

Talkativeness by Michael Earl Craig

written by Leif Haven | June 23, 2014



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By Michael Earl Craig

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“when I slap this ham, open your eyes.”

From *Emotional Music* by Michael Earl Craig

Michael Earl Craig has a certain mode of humor and dread that appeals to me. Surprise is one of his primary tools.

[Wave says](#), “Michael Earl Craig furthers his existential, Lynchian leanings with masterfully composed new poems. He has borrowed the everyday and returned it defamiliarized, dark, and droll. Readers are ushered out of their contemporary bustle and into the intimate viewing room that is Craig’s cinematic fourth collection.”

Unlike most blurbs, I’d say that this one is pretty on-point. Maybe you just have to like something to agree with the blurber. Lynchian is a way that you

could describe Craig's work. Like in a David Lynch film, what seems safe and familiar is relentlessly undermined – characters can change places, identity is fluid, and ultimately, the safe and familiar becomes alien, frightening, and unknowable. The trick is that of course everything is kind of alien and unknowable anyway, and that's the kind of thing that Craig and Lynch highlight.

Craig's work is like a glimpse into the underworld of everything – the simmering weirdness that sits just under the surface of everyone's conscious mind and underneath the apparently hard reliable surface of the world. All it takes is a crack and everything is different.

TOMATOES DISRESPECT US

While cutting into a small tomato (in my omelet)
tomato spurts itself across table
and onto my copy of Conquest of the Useless.

Tea

you fucking tea I shout
hurling the ceramic cup across the room.

I find this poem very funny. There's also something very sad about it – that the disrespect by the tomato could bring about such inchoate rage directed toward the tea. It's absurd, hilarious, sad. It's like something that you might do by yourself while eating breakfast, but not something you would ever let anyone else see. It's profoundly private and intimate.

In a conversation with Zachary Schomburg on HTMLGiant, Craig said, "Some of the poems are humorous I suppose, although I don't think of them that way usually. The humor is sort of a surface tone maybe, and perhaps a direction I can't help going in. I think sometimes some readers stop there—they don't see much beyond the surface of a poem that appears to be "wild" or "weird" or "jokey" or whatever."

I think that Craig's poems are humorous, not because they're jokey, or weird, or wild, as Craig says in the interview, but because they're crushing. Humor in poetry is maybe the best thing I can find there – and I don't think it's

because, as Schomburg says, “humor in a poem allows readers to feel a purer weight of what’s not so funny.” I feel like that “purer weight” of whatever Schomburg is talking about is actually what is so funny. They’re not different things – the humor is inextricably linked to this *heavy* thing. It’s like a management issue; humor is the way we have of dealing with heavy things that are perhaps too difficult to deal with in a rational way.

POEM FOR MANDA

Was wondering, for some time actually,
if you could write a poem for me about washing plastic bags,
and putting these plastics in a big plastic bag
that then gets put in the recycling container...

I’m struck by the absolute insanity of this
And I don’t know how to live with it.

That’s maybe one of the clutch things about Craig – he’s not trying to write a poetry that rationally deals with *issues*. Some poems shouldn’t be written. And some poems are inscrutable events – the poems that don’t surprise in this collection with dream like turns surprise as miniature epics. The [Publisher’s Weekly review](#) of this book says that, “Even the lighter elements of the book seem a bit foul.” I think that is a misreading too – I think that Craig doesn’t balk at darkness or absurdity of the quotidian.

Lynch and any possible Lynchian aesthetic that might be found in other works, such as *Talkativeness*, could be described as foul or corrupt. But, I’m willing to bet that that’s not the way that Craig or Lynch would describe their work. Rather, it’s more like the opposite: the work is trying to un-foul or uncorrupt a world that is irrevocably fucked. It’s trying to find some bizarre redemption – because redemption can only come as something radically different, buried inside what is so familiar.

Some of these poems affect the minimalism of classical Japanese poetry – but it doesn’t feel campy, even when the subject is explicitly the work of Kurosawa and Akutagawa, as in the poem *In the Grove*. This is a good trick;

it's made possible because the whole book dances on that border between horrifying and hilarious, without ever indicating which side of the border you should be on – that's because there really isn't a border at all.

IN A GROVE

Kurosawa was a moralist.

It is said he took and gently bent

Akutagawa's grove.

Akutagawa was trying to show

us something. It is said he wore

cold wet gloves when he wrote.

Michael Earl Craig is also trying to show us something – and maybe he wears cold wet gloves when he writes. There's something about this that seems obscene. It's like the thing that should have been kept off screen – the Latin *obscaena* or Ancient Greek *skene* where we get our word obscene simply indicated that something was conducted off-stage during classical drama. In this poem the cold wet gloves are obscene because they are meant to be left out of the poem. Instead we see them – we might even imagine the slimy, clammy, soggiess of trying to write in these gloves.

This is not what we signed up for. This is not what we were expecting. Yet somehow, this is kind of funny. That's exactly what reading Michael Earl Craig is like.