

REVIEWS

Robert Creeley, *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1975–2005*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. 622pp. \$60

Robert Creeley spoke in an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 1968 about his sense of place, and about those places “where one feels an intimate association with the ground underfoot”:

I, for example, feel much more comfortable in a small town. I've always felt so, I think, because I grew up in one in New England. I like that spill of life all around, like the spring you get in New England with that crazy water, the trickles of water everyplace, the moisture, the shyness, and the particularity of things like blue jays.

It's easy to think of Creeley's poetic emerging from those beginnings: smallness and particularity are his trademarks, along with the kind of inwardness that's been associated with New England since the Puritans. Shyness and self-scrutiny could sometimes end in upset: in the same interview, Creeley says of his early relationships, “the confusions of how to be with people became so heightened I would just spill.” These contradictory habits of thought or speech—shyness and spillage—come together in Creeley's (too) much anthologized “I Know a Man,” a poem that, as Tom Clark has said, “reveals the isolation of the compulsive speaker.” By 1965, Creeley had found some different places to feel at home, among them New Mexico, whose spaces opened into broader coordinates:

[In New Mexico] I'm offered a scale, with mountains to the southeast, the Rio Grande coming through below us to the west, and then that wild range of mesa off to the west. This is a very basic place to live. The dimensions are of such size and of such curious eternity that they embarrass any assumption that man is the totality of all that is significant in life.

So you can hear where Creeley is coming from when he speaks of being “embarrassed for a so-called larger view”: that New England reticence knits into a feeling of the self's smallness and brevity in relation to the timescales and landscapes against which he later measures himself.

Thirty years after the conversation that became *The Paris Review* interview, Creeley wrote in “My New Mexico,”

Oh sun! Three years,
when I came first,
it had shone unblinking,
sky vast aching blue—

The sharpness of each
shift the pleasure,
pain, of particulars—
All inside gone out.

“Unblinking” and “aching” transfer readily from sky to eye, the outcome a lyric consciousness newly exposed in this bright space. You don’t know, in that last line, whether “gone out” means extinguished or gone outside—whether the relentless light leaves no room for the darker interiority that has been Creeley’s refuge, or whether he has chosen to step out into the edged shapes and flat planes, the “miles of spaced echo” of his new place. Either way, the poems in the second volume of this *Collected Poems* frequently attempt this feat of turning inside out. The University of California Press has also reissued the first volume—*Collected Poems, 1945–1975*—in paperback, and between the two books there is a discernible shift of attention from singular, private experience to the sharable and common.

The later volume begins with *Hello*, the poetic journal of a two month tour Creeley took in 1976 through nine countries in Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. “The tourist will always be singular,” he writes in a note to the book, and his journey brought that habitual isolation into relation with other cultures in which “center and strength [were found] in the collective.” The poems in *Hello* are not travel writings in the sense that they deliver postcards of places visited. Rather, in rendering the experience of travel they begin to literalize, or turn inside out, some troubles with selfhood that have long been Creeley’s preoccupation. The sudden arrivals and departures of a whistle-stop tour put the self’s timings out of step with each new locale, so that jet lag localizes a longer-term project in which writing has struggled to keep up with the abrupt transitions of consciousness. With the stopover of each new poem we see a lyric subject trying to get his bearings in time and space. Creeley was in several respects between situations in 1976: *Hello* finds him at the end of a marriage and the start of a new relationship (he has just met Penelope Highton, who became his third wife, in New Zealand). Given that, it’s unsurprising that matters of permanence and transitoriness should preoccupy him. “Cebu” has him wondering whether anyone leaves his mark:

Magellan was x’ed here
but not much now left,

seemingly, of that event

The cross Magellan planted when he arrived on the Island of Cebu in the Philippines survives now as a tourist attraction, but “x’ed” also means struck out—this is where Magellan eventually came to a violent end. Creeley, a latter-day explorer traveling from the airport in a taxi, is struck by the lightness of things:

particularly the people moseying

along. Also the detention home
for boys, and another casual prison

beside the old airport now
used for light planes.

As ever the student of Williams, Creeley is adept at seeing things “in passing with [his] mind / on nothing,” and the result in this poem is a kind of poetic moseying where the touring eye projects its own casualness onto the things it chooses not to be detained by. The poem thinks across to Singapore and its “crash housing for the poor, / that hurtles them skywards off / the only physical thing they / had left,” and against that kind of vertigo Creeley prefers to “keep [his] feet on the ground,” but he does learn from Cebu’s fragile homes to countenance impermanence, to accept if not to relish it: “Whatever, it’s got to / be yielded, let go of, it can’t / live any longer than it has to.” Perhaps this witnesses some self-persuasion about letting go of a marriage, but it is also, as is much of this second volume, about mortality. Creeley puts it quite plainly:

Being human, at times I
get scared, of dying, growing

old, and think my body’s
possibly the exception to all

that I know has to happen.
It isn’t, and some of those

bananas are already rotten

Creeley’s verse, by hearing the speaking subject come into being in the very act of articulation, makes the continuity of selfhood seem more than usually a fiction. Even so, you can’t help tracing the arc of a single life in a collected poems; you can’t help noticing Creeley getting older, or rather, noticing him noticing he’s getting older and doing some of the things that older people are supposed to do, like being nostalgic. Loosening the ties with

home—getting away for a while and more permanently severing a domestic connection—gives room for memory to take up residence. Creeley’s backward glances confess their own brokenness and partiality:

Long gone time—
waves still crash in?
Fall coming on?

Shifting head to
make transition, rapid
mind to think it.

Halfway to wherever,
places, things
I used to do.

(“Place”)

“Fall” is seasonal transition, and that word also has a medial place: it picks up some vertigo from “crash in” (incidentally, there’s quite a bit of crashing in *Hello*—was Creeley afraid of flying?) and more delicately it’s drawn forward to “rapid,” which hovers as a noun before the turn of the line sweeps it into an adjective. If “waves,” “Fall,” and “rapid” indicate water in motion, that is out of kilter with the staccato rhythms of the piece, its abrupt changes of course.

It feels appropriate that the second volume of Creeley’s *Collected Poems* should begin with these transitional poems that come from between places and relationships and from a poet who seems to think that he’s halfway through his life. So Creeley jokes with Milton, “When I consider / how my life is spent / ere half my years / on this vast blast,” and he spells it out again in “Out Here,” written from Tokyo Airport:

it’s later,

and is going to get later yet
'fore I get on plane, go home,
go somewhere else at least.

It’s raining, outside, in
this interjurisdictional headquarters.
I’m spooked, tired, and approaching

my fiftieth birthday. Appropriately
I feel happy and sad,
at the same time.

This sees Creeley at his micro-attentive best: there are the ins and outs of “raining, outside, in / this interjurisdictional...” and the replacement of end rhyme with front rhyme, so that “appropriately” can appropriate something from “approaching.” “[I]nterjurisdictional headquarters” might be jargon for a middling state of mind or mood as well as the no-place of an airport. Creeley interrupts these densely played games of sound and self-reference with some straight talking. “I’m spooked, tired, and approaching / my fiftieth birthday”: well, either you know just what he means or you have a bad feeling that you will when the time comes. Perhaps the cruel trick of fifty is its having a halffish feeling about it, only to reveal when you get there that “it’s later,” that the halfway point in a lifetime was probably some way back, and that you’ve missed it along the way. Anyway, Creeley knows it’s “going to get later yet” and so do we, at the start of a volume that neatly parcels out the second thirty years of this poetic career—and it has to be said that the symmetry of the two-volume split is in part responsible for throwing these halves into relief.

There are hopes and regrets of an unextraordinary kind in the second volume. Creeley wishes he’d talked more to his mother before she died; he hopes for a better world for his small son to live in. He comes back to his mother’s death often, in part because her tight-lipped puritanism was so much his own starting point. Creeley is not the only person to have caught himself sounding like his mother, but he turns that common experience into something more complex:

I look out
at all this demanding world

and try to put it quietly back,
from me, say, thank you,
I’ve already had some
though I haven’t

and would like to
but I’ve said no, she has,
it’s not my own voice anymore.

(“Mother’s Voice”)

Is “no” his own self-correction (but I’ve said—or rather she has) or is it hers (I’ve said “no,” just as she has)? Either way, Creeley is doubled up in this poem between his mother’s self-denyingly modest appetites and his own wants. In this way he shows where the constraint of his slender verses might have come from, and at the same time the pull, especially in the later years of this volume, toward more ample figures.

There is a fuller, more generous poem to his mother later in the volume, the title poem of *Memory Gardens* (1986):

Had gone up to
down or across dis-
placed eagerly
unwitting hoped for

mother's place in time
for supper just
to say anything
to her again one

simple clarity her
unstuck glued
deadness emptied
into vagueness hair

remembered wisp that
smile like half
her eyes brown eyes
her thinning arms

could lift her
in my arms so
hold to her so
take her in my arms.

This poem gets in the way of itself just as it's starting out, so that the simple sentence "had gone up to mother's place in time for supper" takes some recovering; meanwhile the line breaks lift out "mother's place in time" as though to bring static memory from the drift of narrative. When Williams wrote, "This is just to say," he meant most simply "only to say," but Creeley makes "just to say" into "if only I could say," and the poem ends by trying fully to recollect or gather up his mother's thinning memory in those lovely closing lines.

There are other love poems in this volume, to Pen, Creeley's wife of thirty years, and indeed the settled domesticity of the couple's life runs through the book. From the outset he thinks about oneness and twoness, as in this fragment from *Hello*:

Bye-bye, kid says,
girl, about five—
peering look,
digs my one eye.
(“Soup”)

There are two long i's in "Bye-bye," and another in "five," set against the short ones in "kid" and "dig," and if that joke makes you wince, you do again at "digs my one eye" because "digs" is too much a reminder of what happened to the other (Creeley's left eye had to be removed after a childhood accident). This is all a bit of a game, and there is more play with twoness at the other end of the volume, when the awkward grammars of rhymed couplets poke fun at strained coupledness:

Us was never happy we,
all that's ever left is me.

Oneness plays a nastier trick on Creeley, though. In some poems he imagines aging as falling apart, but in "Time" there is a more horrible realization:

When I was young,
the freshness of a single
moment came to me

with all hope, all tangent wonder.
Now I am one, inexorably
in this body, in this time.

Creeley alerts us in several poems to the "one" in "wonder," but here the thought that self and body are one and that you can't get out of what he elsewhere calls "this—physical sentence" pits the oneness of age against the wonder of the past. He makes lighter of it later in "I'll win":

I'll win the way
I always do
by being gone
when they come.

This poem anticipates the Houdini-like trick its speaker will play on befuddled future readers, but it ends, "Being dead, then, / I'll have won completely," where the hollow victory of the escape artist is to vanish into the oneness of death.

In his late essay on Whitman, Creeley wrote of death as "the utterly common fate of all beyond any differentiation." Facing that common end meant something particular to a poet who had sought throughout his life to differentiate, to find the edges of things. He tries to do that in "The Sound":

Early mornings, in the light still
faint making stones, herons, marsh
grass all but indistinguishable in the muck,

one looks to the far side, of the sound, the sand

side with low growing brush and
reeds, to the long horizontal of land's edge,

You can't quite make things out here: "light still" might be adjectives awaiting their noun ("in the light, still landscape"). Rounding the corner, "light" turns out to have been a noun, qualified by "still faint," and the poem goes about its task of picking things out even as it says they're hard to distinguish. Looking further out, things are clearer, but at the same time "sound" registers doubly: a sound is an inlet, or narrow channel of water, in this poem between the observing self and "that / other side, that outside, place of / imagined real openness." And sound is also, of course, the channel that comes between inner consciousness an outer expression, along which distinctions are made, or in which they are sometimes lost. So "sound" threatens to disintegrate when put too close to its kin "the sound, the sand / side," and yet on the other side sound preserves seen distinctions, as where "low growing" measures its long o's against the short ones in "long horizontal."

Creeley plays with this double sense of sound in several places, including the long poem "Histoire de Florida." You can't go to Florida, especially in French, without taking some Wallace Stevens with you. Stevens's "Idea of Order at Key West" in which maker and made were so fully bound up, ends, "In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds." Creeley's "Histoire de Florida" reminds us again of the other sense of "sound":

Out over that piece of water
where the sound is, the place
it loops round on the map from
the frontal ocean and makes a
spit of land this sits on, here, flat,
filled with a patent detritus left
from times previous whatever
else was here before become
now brushy conclave thick with
hidden birds, nimble, small lizards.

This thinks about the sounds and surfaces of the page as well as the landscape it surveys: "where the sound is" is both out over there where it's pointing and here, the channel through which the poem makes its way. "[A] / spit of land this sits on, here, flat," gestures insistently at the page as well as the peninsula. Pages, like swamps, might be covered in detritus, and this one is littered, as you might expect, with bits of Stevens—in fact "Histoire de Florida" winds up winding itself, perhaps too predictably, around his "Anecdote of the Jar."

In the latter part of this volume sound turns inside out. Readers of Creeley are used to listening for delicate internal sound patterns while pick-

ing their way through the verbiage, but in many of the later poems these internal threads turn into external frameworks, internal rhymes pushed out into end rhymes and interior rhythms into strictly metrical ballad forms. These familiar frames are a kind of homecoming, in that return and recall are embedded in their structures, and insofar as they recall “earlier” oral forms known from childhood. Sometimes, as in “Memory,” the layers of self-reference threaten to evacuate the poem into pure form. Dedicated to Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop, the poem begins, “Remember when / we all were ten.” Here is its last stanza:

Because it's when
all thoughts occur
to say again
we're where we were

The coming together of that last line feels somehow inevitable, “were” dropping back almost where the line started in “we're.” Almost but not quite; memory doesn't quite take you back where you began. Meter collaborates in that thought in “Provincetown”:

Could walk on water backwards
to the very place
and all around was sand
where grandma dug, bloomers up,
with her pail, for clams.

This is almost but not quite short meter, the hymn stanza whose four-beat penultimate line signals so clearly the closure to come. Only there are five lines here, and if you listen to it you notice that either of the three-beat lines “to the very place” or “and all around was sand” would have done nicely. These two lines jostle to occupy one position, as though two thoughts were squabbling over the space, and the poem were trying to choose between them—between the hope that walking backwards, remembering, would miraculously get you “to the very place” and the worry that you'd end up not walking on water but beached on some featureless strand (“all around was sand”). Although the form ends at the expected time, the meter and (almost) rhyme closing appropriately with “clams,” its second and third lines betray a hesitation in its making, an imperfection that pulls it back from the brink of nostalgia.

Like any collected poems, this book irons out the contingencies of earlier publication; there's no sense, for example, of the work Creeley did in collaboration, nor that the poems in *On Earth* were those left in a folder on his desk when he died. There are no dates in the list of contents; you have to

turn to the credits for those. Perhaps the resulting sense of disorientation is appropriate, but on balance I'd have preferred less minimalist bibliographical apparatus. There are compensations, though, like the index where you can count up the number of times Creeley titled a poem "Here" (8) or "There" (8) or "Place" (5). These are small measures of his persistence perhaps; but these two volumes also bring the larger-scale ambition of this particular, obsessive, and yet various and vital poet plainly into the light.

Fiona Green

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Devin Johnston, *Sources*. New York: Turtle Point, 2008. 96pp. \$15.95

Devin Johnston's *Sources* deals in the stuff of poetry: birds, weather, love, other poems. But its main pleasure is Johnston's mastery of craft. "Thunderheads," a weather poem, begins,

Days spent in the shelter of work
blown apart at dusk:

skirts rustle mimic rain
as shadows bloom across the draw;
a five-ton hammer taps
a crimped leaf; cutterheads
dredge voices through the wall.

Discrete perspectives on the storm complement each other like rhymes. "Skirts" links to images of rustling curtains and women fleeing the "bloom of shadows"; the sound of a tapped leaf predicts—and then joins—the dredge of voices. The word "taps" seems commissioned specially for the poem—manufactured to note the gentle action of the cloud's "five-ton hammer." (In another poem, the word "auctioneering," which describes a warbler's call, is similarly fitted for its line.) Johnston, here, records the changing scene as he remains focused on the present. Change is a condition of presentness.

"Four Nights" describes another cloud-scene:

A wave, a welter
of clouds cross-
hatched with rain:

excess, happiness.

A wave of clouds becomes a welter as the rain appears. The break at “cross- / hatched” reenacts the storm’s crash or clash, and the rain’s hatching. The comma between “excess” and “happiness” marks the transformation’s near-imperceptibility: excess leads to happiness, the poem suggests, and is happiness. The sense of excess-as-surplus is a subtle joke, called out by the poem’s precision: the rain is in excess of the clouds as “cross- / hatched” is in excess of its line or the poem is in excess of the storm. (“Excess” has the Latin root “excedere”—to surpass, to outperform.)

Writing like this is the main key of *Sources*. The poems are exquisite and comprehensive. Their music and surface beauty invite intense scrutiny, asking us to look deeper and better—at the objects they describe, but more importantly at the resources and effects of description itself. (Johnston has developed this key through two earlier books, *Telepathy* and *Aversions*, and promoted it with Flood Editions, a publishing house he co-directs with Michael O’Leary.) The poem “Clouds” considers the stakes of this invitation. It opens with another cloudscape, this time viewed through a kitchen window. The clouds “diurnal, tidal” evoke their literal, liquid sources: “spume of Puget Sound, eggs / boiled at Little Bighorn, evaporated / birdbaths on display, sunbathers / stretched beside the pool....” It concludes:

We say, *that’s life, that’s love*—
Yet the active file distinguishes
hounds, greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs;
gate and mirror; heads of lettuce
glazed with rain; Taj Mahal
and traveler; marching trees of
Birnam Wood; sheep from Deuteronomy.

Above the kitchen sink, we skim
a massive novel shorn of names, wild
ramifications of dis-
 appointment, old life
convoluted past recall.

Descriptions from the “active file”—descriptions actively crafted, rather than spontaneously recalled—replace the earlier catalogue. A “file” abrades as it houses. Clouds come to resemble trees from *Macbeth*’s Birnam Wood, sheep from Deuteronomy. This “novel” is both a “dis- / appointment” and literally a series of appointments: a recognition of the poem’s incommensurability with one’s “old life” and of its potential to realize a new one. Craft, here, is not an instrument of memorialization, but of discovery. A “novel shorn of names” is not a novel without names; it’s a novel with names constantly recast in the imagination. Read “shorn” think “wind shear.” The poem records this

discovery as loss and gain: the “old life / convoluted past recall” met by the “wild / ramifications” of the poem itself. Valéry would call Johnston’s “wild ramifications” *wonder*.

The less successful poems in *Sources* seem to actively avoid such ramifications. They are instead content with aphorism or willfully minor. “Swift-footed” opens with an unconvincing epigram:

Look at the sun
beating down
on what was
February’s cold
mud:
 everything
durable proves
unendurable.

“The Door” asks, “What was this basement door / scratched by the dog, / cut from the hardest / shagbark stock?” Its answer literalizes the book’s title as a poetic exercise: “The straightest went / for ax hafts / turned on a lathe, / the trunk for sash / and door.” This is pretty but not nearly as exciting (or revelatory) as the book’s best poems.

Johnston’s translations from Latin and Greek suggest another gloss on the volume’s title. “After Sappho” begins,

Some say flashing metal, some say fire,
others call a Sea Harrier
in vertical ascent
 the loveliest sight
that dark earth offers. I say
whatever you love most.

This translation from fragment 16 is first an occasion to vitalize English—a revitalized original is byproduct. Where Jim Powell, for instance, renders Sappho’s “fleet,” Johnston presents a fighter-jet. The tack mocks the problem of anachronism in translation, while creating a complex of music and imagery that is the poet’s own. Internal repetition galvanizes the stanza: “Some say” leads to “Sea Harrier” and to “say fire”; “metal” leads to “call,” and to “loveliest”; “ascent” to “sight” to “most.” As with the cloud poems, the true source and subject of “After Sappho” is the imagination—the mind reshaping its environment as it discovers it.

Joshua Kotin