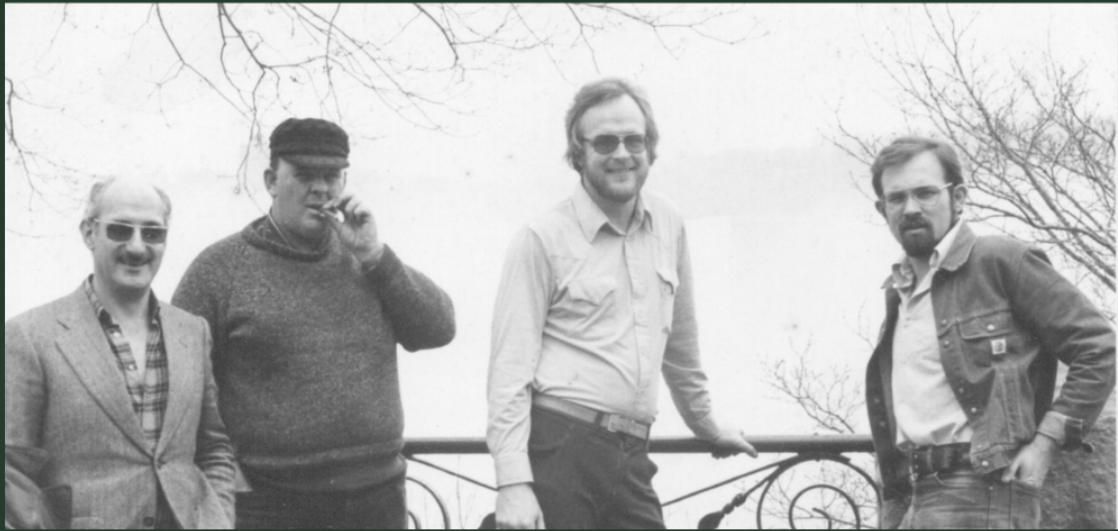


To Help Us Breathe



Craig was a poet. In a very real sense poetry was his life. I don't mean for a second to suggest that other things – music, his family, psychotherapy – were not, or were in any way less important, far from it! But poetry is where he took his best moments, and his most frightening: his insights, his confusions, his joys, his loves. It did not take the place of those things. Rather it expressed them in the clearest form he could manage. Look for Craig's life and you'll find it there. Craig himself puts it best. *We rest in poems*, he says in a late one, *as a mind knowing us*.

Re-reading Craig's poetry in the days after his death I had the uncanny feeling that, amongst all the other things he was doing there, he was also preparing himself, and us, for his dying. In that late poem – a poem written to his friend Richard Deutch to try to console him for the early death of his wife – he references a short poem the Roman poet Catullus wrote to comfort a friend of his, Calvus, whose beloved wife has just died. *If the silent grave can derive any sweetness or pleasure*, it begins,

For the grief that we feel, Calvus, for those who lie there,
For the grief with which we renew remembrance of loves who have left us,
And the tears which we weep for old friendships now lost forever,
At least Quintilla must feel for her untimely death less sorrow
Than pleasure to know, by this continuing proof, of your love.

Trust Craig, with his encyclopaedic knowledge of poetry, to know just the right lines to apply. But now his poem (the words *Gaudet amore tuo* mean *Rejoices in your love*):

WORDS FOR MARIA

Catullus tells you that your young dead wife
rejoices in your love. It is early still.
You can only wonder at this desolation
sung over ages, sung by so many mouths,
all for you and none of it. Gold hair
in a photograph, her presence at a meal,
the four of us together and now three
standing on the rim of a valley where you can't
imagine how deep it falls. It would break you
without the poems. *Gaudet amore tuo*.
We would break.

Or else listening
down a corridor of dark voices, faint
or rising, from rooms we can never
enter, we'll hear her name beloved and lost
before she was born. *Gaudet amore tuo.*
We rest in poems as a mind knowing us.

In all, Craig published nine full collections of poetry. Of his first, *A Different Kind of Breathing*, published in 1966 when he was just 26, no less a poet than Kenneth Slessor remarked the poems were 'technically almost flawless ... and filled with gleams of promise', and A.D. Hope, a masterful poet but a harsh critic, wrote 'Some of these poems I hope to read and read again.'

There followed, two years later – Craig still not thirty – *I Learn by Going*, dedicated to the remarkable but deeply troubled poet Francis Webb, whom Craig had treated at Gladesville psychiatric hospital and who'd become a close friend. This collection led Bruce Beaver, the leader of a new wave of Australian poetry at the time, to describe Craig as 'A leading one among those local members of his generation worthy of the name of poet'. Poems from this collection have been repeatedly anthologised, like the striking 'Madonna and Child':

An image of silence: fine dust falling on hair
where two of them sit motionless. The light
glides with a rhythmic stillness out of sight

yet leaves a kind of radiance upon
mother and child asleep in a warm chair,
rags stuffed under the door, the gas turned on.

In 1972, the year he and the family left for Canada, a third collection, *A Country Without Exiles*, appeared, and six years later a fourth, *Rehearsal for Dancers*, from a press in Winnipeg. There's a new freedom in these poems. They're sharp, clear, full of snow and space and wonder. To my thinking they might well have put Craig upon the world stage. Try these lines, from the opening of 'In Spruce Woods':

Blue horses in early light
kneel to the spaces surrounding them their
shoulders steam they are opening their eyes

where we walk holding each other
our bodies wet after making love
our children dance ahead of us to the beach it

is the sun hitting
their fingers I listen to the syllables
of their bones brushing

the grass

or these, from 'For Matthew at Caddy Lake':

Cast up crinkling on the beach I gaze
at him he will tire of this
soon and paddle through shallows
and across the shingle to me bright
flakes shawling rainbows from his body.
I breathe and turn
phantasmal in his thoughts hobgoblin
and cradle when he is
older he will close my eyes

Returning to Australia in 1982, Craig included a number of these poems in his fifth collection, *A Face in Your Hands* (1984). Four years later, in 1989, he was a joint winner of the *Quarterly Review of Literature's* 45th anniversary poetry award for his sixth, *The Ocean Remembers it is Visible*. This was quite an accolade. Somehow, though, in *this* country, his poetry, after the first three volumes, never quite received the attention it deserved. Perhaps this was because he was following a personal rather than a national agenda. I think it's worth registering that he never complained about this. His modesty, when it came to his poetry, seems in retrospect quite striking. But his credo – along the lines of if you go deep enough into the personal you come to the universal – was always going to have a hard time in a country so reticent about the expression of its emotions.

The poetry, in any case, just got better. There were three more collections: *Minga Street* (1993), *Music and Women's Bodies* (2002) and *A Mind Knowing Us* (2013). I could read you any number of these poems, but this is not the place. I urge you to read them for yourselves.

Then, of course, in 2011, something happened. He fell from a ladder. Did a Molly Meldrum, as I'd joke with him (though in fact it was the other way around, as Matthew reminds me: Molly Meldrum doing a Craig). And twelve months later he told me the poetry had left him. That he couldn't think *metaphorically* any more. He could read it, still, with pleasure; he could recite it (in volumes: he had a prodigious verbal memory); but he couldn't *write* it. He was philosophical about this, but I think he was heartbroken.

Let me read you 'Breath Creatures', the last poem in his last book:

This evening the cattle drift farther down the valley
and graze by a blackwood, beside the blue gums.
Bushfire smoke on the hills, the earth
so faithful and lost to you, with the still cattle.

In the morning, early, the cuckoo shrike
will chirr and peck at your window, wild
for the bird in the glass. Birdsong and thump,
he hammers to let in the world, to help you breathe.

So still, so gentle, and saying so much so simply.

Craig is no longer with us, but we can still consult the mind he has left us, we can still wander at will in his world, we can still find, within it, so many, many places to help us breathe.

David Brooks

