

# Naming the Names

By Mark Fitzgerald

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Perhaps one of the most refreshing and noticeable qualities of *Spirit Machines*, Robert Crawford's fourth book of poetry, is the cleverness of its humor. Whether watching little boys disturb a funeral, impersonating an American gynaecologist in Paris, asking absurd questions on a test, or surfing through Scotland on the Internet, Crawford always seems to deliver just the right measure of satire and guile.

Mostly he does this by thrusting his closures back upon the context of his narration: "dark suited and dark-stockinged legs," for instance (the last words in a poem called "The Boys"), make immediate both the somberness of the funeral and the out of place resonance of a boy's outburst. Too much restraint and gravity often leads to laughter, and many of Crawford's poems are funny more for what they undermine than for what they uphold. "A Life Exam," although not really a poem, is a sequence of seventy-one outlandish imperatives and questions (my favorite being: "Knit together the plates of your skull correctly.") written in the same sparse style as a standardized test, and probably the most obvious example of how Crawford is playing with convention.

But there's also a nostalgic texture to his language that speaks of a world that's somehow slipped away, escaped, or been lost; and therefore survives, because it's what the poet carries with him: "Children," who have gotten off "at the wrong station, who can hear / carriages that went ahead without them / decades ago, still singing in the rails." This is the kind of imagery that pushes remembrance and longing to the forefront. The journey continues long after death through loved ones who slice up and reassemble what once was very simple. Crawford calls it "Bereavement," appropriately enough, perhaps making reference to the recent death of his father. This is the most haunting poem in the collection and harkens back to an earlier poem called "Relief," where Crawford is more open and direct about his father: "In his last year, he told me, like a shot, 'Aberlour on Speyside, near Grantown.' / I knew he was the only one alive / knew the right answer. Now I have relieved him." A secret is handed down from father to son and a legacy continued. But, unlike "Bereavement," Crawford is light-hearted about the speaker's relationship to his father. The poetic narrative is a pastiche of the way the author's Dad might have told it: "Jumping at the 'whump!' behind yon hardwood door." The storyteller is relieved and bereaved in a way that establishes a reciprocity between memory and absence, anecdote and reverie.

The collection is broad in scope, encompassing both prose and verse, two ballads and an eleven page narrative meditation called "Impossibility." Crawford is especially

fond of couplets; fourteen of the seventeen poems in the first section are structured this way, as are several others in the later segments. One of the most recurring aspects in this collection is the strong connection he maintains with Scotland. Names are important and the places which stem from them branch out to other referents; or as the poet makes clear in a poem called “Liglag,” voiced idiomatically: “Nemms o places haud thir secrets, / Leochel-Cushnie, Lochnagar, / Luvely even untranslatit.... Pour a dram an tak it neat, / Neat as Cattens, Tibberchindy, / Tomintoul or Aiberdeen.” Crawford goes on in the following prose poem, “Sensation of Another Language,” to decode the dialect, but the beauty and rhythm of the syllables are lost. And maybe this is his point. Some things refuse translation—specifically, the affective elements of impulse, restraint, and tone. In other words, the practical consciousness of everyday life so entrenched into the culture and community from which one emerges.

There’s a reason why the Highlanders maintain and believe so strongly in their cultural identity. But history can only tell us so much. The Jacobite uprisings of the 17th and 18th centuries and the Highland Clearances of the 19th century make no difference to the “lilac bushes, the cypress alley,” or “the wild brier.” The former counties of Caithness, Inverness, Nairn, Ross and Cromarty speak both together and privately of a scenery connected to a version of Crawford’s Scotland and every other indigenous person’s sense of civic pride or obscurity. Naming the names, as Crawford does repeatedly in many of his poems, is hardly new, but it affects a certain intimacy that shows how eventually everything ages into a characterization of itself: “Castor and Pollux, Cupar and Balmullo, Cassiopeia, Blebo, Pittenweem” are merely clusters in the “needlepoint beside big planets.” But they’re also constellations, stars, and mythical names. Language is not transparent; it does not allow us to say something without conveying an attitude about that something. In this sense, I’d like to think that Crawford is being meta-poetic: the referent is molded into the curve and mood of his background. Like poetry, the names resonate and continue to sing because they signify an ineluctable aura and awareness that is so elusive and resistant to language.

The manuscripts of Ossian (a 3rd century Gaelic bard who was the war hero of a body of heroic tales known as the Fenian Cycle), which the Scottish writer, James Macpherson, falsely said he discovered in 1760 is also worth mentioning if only because Crawford pokes fun at the impact of the hoax. Macpherson, who was a well-known poet himself, had gained a reputation for his translations of Gaelic poetry. But after he published a work called *Temora*, it was discovered that his translations were not fragments of Ossian’s epic poetry from the Highlands of Scotland. The poems were, in fact, a blend of fragments from old Scottish and Irish poetry, tinged with 18th-century sentimentality and diction. The question of their authenticity raised a furious controversy and Macpherson’s “translations” were eventually denounced by Samuel Johnson as literary forgeries. But the Ossian poems were deeply admired by Goethe, Blake, and Byron and they strongly influenced the emergence of the romantic literary movement,

especially in Germany and Italy, vaulting Scotland into the European imagination as the land of heroism and romance.

Considering Crawford's fervent attachment to his country, it is not surprising that he should to some degree be predisposed to think that modern poetry began with trickery. "In the Ossianic twilight," he chides, "woven with the shuttles of money screens of the world fade out and rekindle with light." Maybe the Ossian poems were a get rich quick scheme, but I don't think he is being that cynical or wants to dismiss Macpherson so easily. After all, Crawford has helped publish loads of criticism concerning cultural identity in 20th century poetry.

No, the message seems more complicated. If Macpherson succeeded in inspiring poets who laid the groundwork for modern poetry, what does this say about the movement that resisted him? That the very basis of modern sensibility rested in the chaos of its philosophy, morality and aesthetic practices, is reason enough to wonder whether the pre-romantics sought to disparage Macpherson's work more for what it threatened to upturn than for what it said about legitimacy. But such theorizing tends to jostle social latencies where none may be. In all likelihood, Blake and Byron and Goethe spun from the controversy a clearer awareness of the epic poem's evolution and capacity in the vast arena of 18th century literature. It almost seems practical then that Crawford should use his fellow Scotsmen as a pulpit from which the texture of his own narratives might already be familiar.

The two ballads in the "Highland Poems" section offer better instances of how Crawford is playing with the names of certain people. In "The Ballad of John Windsor," the subject speaks of himself as a "boy," a "little prince," and "the smashed winter elm." The voice derides the Windsor name and the British royal house because of what it must not say or do: "The Windsors hurt, but they are slaves, / born into golden chains." The twist comes at the end, however, as the persona recognizes the advantage of informality and the beauty of the oaks in Windsor Park. "The Ballad of Wendy Wood" echoes from Scottish folklore and Crawford seems more at home with the jest than in the previous ballad. We learn that "Wild Wendy led a [Scottish] Patriot group" and kept explosives, but little more.

The naming and the short rhythm of the lines are what's most significant. In this sense, what one hears, the "chap! chap!" chapping on wood is more important than what one knows. Both sonically and metaphorically the allure grows not just because of the long tradition that privileges mystery and song over certitude and exposition, but also because the names and places, however feigned they might be, nourish the roots of a cultural gaze deeply aware of how the past looms over present, and sets into incredible motion, the future.

All in all, there are many reasons why we can admire Crawford's work. But not, in this collection at least, a decidedly overarching one. I never felt as if the poet knew what he wanted the togetherness or apartness of his poems to mean. What relationship

does a sequence of flippant examination questions or a long narrative about Margaret Oliphant, have to the title sequence, "Spirit Machines?" There are only six poems in this last section, dedicated to Crawford's father, and apart from a few of the poems in the first section, clearly his strongest verse. We move from a CD ROM blaring the "Noise of grapeshot entering a body," to the steadiness of a digital voice asking for our "personal number," through a "cybered . . . world of light," and out the Internet's window "opening on many Scotlands."

Automation has somehow mass-produced the spirit of its maker and it is rapidly streamlining many of the everyday operations we now take for granted. Suddenly the relationship we have with our computer and cellular phone appears noticeably more intimate and secure than the links we keep with some of our closest friends. But Crawford only imports a glimmer of this ominous undercurrent. The rest of the light falls on Scotland.