



INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN CRAMER,
AUTHOR OF *GOODBYE TO THE ORCHARD*

Why did you choose Goodbye to the Orchard as the title poem of this collection?

For four years, my family and I spent each fall and spring living in an uncultivated apple orchard. The trees bore green, spotted, inedible fruit that even the insects, it seemed, left to rot on the limbs. I wrote a number of poems featuring this environment where growth and ruin coexisted—“the simmer of rot and renewal,” says Lowell—although I kept only a few. Months after moving away, during a summer of rereading *Paradise Lost*, I finished the title poem and knew it would name my next book. I hope the phrase resonates in both immediate and elusive ways, yet clearly speaks to the tension between those losses life marshals against us, and the various attitudes—the many ways to say “goodbye”—open to us for confronting them.

Your poems, while often anchored in autobiography, avoid the usual claustrophobic ego of lyric poetry. How do you manage this?

I make a distinction between personal poetry and autobiographical poetry, and I think that since my second book I've written more of the former than the latter. Aside from the narrative poems about my late sister, not many in this book tell stories about my life, although they may take off from *occasions* in my life.

The arid debate over “self” in poetry often descends into enumerating the times a poet uses the pronoun “I.” Ellen Voigt has written that if the emotional life is what binds us together, then memorable poems don't necessarily need extraordinary life circumstances or “romantic alchemy” but rather a “relentless striving to be accurate and, sometimes, a certain ruthlessness toward the very sensibility that produces the poem.” I hope my poems avoid the shut box of ego-involvement through rigorous self-scrutiny.

The middle section of this book intimately details your sister's death, with moving accuracy about the states of illness and grief, as well as with disarming humor. Were these poems written easily, or not?

They weren't easier or more difficult to write, but they did come from a different sensibility than the book's other poems. Extremely intelligent, my sister was a very down-to-earth person (an occupational therapist, aptly enough, specializing in wrist and hand injuries), and she distrusted the oblique, the roundabout. In these poems, some of which she lived to read, I wanted to avoid literary “dodges,” especially those stylistic shibboleths by which we assume that the “I” in a lyric is “not the poet, not me,” or that poetry “tells all the truth but tells it slant.” She found such notions suspect, so I wanted to honor her by finding them suspect too, at least for these poems. She'd wrinkle her nose at my “slanted” poetry, my “speakers” who wear the mask of “I.” But she liked the ones that seemed, to her, “straight-talking.” These poems try to talk straight.

What, or who, are your influences in this particular book? We sense a whiff of William Matthews. Would that be accurate? Any others?

Bill was a teacher of mine, and I once had the pleasure of co-teaching some workshops with him. I love his best poems, so I'm gratified by that whiff, even as I think it's more an affinity than an influence.

For the years I lived in the orchard, I repeatedly taught the great work of the dead: Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, Whitman, Dickinson, and the major—as well as many of the minor—sonnets (“little songs”) of the 16th and 17th century. I read and discussed them over and over, falling in love with the sturdy sincerity of Gascoigne, Raleigh's didactic rhythms, and especially the scorching introspection of Greville's penitential lyrics. Even Sidney's show-offy “look-at-me-Stella” wit moved me by its helpless urge to impress. Shakespeare's sonnets are so preternaturally complex—so sublimely “ruthless toward the very sensibility that produced the poem”—I often left them feeling unnerved, dizzy.

Sonnets started happening to me, and the ones that worked helped me to complete *Goodbye to the Orchard*. The form allowed me to move more horizontally, to take turns in ways I hadn't. They don't dance “elegantly” like the Elizabethans—indeed, I hope they as often lope or stagger or spin—yet the “riffs” of those early English sonnets appear, in retrospect, to be influences.

How has your work changed since your last book, Dialogue for the Left and Right Hand? Where does Goodbye to the Orchard stand in your oeuvre, and how do you see it working as a book?

I think *Goodbye to the Orchard* is more restlessly allusive—framed by two adaptations from Miguel de Unamuno, with Shakespeare often smuggled in, and my affection for brand names and popular culture indulged—and I hope it's more formally various. At one point, I foresaw a book with a single organizing principle: that every page offered the reader a different poetic structure. I'd like to think I've kept to the spirit, if not to the letter, of that principle. On the other hand, I'm aware of two further shapes to the book: circular—Unamuno to Unamuno—and, for lack of a better term, “spherical.” That is, I want the poems in Sections I and III—which often are more “slanted,” or do play with their pronouns—to be held in their orbits, as it were, by the gravity of the subject and style in Section II. On yet a third hand, I hope a discernible emotional arc shapes the book, so that readers feel they've been “through” something once they've finished it. “The best way out is always through,” says Len, one of Frost's characters in “A Servant to Servants”—via his not-entirely sane wife, admittedly. But his advice still seems like good advice.

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