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A Review Essay of Three Poetry Collections (and the Preoccupations of Male Poets?)

Paul Chafe

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[See table of contents](#)

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**Wonderful things girls do to guys,
Deodorant, face scrubs, and dyes,
And “hexagonal calcite eyes”?:
A Review Essay of Three Poetry Collections
(and the Preoccupations of Male Poets?)**

Paul Chafe

Michael Crummey. *Under the Keel*. Toronto: Anansi, 2013.

ISBN: 978-1770892699

Don McKay. *Paradoxides*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2012.

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Patrick Warner. *Perfection*. Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane, 2012.

ISBN: 978-0864926838

A quick Google search will reveal that the average male thinks about sex once every seven seconds. That is about 8,100 times a day, assuming the poor, sex-obsessed buggers are managing to get eight hours of sleep. Actual studies into the phenomenon reveal the amount to be closer to two or three times an hour (so the average male *may* just be able to concentrate long enough to get to the end of this review). Either way, it appears a fair amount of a man's thinking is dedicated to sex: remembering it, imagining it, devising ways to have it, envying

those who are having it, or dealing with unbidden thoughts about it at unexpected and inappropriate moments. Two recent poetry collections by Newfoundland-based poets appear to confirm this obsession. A third collection proves that this obsession can alter a man's view of just about anything (like *hiking boots*, for example), but also seems to indicate some men do eventually grow out of it.

Michael Crummey's *Under the Keel* (2013) is by far the sexiest of the three collections. In the first section of poems, "Through a Glass Darkly," Crummey focuses mostly on reimagining the confusion, excitement, and ignorance of a child's burgeoning sexuality in pieces like "Odysseus as a Boy," "Through a Glass Darkly," and, most profoundly, "Cock Tease": "She had a raw mouth for twelve, / barely-there breasts and a name that made / her reckless and surly by turns . . . I was embarrassed to court / her company but risked the taint / for her reputation's promise . . . and we chafed against each / other with a sour sort / of affection" (12–13). Crummey contrasts these poems in a section titled "Under Silk" in which the poet is obviously a man in love. "Hope Chest" consists of four poems offered up as a wedding gift: "Something Old," "Something New," "Something Borrowed," and "Something Blues," where Crummey takes his turn as a lovesick bluesman who has, almost in spite of himself, fallen into a life-altering, blues-banishing sort of love: "Almost quit before I met you, / didn't sit up nights by the phone, / I was halfway gone to believing / I'd be better off on my own, / I came on in a few kitchens / but I never stayed in there long — / it wasn't love, it just kept me busy / until you came along" (68).

Interspersed within the collection are some delightful poems that offset both the sought-after, almost-animalized sex of the first section and the sanctified-by-love sex of "Under Silk." The poems focus on dealing with one's sexuality and sexual cravings at unexpected moments. The opening poem, "The Selected," finds the speaker on a flight to Boston with *The Selected Paul Durcan*. He is extracted from his reading and the meandering reflections it has inspired by his sudden attraction to a flight attendant: "The stewardess leans in / to offer a tray of snacks, / a small silver crucifix / tick-tocking below her perfect /

smile, one immaculate hand / marred by the fleck / of a gold wedding band" (4). In "The Ganges, at Middle Age" the speaker is wakened in the middle of the night by "some creaky hinge of middle age, / the kind of worry that changes / nothing, makes us voyeurs / of our own circumstances" (88). As he stands "in the gloom, insomniac" before his living room window, the speaker becomes a voyeur of another sort, unable to turn away from the young couple "making out / on concrete steps in the dark" mere inches from where the speaker stands brooding. Despite feeling "like a dirty old prick / spying on the private ceremony," the speaker wants to keep watching and laments that he cannot "see where hands were busy / or what buttons were undone" (89). The poet paradoxically elevates and degrades the couple to "anonymous pilgrims div[ing] / into the foul water of the Ganges / as if touched by something holy" (89). After "a moment that went on for ages" the couple moves on, leaving the speaker uncertain if his has been a transcendent or pornographic experience (89). This poem is followed immediately by "The Landing," in which the poet's dream of himself "engaged in some extracurricular / with two girls who seem, on the face of things, / not quite old enough to buy their own liquor" is altered quickly by the appearance of his deceased father, who disappears just as the speaker reaches for him (90). The dreamer is left wondering if he conjured his father through some need for reprimand, through the "grief or bald shame" of having engaged in a threesome with the young girls (90). "Our lives are simpler than we care to see," the speaker realizes, amazed how fundamental cravings and desires can manifest themselves in so many seemingly unconnected ways (90).

Readers familiar with Crummey's work may find a few poems a little stale, however. It is revealed in the endnotes that "Viewfinder" appeared first in the NFB documentary, *Hard Light*, which is not surprising, as it reads like leftovers from Crummey's earlier collection of the same name. "Women's Work," "Small Clothes," and a few others may leave some feeling like they have read them before. The poems from the third section, "Dead Man's Pond," appear to have been commissioned for an exhibit at The Rooms, the Newfoundland and Labrador

archives/art gallery/museum/cultural depository in downtown St. John's, and at times feel a little more like preservation than poetry. In recent years a handful of Newfoundland poets and novelists have pilaged the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, historical texts, and even files from court cases, then published their findings with very little alteration and called them "poetry" or "fiction." Crummey walks this line between creation and cut-and-paste in "Dead Man's Pond" and "Cause of Death and Remarks" in which he appears to present as found poetry strung-together passages from various family genealogies. Passages like "Peter wed Sydney Livingston / before he was shot by Long. / Monier drowned, Charles died young, / Eliza's girl wed Woolcombe" or "Died suddenly. Died young. / Fell overboard and drowned. / Boat capsized while hunting loons, / body never found" may seem a little rote and leave some readers longing to see a little more of the poet's hand.

Where the poet makes the most of his abilities is when he puts into words the complex and conflicting collection of emotions and memories he experiences as he reflects on the death of his father. "Something New" appears at first to be an odd poem to be included in Crummey's wedding gift, focusing as it does on the final weeks his father suffered in hospital. But the poet is astounded at the love between his parents, his "mother's fidelity to the vigil" and how this demolishes any cynicism he had about "tying yourself to something as frail / as another person" (64, 65): "Bound to fail / was my thought and I managed / to keep well clear, but my parents' marriage / in its final days on the cancer ward / made me think I'd lived my life a coward" (65). The poet acknowledges that these are "Not the most romantic lines," but they represent a pledge to his new bride that will act also as a testament to his parents' love; a promise "to stay by you, to be fully awake" (65). "Off Stage," "The Keepsake," and "Burn Barrel" all capture in their own ways the memories, unfinished business, and stories that seem to comprise a person after he passes.

Patrick Warner's *Perfection* (2012) is another rather sexual, very physical text. So many of the poems are preoccupied with one's relationship

with one's own body and the bodies of others. It is disappointing that the editors use the back cover description of the text to draw attention to what are arguably the weaker poems in the collection. "The Pound of Flesh Bazaar" imagines an outlet store selling body parts: "A half-stone of noses heaped on a counter: / alabaster pert-snob and beaked Concorde, / aquiline patrician next to broken-veined honker . . . The furniture section is all backs and lumbar. / Limbs are trimmed and corded like lumber" (Warner 18). Predictably, the bowels of the building contain bowels: ". . . the innermost sanctum, its entrance / pulsing neon, its door not a door at all / but a leather blanket, sodden, dripping. / Inside, organs gently piping" (19). Yes, the commercialization and commodification of the body is distressing, but the delivery here is a little too-on-the-nose. In "Anorexia," the disorder is personified but has little of interest to say: "The less there is of you the more of me / . . . I could go on, in fact, I think I will, / my passion for girl flesh is inexhaustible" (23). And in "The Chocolate Chip Pancake is Innocent," the trial of the accused is presided over by a profiterole judge with "whipped cream hairdo" and a meat tenderizer gavel (25). The prosecutor is a saltine cracker, the defence solicitor is a "sugar-coated pretzel," and the bailiffs who take away the guilty pancake to "fry" are "a strudel and a rhubarb pie" (26). Art, even when it is about food, should not be spoon-fed so forcibly to the audience.

But these examples are minor missteps in a delightful and challenging collection of well-written, well-plotted poems. The title of the collection is reflected not only in the human quest for perfection detailed in many of these poems but also in the too-human detours from this quest. The speaker of "Ablutions of a Middle-Aged Man" spends the entire poem scrubbing, buffing and polishing every part of his body, working meticulously to present the best, most-balanced version of himself, but in the end cannot resist the call to self-destructive behaviour that will likely undo all his primping and preening. In the pursuit of beauty, he subjects his skin, hair, and teeth to undefinable, most-likely poisonous chemical mixtures: "alcohol, citric acids, a cock-tail of salts, / odd compounds prefixing various '-ates': / mercedes benzoate, pandemonium sulphate / and my fave, nymphomaniac chloride"

(11). The speaker has grown expert and obsessive in his topical upkeep and has created a home remedy to best treat his “burgeoning rosacea”: “zinc bits flaked from leftover chimney flashing, / magnesium from burnt-out New Year’s flares, / sodium gathered from the salt shaker’s threading, / iron filed from a rusted window weight” (11, 12). He creates another concoction to quench his “parched elbows,” knees, and feet: “I’ve made my own [balm] ever since Europeans / declared petroleum a likely carcinogen — / just microwave beeswax and baby oil. / It’s as easy as that, just don’t let it boil” (12). Of course, this artist does not want it to appear as if he has spent considerable time perfecting himself, so, “I eschew a shave — I want bristle to balance / this grooming; I want a hint of the animal, / but not the scent” (12). And yet these preparations do nothing to strengthen him against the other poisons that will destroy his body: “That’s it. I’m done. I dress quickly and hit / the salt-strewn streets of the downtown. / I promise myself, no more than three pints, / and no cigarettes. Well, maybe just one” (13). The pleasures, the perfection of the moment, outweigh the desire to pursue a more permanent form of perfection.

In “The Zone” Warner details the inner workings of a “downtown hotspot” that could very well be the destination of the scrubbed and scoured speaker of “Ablutions of a Middle-Aged Man” (32). Here, “suits and cocktail dresses flock” around a “black-lit bar” “to knock back shots / of lemon-scented kitchen cleaner” (32). Pressed “six deep” as they jockey to buy rounds, make connections, and otherwise make the most of happy hour, the patrons, far-removed perhaps from their morning ablutions, are betrayed by bodies they have strived to make attractive: “boasting the body’s honest smells: / pit stink, crotch funk, butt whiff” (32). Perfection gives way to primordial as these downtown denizens reveal more than “a hint of the animal.”

The real power of Warner’s collection lies in the narrative poems that capture (perfectly?) a passing moment, as in “Waxing”; the passing thoughts of multiple St. John’s citizens, as in “Valentine’s Day”; or the passing of centuries, as in “A History of the Lombards.” Anyone who has held a summer job that required much of the hand and little

of the head will appreciate “The Animal’s Absolution” in which the speaker details both the “mindless work / that freed my mind to wander” and the obscene workings of his imagination (28). One job required him to fill jars with “brilliant thick globs / of custard that shook and wobbled like fat,” which he imagines to be pus from the wounds of some giant suffering animal secured secretly behind the store, tortured and tapped to satisfy the unending orders (28). Later, the speaker imagines all the meats in the butcher’s cart reassembling “back into animal” and lumbering out the sliding doors (29). “Thanksgiving” is a fitting culmination to the collection, detailing as it does the choices and chances that are missed or dodged to arrive at the now, the perfect moment. Having set out late at night to fulfill a prescription that will hopefully give some relief to his daughter “made a marionette” by a “dry hard cough,” the speaker of the poem is met by a woman he had “met once, years before, at a party, / a bloodless Goth, in bustier, boots and black vinyl mac” (59, 60). Leaving the drugstore, the speaker is more than a little delighted to find his wife with “feathers pleasantly dishevelled,” having witnessed this meeting through the store window: “I could see her from the car. I watched her preen, / plump, haul her pantyhose up. She stalked you” (60). The serious illness of his daughter combined with the sudden reminder that he is still on the market leads the speaker to reflect on the other oft-missed marvels that conspire to create his seemingly simple life: his Blue Cross membership enables him to purchase drugs unavailable to the “earthly poor” who at this moment may be suffering and dying from the same ailment now treated in his daughter (60). Born in another time, the speaker most likely would not have survived his “acute appendicitis” and his wife would have been “asphyxiated by severe childhood asthma” (60). Even now, exhausted, having endured an entire day of fretting over the health of a child, the speaker is inspired to reflect on his perfect life and wonder what more could he possibly want?

Don McKay’s *Paradoxides* (2012) is perhaps the most accomplished collection here, if not the sexiest (though if subsections were to be employed in this review, the section dedicated to McKay could be

called *Kinky Boots*). *Paradoxides* is written by an avid outdoorsman and contains odes to the accoutrement of hiking: “To Clasp” is a four-part poem in praise of the poet’s walking stick, while “To Step” is a two-part homage to hiking boots, in which the poet reveals he is perhaps a little too familiar with his footwear: “Ah, / let there be boots. / Let them lurk in our sheds, / our vestibules, under our beds, / their mute tongues lolling, / their laces unstrung like Victorian corsets / wanting only to be worn. / May there be eros in our entries, / as the burrowing of moles more / snugly into earth” (63). The second section recalls times spent after days of manual labour “dubbinning our boots” and captures the loving relationship fostered by physical labour between a young man and the item that protects his precious feet:

The dubbin restored grease to the leather, making it more waterproof and suppler; it coaxed the animal partly back to life. Surely concubines in harems were not massaged more thoroughly, the toes, the insteps, the high uppers, the secret, tucked away-tongues. Surely these pieces of hide were no more cherished, or water repellent, when they’d been worn by cows. Yes, the absence of girlfriends may have played a part in the ritual, as our profane banter (“Looks like Danny’s getting to second base with his boots”) did not fail to make explicit. But it also involved the proud hands’ homage to the humble feet, who were proving to be far more sensitive, and important, than we’d ever imagined back in the city. (64)

For most of *Paradoxides* McKay is preoccupied with concerns of a higher order, namely, the very problem that tortured Coleridge in “Kubla Khan”: how to capture in words a thought, emotion, moment, or place so that another person can experience it. The paradox to which the title alludes is that the poem cannot be what the poem is about, and McKay brushes against this (im)possibility beautifully: each poem is a wonderful failed attempt to render in language that which cannot

be written down. The first section deals with this play, this plight, this problem of writing, and McKay acknowledges several times how language, no matter how articulate or lyrical, is more than a few steps removed from the actual. There is no “Ode to a Nightingale” here (though McKay refers cheekily to the night Keats “nearly OD’ed on The Nightingale” [8]), but rather poems that acknowledge the unbridgeable distance between poets and the objects they are trying to recreate on the page. The doubly distanced titles “Song for the Song of the Canada Geese,” “Song for the Song of the Sandhill Crane,” “Song for the Song of the Common Loon,” and “Song for the Song of the Purple Finch” reveal a poet who has read his Plato and Barthes and is enchanted by the possibilities and impossibilities of language.

In “Forlorn” McKay ponders on the eponymous word and tries to find in its sound the meaning and emotion it is meant to convey: “The very word is, if / you ask me, like a horn — / fog, French, krumm, *cor / Anglais*, or car — depending on the timbre / and accent of its native loss” (8). For the poet, the word “honks” like “a closed nasal / existential echo, not quite / recovered from that nasty cold” (8). Interestingly, he finds his meaning of forlorn while trying to translate the untranslatable “Noises, some like itch, / some like scratch” that surround his cabin late one evening (8). Heading outside to find the source of the foreign sound, the speaker tries his best to express what he hears through the written word: “As though whatever it is / started to say ‘curse’ then / switched to ‘kiss,’ / then ‘ship’” (9). The beam of his flashlight lands eventually on the culprits: “Owlets, / I’m guessing barred, out of the nest / but not yet fledged, still / begging for food from the ruthless mother, / who is elsewhere” (9). The man of letters wonders how he can possibly relate what he has heard, “The hiss / of hunger, separation, and — to insert / a personal note — sleeplessness. *Ksship*: / how to translate that?” (9). The poet concludes by answering both questions driving the poem: “Forlorn, of course, / the very word” (9).

The third section of McKay’s collection continues the geographical and geological contemplations of his Griffin Poetry Prize-winning *Strike/Slip* (2006). Buried appropriately within the text, this section

focuses on fossils and foundations that alter the readers' understandings of the entire book, themselves, and the spaces through which they move. McKay's preoccupations with deep time and the slow evolution through millennia of the here and now have made him the darling of ecocritics and (as has been said elsewhere by this reviewer) the unofficial poet laureate of Labradorite and other otherwise unsung minerals. Though the poet cannot help but have fun throughout the text with the paradox buried within *paradoxides*, the title actually refers to a species of trilobite that functions now as an index fossil proving parts of Newfoundland were once part of Avalonia, a micro-continent made up of land masses that now comprise parts of Great Britain and the North American east coast. Somewhat more poetically, *paradoxides* prove that "here" was at one time somewhere else, and will be again. This sort of deep time transience is enough to unhome the poet and the reader, and make plain the naivety and folly inherent in trying to understand such unfathomable concepts through references, metaphors, and language that have existed for a mere fleeting fraction of the earth's long history.

Of course, this does not prevent McKay from trying. In "Thorax," one of three poems dedicated to *paradoxides*, the poet praises the trilobites not just for their "hexagonal calcite eyes which evolution never happened / on again" but for their troubling of language categories "five hundred million years before the first false dichotomy appears / in the Anthropocene" (42). While they "index both the micro-continent of Avalonia and the / Mid-Cambrian Period and so situate us in space and time," they also (paradoxically) "dislocate space" and "infinite time" (41). Faced with such infinitude, the poet cannot help but be a little silly in the metaphors he chooses to capture the creatures on the page: "For they anticipate lobsters, the Pre-Raphaelites, the tenor / saxophone, and the buckskin jacket . . . For their pleural spines extend past the thorax *like the kind of drooping / moustaches sported by bad guys in westerns*" (41). One cannot help but feel unequal to the task of naming and describing so unique a creature that has existed nameless for hundreds of millions of years. Poems like "Deep Time Encounters"

and “The Wopmay Orogen: A Field Trip” both locate and dislocate the readers and remind them that their here and now is but the latest “Ozymandias”-like “rise and fall” that constitutes but a mere moment of the earth’s slow, steady, violent reconstruction: “Answers / may be carved in granite, writ / on water, or delivered as a lecture / to the air. Because it was, because it is, / because it isn’t there” (51).

McKay exits his text with a section containing two poems: “Taking the Ferry” is a Whitman-esque acknowledgement of the impermanence of self, while “Descent” is a slightly more macrocosmic examination of the end of language: “Once his song / made rocks move and the gods / relent. / Such was the boast. / Now the rocks / rub raw the bone. Gravel, / scree. Who will name / the dark’s own instrument? Riprap, / Slag. Music / tearing itself apart” (77). How fortunate are we to live now, when poets like McKay, Warner, and Crummey make the most of this new tool, language, and strive to touch those eternal, nameless, shifting things that shape us.