corn husk in the garden,  
there is no person.

Perhaps a key question is this: what kinds of demands may a poet make upon a reader? Or this: what demands can a mystic make upon those with whom he would share his experience? It seems that Depta, too, may suffer a certain ambivalence in response, since several superb poems seem to question his pursuits. "Doves in November" begins:

This mystic love  
am I to wipe it off like tears on a child's face  
and walk among dry thistles  
the blackberry vines and broomstraw  
the burrs and sticktight  
as a bitter paramour  
and with cold reason watch the winter come.

In "Her Turtles, Her Possums," he writes,

I had . . . created an animal  
a ferret, a white truth whose zeal frightened me  
as it darted among the books which I disdained  
though I wouldn't, with such violence, have disclaimed them  
If I weren't plagued by a metaphysical disease.

Possibly most telling is the apparently confessional "An Interest in Oneness," in which Depta relates that his young friends joke about his mystical preoccupation because they are frightened of his "consuming interest / in oneness"; and, as he admits with secure closure, "I, also, am a little frightened." It is this struggling persona, in addition to the intrinsic power of the individual poems, that makes *The Silence of the Blackberries* such a formidable and difficult collection.

These four books are hardly a representative sample of Appalachian poetry in 1999. Considered together, however, they may

suggest certain tendencies. In the article with which I introduced this review, George Ella Lyon suggests that the sixties brought a “growing consciousness of Appalachia as a region,” and that this resulted in more poetry that was volatile and politically active. It may be, however, that in our continually shrinking world of e-mail, net-surfing, and satellite dishes, the trajectory has reversed. Today the more overt political tendencies of the 1960s and 70s are further from the center of our field, displaced by a highly personal—and sometimes cryptic—romanticism. Lyon ends her article by noting that poetry does a kind of “mission work among the irreconcilable forces in our lives, is a form of healing.” If that is so, it is only natural that Appalachian poetry would follow this more personal course. Whether that is to be regretted or celebrated, it seems sure that the energy for exploration of one’s own Appalachian experience has never been greater. These four books bear witness to the value of discoveries which come with finding one’s own place in one’s own time.

—William F. Jolliff