

In Memoriam: Craig Crist-Evans 1954-2005

By Jim Applebaum

The news of Craig's death arrived in late March by slow rider up from balmy Baja, and so it seemed an especially strange visitor to our wintry Pennsylvania academic community with its restless pace. The news came unvetted. Craig, it said, had been vacationing south of the border with his companion, Stephanie Howe, and his son, Yann. He had suffered a fatal heart attack. He had been celebrating his son's 21st birthday. His 51st had just passed. We made plans to execute the messenger; it was an impossible scenario.

The gray overhang of late winter oppressed us, his most recent friends and colleagues, who had, in January and with great effort and tears, given Craig up to his new adventure in the West where he was about to restart: to write, to enthruse young readers and future poets, and to be companion to a lovely woman. His departure was unscheduled, an escape from burdensome solitude and depression. His students adored him and so we were left to console them in their loss. After the double trauma of his midyear departure, then his death, they wrote in grief about his unique bonding with them and his grace at motivating them to trust their writing voices.

Craig emitted great sparks of imaginative energy. He arrived at Mercersburg, a venerable college prep school in the Cumberland Valley of south-central Pennsylvania, to create a writing center and a writing-across-the-curriculum ethic. He pitched into his mission with élan, sometimes battling those for whom a distinct focus on writing well seemed excessive, redundant. Craig would lick his wounds, go for an extended trek on his mountain bike, then return to the job. He loved the company of his colleagues who, in turn, were often dazzled by his ardor and warm embrace. A few found his enthusiasm offputting. But Craig was adaptable and had become wise to the scarring associated with new ventures.

With distinguished poet Roger Weingarten, Craig had helped create a graduate program in writing for children at Vermont College before his arrival at Mercersburg for the 2001-2002 academic year. Earlier, he had taught writing in schools in Colorado and Tennessee and managed the operations of a chain of Colorado restaurants. He loved Colorado and hoped someday to return there. He was recommended to Mercersburg by a mentor and writing-center guru, Pamela Childers. Her husband, artist-writer Malcolm Childers, said of Craig at his death: "In the field of memories I have of Craig Crist-Evans, the grass is still tallest around the days when we first met. Craig's easy manner was animated with a sense of what language could do and a keen interest in philosophical dialogue. He had a rich voice that would have suited him well for being a broadcast announcer or raising the heartbeat of women if he chose."

His childhood was troubled: a combative relationship with his father, frequent relocations, exile for a time to a military academy where his marginality helped start a poetic bent. He had made peace with his parents by his middle years. At a distance, he was attentive to his two children: Yann, his son, and Katie, his daughter. He brought Yann east from Colorado to attend Mercersburg for his senior high school year. Craig's genuine love of the young certainly slanted his professional interests. In addition to his academic accomplishments, he wrote four young adult novels: *Moon Over Tennessee* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999), *Amaryllis* (Candlewick, 2004), *Shadow of My Father's Hand* (Breakfast Serials, 2004), and *North of Everything* (Candlewick, 2004). At the time of his death, he was working on a collection of poems for young readers, a new young adult novel, and a picture book.

In 2003, he inaugurated a Young Writers Camp at Mercersburg, which continues. Craig's work made the New York Public Library's Best Books for Teenagers List in 2000 and 2004. In 2001 he received the Lee Bennett Hopkins Promising Poet Award from the International Reading Association. A consummate promoter of reading and writing for and by young people, Craig appeared before local and regional groups of children and parents and assemblies of educators. He had been scheduled to join Lee Bennett Hopkins and Kristine O'Connell George in a presentation at the International Reading Association Convention in San Antonio on May 4.

Hardened by regular, strenuous physical activity yet sensitive and soft to his companions and colleagues, Craig wrote poetry that brought "major experience to the table, the well-traveled experience of a man familiar with what Stephen Spender called 'the destructive element,'" as poet Jonathan Holden wrote about Craig's collection, *No Guarantees*.

And poet Carolyn Wright said of the collection, "An edgy lyricism moves through these poems, with yearnings and never-quite-consolable losses, from the other side of a difficult childhood to an adulthood the poet cannot entirely come to terms with."

Craig was also nominated for Pushcart Prizes for poetry in 1995, 1996, and 2002. He was a contributing editor of *The Bloomsbury Review* and regularly shared each issue with colleagues and students.

Poet and teacher Roger Weingarten, with whom Craig had been collaborating up to the time of his death on a collection, *Manthology: Poems of the Male Experience* (to be published in 2006 by University of Iowa Press), put his friend's life and death this way: "While all of his accomplishments speak to his profound gifts as a writer and teacher and his insatiable life force, the sweetness of his presence in my life is what I'll miss. When a mutual friend, who worked at Vermont College for many years, called to thank me for bringing Craig to Vermont, he said that Craig had been more a brother to him than his own brother. I believe he brought that level of feeling to all his close relationships, his love of literature, and his own writing."

A Craig Crist-Evans Scholarship Fund has been established at Vermont College to support the attendance of selected poets at its postgraduate writers' workshop. Contributions to the fund may be sent care of Roger Weingarten at 184 Main Street, Montpelier, VT 05602. ■

WRITER: **Jim Applebaum** teaches English at Mercersburg Academy in Pennsylvania. A former journalist, he holds an MA in writing from Johns Hopkins University. Photograph courtesy of Mercersburg Academy.