

# BOOKS 1

## CHRISTOPHER COX

On the cover of Douglas Crase's first book of poetry, *The Revisionist* (Little Brown, \$10.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper), there is a grainy photograph of a waterfall plunging into a gorge between old buildings. "That's Genesee Falls," Crase says, sipping coffee from a cobalt-blue cup. "When I was in Rochester, people kept telling me there's a waterfall downtown, but it took me six months to find it. In the early 19th century there was this guy named Sam Patch who was really one of America's great national celebrities. He was a falls jumper — he went over Niagara — and he made a career jumping off waterfalls and surviving. In 1829 he came to Rochester and he jumped from Genesee Falls — but he didn't come up."

There is a long silence and a little Vivaldi on the radio. On the wall hangs a Robert Dash painting. Crase sits in a straight-back chair. He is as tall and thin and precherly as a character out of Washington Irving.

In *The Revisionist*, Crase reimagines "America." I place the word in quotation marks because the country he writes about exists only in this book and in his imagination; it seems as alien and as exotic as the continental map rolled down for a grammar school geography class. From the opening lines ("If I could raise rivers, I'd raise them/Across the mantle of your past; old headwaters/Stolen, oxbows high and dry while new ones form/A sediment of history rearranged") we are in a country we do not know. You might even say that this is not the country of America but rather the inner landscape of a poet who is in love with the country in American poetry. Crase's fragmented and scattered American world mingles history and myth, records and memories, art and nature, New York City and upstate New York, the land viewed from the air or from the more intimate heights of childhood. As Crase says, "Everything allows itself to be seen again in the focus of its possibilities."

Douglas Crase could be compared to every major American poet of the last 100 years, but I'll leave that to academics and old poets. I'm content with originality, imagination and feeling. I also feel safe in saying Crase may be the most important poet of his generation. But he is a deceptively simple poet. Long lines and prose rhythms give his poems the speed of stories. In truth, they are more like memories in the remaking. The discontinuity between past and present is a major theme, and Crase has turned that conflict into a principle of composition. The quick changes in tone and attention, the collisions of plain talk and eloquence, the accuracy of description and precision of detail — these are all habits of a mind involved in the continuous activity of selecting meaning out of reality and reshaping that reality with the imagination.

Crase was raised on a farm outside of Battlecreek, Mich., in a small community called Banfield. In a photo album he showed me, four pictures paint the scene in Kodachrome: an 1850s dream house, as plain as the land around it, with columns running along the porch and an Italianate cupola on top, half hidden in the shade of a black walnut tree; a grinning service station attendant, out of focus next to the gas pump at the general store, tending to the snow-covered fins of a '55 Chevy; at the top of some well-worn steps, the Methodist church, the lawn surrounding it as neat as a fresh haircut; and, finally, high on a hill covered with shimmering grass, a one-room schoolhouse.



Douglas Crase

## Revising America

I've often thought that writing poetry now represents what I wasn't able to do as a politician. When you write a poem you can make the world any way you want to'

"I know it sounds Abraham Lincolnish," Crase says, closing the album, "but I did go to a one-room schoolhouse. Every year you moved back a row. Being a smart-assed brat, the teacher moved me sooner than others, and needless to say that didn't make me very popular. My parents moved to the farm in the '50s, when I was six. I was already sort of a city slicker, so it was a shock to come to something like that. There was even an outhouse in the field behind the school. You'd raise your hand, go out into the field. There was a ram out there, and he'd butt his head against the outhouse until you were through. It was a rural experience to say the least — it was atavistic."

Banfield in the '50s could have served as a backdrop for the pastoral American dream. More recently all the cows were shot after fire retardant was found in their feed. Even the silos in the fields are no longer innocent. "It's inescapable/How history has targeted the tiniest, safest life," Crase writes in "There is No Peace in the World." "And altered the code so thoroughly that issues graceful once/As travel or turning the calendar beget features of flight/ Contortion and alarm instead."

Crase went to the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton and to law school at the University of Michigan. In the '60s he became interested in politics and wrote speeches for politicians. For a while Crase planned a career in politics for himself. He got married. After the Chicago Convention, he was editor for the Political Reform Commission of the Michigan Democratic Party. "Then I dropped out of law school. I got divorced. Like a lot of our generation I had always thought I could figure out what I wanted to do, go to college and then go be it. Of course life isn't like that; it makes up its own mind about lots of things. I've often thought that writing poetry now represents what I wasn't able to do as a politician. I guess that's one of the imports of *The Revisionist*. When you're writing a poem, you can make the world any way you want to."

Not that an exact understanding of Crase's sense of the world is easy to come by. His poems are emotionally and formally elusive despite their guileless surfaces. Revisionism for him is restoring the world in a way that makes affirmation possible. (He seems to have adopted William James' notion that the best philosophies are those that try to "restore the fluent sense of life again, and let redemption take the place of innocence.") At the same time, his stance also seems to be an instrument of self-protection, a way of countering and encountering a lost world. The tinge of melancholy that imbues his work can be ascribed to his sense of detachment, to his acute sense of the transience of beauty and pleasure and above all to his pervasive consciousness of time passing and his serene acceptance of it. Yet we are never encouraged to believe that we have the "real" Douglas Crase. The deepest feelings here exist between the narrator and the "you" to whom the poems are addressed — a "you" whose face is constantly changing, dissolving into another, until you feel as if all the faces that have passed through the narrator's life are hovering over the poems like all the phases of the moon. Though Crase evinces a will to joy (and his poems, thereby, become joyful), his feelings always seem to be teetering on the edge of doubt. In the end this shuttling between wariness and hope is emblematic of what we know to be true.

In the early '70s Crase moved to Rochester, N.Y., and began writing speeches for executives at Eastman Kodak and other companies, a job he still has today. He also began writing poetry. "little lines like Charles Olson's work, skinny poems on the page with lots of slashes and typewriter typography and no capital letters." When he met John Ashbery, however, his poetry began to change.

"John is from Rochester," he said. "I met him when he came up for a visit, and he made poetry seem so unimposing. The first book of his I read was *Three Poems*, in which the lines are the longest you can have. They're prose. So my lines

got longer. They're faster, more manic. Like a newscaster delivers pre-digested news for the evening. I like to hear them read in that tone. I also like to pretend that they're written in variable tetrameter. William Carlos Williams, in particular, talked about the variable foot; that is, the accents in the American language are not regular; there are a lot of little unaccented feet before you get to the one big accent. In most of my lines there are four accents and, in between, a lot of lower-level things if they're read conversationally."

Crase has a disarming, offhand way of speaking that is very personal, even quirky, and his poetry is a blend of the cadences, rhythms and measures of American speech and the formal language that he learned as a speechwriter — his use of assertive or argumentative statements at the beginning of the poems and the way he backs away from them or adds to them. "For me a great poem has to be a great argument," he said. "I think of Emerson who said, 'It's not the meter but the meter-making argument that makes the poem.'" He also has a love for the sounds of words, a trait he shares with Wallace Stevens. Here is "The Continent As the Letter M":

*Think of it starting out this way: in profile  
Two almost immediate peaks, but widely opposite,  
The basin humming with weather in between  
And approaching speech as summary — ineffectual  
As the oceans beside its feet, their murmuring  
Montauk, at Monterey. Think of the central  
Organizing mound of it, around which  
An alphabet of fir mounts up to fall — away  
Just at the timberline, the solid crown of it  
When seen from cabin windows, imposing  
crash sites  
Seen from stricken planes. Ponderous,  
The name of our country is ponderous and brown,  
Laborious as a growing mastodon, its own huge shoulders  
The only thing it's hanging on —  
Columbia,  
Paumanok, say it, the Alamo — we build  
Outward from this middle interior sound  
So far until, unsupported,  
Our imaginations begin to let us down.  
To the soft soil of that consonant we return,  
Made Massey-Ferguson fertile and turning over  
A train of little m's behind the plow.  
America:  
So many centuries thicken its animal sound,  
This mammoth that holds us between its knees,  
Maumee, Menominee,  
Michilimackinac,  
Deep, past Appalachian deep  
The inarticulate lives in its hold on me.*

"I wrote that poem on a plane," Crase said. "Which reminds me of Gertrude Stein. Once, when she and Alice had come back to the States for one of those triumphal tours, they took their first flight. On the plane and looking down, she said that everything she had ever written was vindicated by that experience. She particularly liked the fields, the abstractions of the landscape. She had said a lot about the abstract quality of the American mind. That Americans were more comfortable with abstractions than with people. Seeing the land from the air proved her right: America is one great abstract painting. I think that's what I'm writing about. It's easier to envision changing a landscape than changing a society."