

# THE SINGING METAPHOR

## *Poetry of Rienzi Crusz*

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**R** IENZI CRUSZ STANDS squarely in the English literary tradition of Shakespeare, Milton and the Bible. His mother tongue is English, and he speaks no other language. He is a Canadian poet, never having written poetry or any other kind of creative writing until he immigrated into Canada in 1965. The story of how he came to poetry is interesting. After working for thirteen years as research librarian in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), he came to Canada; as a single parent of three children, all under the age of ten, he was glad to take any job he was offered; he found himself appointed a cataloguer at the University of Toronto Library. The sheer boredom of having to churn out five hundred catalogue cards a day drove him to poetry. He sent four of his poems to Irving Layton with a note asking if Layton thought he had any talent or "should I collect postage stamps?" Layton replied, "Forget about postage stamps. The poems are very good indeed." Today Rienzi Crusz is the author of five volumes of poetry: *Flesh and Thorn* (1975), *Elephant and Ice* (1980), *Singing Against the Wind* (1985), *A Time for Loving* (1986) and *Still Close to the Raven* (1989). A sixth volume, *The Rain Doesn't Know Me Any More*, is due for publication in the very near future.

Rienzi Crusz was born into a burgher family (like Michael Ondaatje) on October 17, 1925 in Colombo. The burghers claim descent from European colonists who fathered children on Sinhalese women. In one of his poems, Crusz refers to "A Portuguese captain [who] holds / the soft brown hand of my Sinhala mother. / It's the year 1515 A.D." ("Roots" *TL* 69) His father was a mathematics instructor who, as Crusz says in a poetic tribute, "chased the ultimate equation / the something that flowed / from heaven to earth / earth to heaven." ("Elegy" *TL* 57) It was perhaps from him that Crusz developed his love for precision, for the symmetry and structure that permeate his poetry. His mother, Cleta Marcellina Serpanchy, from the three poems in which she appears that Crusz has said are biographical, seems to have been an efficient homemaker "squeezing out the shine / from veran-

dah chairs, the red cement floor / a mirror to your sweaty face.” (“Elegy” *TL* 79) She was a devoted mother, feeding, “hectoring” and sacrificing all she had for her eight children.

Critics and reviewers have seen Cruzs as mastering an alien tongue and culture. Arun Mukherjee, one of our most forthright critics of imperialism, speaks of third world Calibans who must perforce speak Prospero’s tongue. Of Cruzs she says:

Like Yeats, he has created his own mythology and rhetoric because the available conventions of Anglo-Canadian poetry do not serve his needs. . . . The comfortable sense of tradition which a mainstream poet enjoys in relationship with the readers from a similar cultural background, and which performs half of our labour for us — familiar allusions, a shared past, binding conventions, is unavailable to Cruzs for it, being alien, will only falsify his meaning.

Michael Estok, in a review article, says Cruzs’s work is “in the mainstream of Canadian culture” because immigrant sensibility that seeks to come to grips with the “extended wholeness of life” is mainstream sensibility, but he goes on to say that “unlike so much in the history of Canadian writing, Cruzs is derivative of no one.”

Though both critics are complimentary to Cruzs, and have their partial relevance, their statements are not quite true. In the erstwhile British Empire, as I have noted in an earlier study (Vikas 1976) there were several generations of South Asians I call “native-aliens” whose language of proficiency was English and who excelled in all that British education had to offer but who oftentimes knew little about their own indigenous culture or language. Cruzs shares the same literary experience as most Canadians of his generation that was closer to standard British school curricula across the Empire than the present generation is. He is derivative, not in any pejorative sense, of Milton, Dylan Thomas and the Bible, just as Margaret Laurence is. Landscape, and not sensibility or educational background, is the difference between Cruzs and native-born Canadians. Reared a Roman Catholic, Cruzs’s childhood was saturated with psalm-singing and Bible reading. As Judith Miller says of his poems, “they carry a language of modulated rhythm and sonority, the language of oral poetry and of the King James version of the Bible.”

Two sets of memories that he talks about in his public readings are: standing at his brother’s door listening enthralled to a recitation of Francis Thompson’s “The Hound of Heaven” and going to movie versions of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*. Many of his poems echo Thompson’s form and philosophy, and Shakespeare’s cadence.

Like many others across the British world in the first half of this century, Cruzs grew up with the poetry and sensibilities of the English Romantics and his poetry bears witness to his careful observations of nature’s sights and sounds. His home stood a hundred yards from the beaches and ditches of Galle Face Green and Layard’s Folly, and on the same road as the house of the Chilean ambassador

Pablo Neruda. During the last two decades, Cruz has enjoyed with the pleasure of recognition the Sri Lankan landscapes that appear in Neruda's works, and has been an avid and conscientious reader of South American writers, as evidenced by the epigraphs he selects for various parts of his volumes.

Cruz took an Honours degree in history and later received a Colombo Plan scholarship to study Library Science at the University of London. He earned his living as a bank clerk until 1965 when he left Ceylon for Canada with his three children, who figure in his early collections. He is now married to Ann, also from Sri Lanka, and lives in Waterloo, Ontario with her and their teenage son, who seems to have given a lighter touch to the later poems in his continuing dialectic of Sun Man and Winter Man, elephant and ice.

THE FIRST POEM IN his first collection, *Flesh and Thorn*, is typical of Cruz and representative of his poetics. It is carefully crafted, structurally balanced and thematically explicit. It is also a metaphor of his own poetic process; it says that considerable force has to be skilfully applied before an experience becomes a poem. Titled "How does one reach the sweet kernel?" it is a love poem on the first level. The metaphor of love is developed in three steps. The first stanza describes the husking of a coconut by a Ceylonese farmer, the second connects that to one kind of love, and the third contrasts this process to another kind of love. The description of husking a coconut is visual and violent. The coconut is pierced on a standing crowbar, the shell is cut with a machete and the sweet kernel "opens out like a womb." This simile with which the first stanza ends serves as transition to the second stanza which describes sexual force in visually explicit terms — "that hangs exotic and hard / like a bunch of king coconuts / on the palm of our dreams." The usage of "palm" is interesting. Along with a more literal image of the metaphor in progress, namely, the palm tree on which the coconut clusters hang, the possibility of holding something in the palm of one's hand is hinted. This echo of Dylan Thomas, or rather Thomas' technique of slightly varying familiar phrases to give a startling new effect, occurs frequently in Cruz.

The third stanza is short. It describes another kind of love, genteel and "tentative," clearly love that the persona finds repugnant. The contrast between the two kinds of love is expressed in the choice of fruits, coconut and plum. Everything about the plum is on the surface; there are no hidden delights, no struggle with thick fibres and hard shell before one can burst into the "kernel of the heart." Using a sexual metaphor, Eliot's Prufrock asks, "Do I dare to eat a peach?" Cruz overturns this analogy, showing that the peach-plum family of fruits is for toothless, anemic Prufrocks, not for full-blooded human beings. The double metaphor — of the process of love and of poetry — is unmistakable.

Crusz's preoccupation with poetics recurs in numerous poems. Of particular relevance in the present context is his own recognition that poetry revolves around metaphors. He says in the title poem of *The Rain Doesn't Know Me Anymore* (which I read in typescript): "I, who for so long / shaped the forgotten metaphor," know "a horizon that would never stand still." The visionaries whom he celebrates in "Truth," are also poets "the madcaps . . . who dared / to crawl up the volcano's rib / and balance on a rim of flame." In "Pardon My Muted Ways," when the woman asks,

Why a Christ  
on every hair of your head,  
metaphors delicate as wind . . .  
from some prophecy of pain?

the persona replies,

. . . once long ago  
a haunting face  
drained the Sun-Man to pale bone  
till night collapsed his eyes  
and love slept off its wounds.

His early poetry is suffused with the pain inflicted by that haunting face. Autobiographical details are never far from Crusz's poetry, and it might justifiably be said that *Flesh and Thorn* traces a period in the poet's life, a period that was dominated by two events — the breakdown of his marriage and his emigration from his native Ceylon. In his first volume, two poems, "Biography of an Elusive Cat" and "Karma," specifically record this experience. The cat in "Biography" is an analogue for his wife. She is a Persian cat, with "rich fur" that shines "blue ash or ash blue." The history of a broken marriage is succinctly conveyed — her refusal to be held in the persona's arms, her secret trysts elsewhere, and the intense hold she has on him even long after she disappeared into the night, a hold that reappears time and again in later poems. In "Karma," the same persona leaves the island one June day. The image of the gull lingering on the wet rock effectively fuses his tears and the hardening of his heart, and as the ship sails away, "the fluid horizon" shifts as does the mind, and "the healing sun sealed the hemophiliac flow." The fading smell of frangipani (red jasmine) is replaced by Jergen's Lotion, an anticlimactic kind of comparison to brand name commercial products that appears more often and more intrusively in later poems. As he starts his new life, the "slim Singhala girl" is still a presence in his bones, but the poem ends on a note of catharsis. Time has passed and "the vine hangs heavy . . . with purple grape."

In the first cycle of poems, various similes and metaphors are used to delineate the beauty of the woman who betrayed him; there is the haunting face, the elusive cat, the well-oiled gun, the foxy finger, but none sings more powerfully than the

ectoplasmic limbo-dancer of "The Night before my Birthday." The persona's children are growing up "lost/in the jungle of new apartments," and he himself is entering middle age, "forty four years of matured griefs." The poem evokes a nightmarish atmosphere of hospital wards drenched in Dettol, of empty houses and desolation. Then she "crawls / a fluid limbo-dancer / from under the slit of door" and asks after the children. All the panic and despair of the persona are packed into four words, "Fled, fled, I cry," followed by an awareness of the heritage that has also fled: Noah's doves seek the olive branch.

And the Gods of Kataragama  
bleed in their shrines  
as a whiff of frangipani  
cuts through the antiseptic air  
and disappears. (*Flesh and Thorn* 4)

His lost heritage is further defined in "Little Brown Boy," where the son is a typical Canadian youngster "cutting rhythms, figurines / with knives under your shoes," but Singhala blood still runs in his body and in his racial memory, symbolized here by "those Singhala ears / that like the elephant / hear the woodapple fall." It is time for the boy to learn more about other losses as well — about his mother's betrayal "a long night ago / when cats wailed on the papapet wall." Through such recurring reference to felines, the poet periodically connects to the continuing life-story that underlies his early poetry.

**C**RUZ'S USE OF Sri Lankan landscape and imagery has been noticed by every reviewer and critic, but with widely diverging response. Most Canadian readers perceive exoticism; some praise his work for this quality and others, like the reviewer of *A Time for Loving* in *Canadian Literature*, condemn it as artificial, "a colonial's dangerous nostalgia." Perhaps it is time to recognize that it is neither, that landscape of an immigrant's homeland is part of Canadian poetry, though it is never easy to educate a reviewer into revising his imperialistic and unfounded assumptions such as that the classic temples that dot Crusz's poetic landscape are "surely the product of massive conscription and social oppression?"

Reshard Gool looks deeper at Crusz's imagery; he says of the elephant symbolism, "He handles language three-dimensionally." Elephant imagery is so pervasively representative both of the original homeland of the immigrant and of the making of poems, that it becomes a continuing and expanding metaphor. The poet, at times a circus elephant, at times a king of all he surveys, at times a tired rogue finding his way to the clearing where "your brothers have always gone to die," always combines proverbial powers of memory with proverbial strengths of non-

violent assertiveness. This circles back to the elephant as metaphor for the South Asian immigrant.

Crusz's second volume, *Elephant and Ice* (1980) introduces the use of the dialectic structure that gets honed in his later volumes. The metaphor in the title is obvious, and many of the poems in the volume deal with the advent of the elephant to winterland. Can it survive? The old man in "Kamala" thinks not:

Beyond  
     lies a strange land  
 where we can only wear  
 a face of alien skin,  
 and not finding  
 the find of fish or salt of sea  
 we'll die slowly within ourselves ("Kamala" *EI* 19)

But he is a lone voice, and he speaks only once. The Sun Man, who actually makes the move from Sri Lanka to Canada, traces the immigrant's path from apartment to suburbia and ends with ironic metaphors for Canadianization, but also with a note of thankfulness. The "rice-paddy lands," "the primal scream" and "words of angels under the sea" of Sri Lanka are lost in the perfections of vitamin pills, the silence, and the "Molson cool" sipped on "shaven grass" of Canada, but the persona ends on a thankful note:

I AM perfect now.  
 A brown laughing face  
 in the snow,  
 not the white skull  
 for the flies  
 in Ceylon's deadly sun. (*EI* 95)

I am reminded of a contrasting poem of my own where an old woman visiting her son in Canada says she wants to go back to India, "to sun and air / and sweat and even flies and all / But not this, not this."

The Sun Man in the new poems in the third volume, *Singing Against the Wind* (1985), becomes a little more aware of the racism that is directed at him but finds himself muted in this white land,

the senses forged to iron silence,  
 the mind trapped in a snowboot,  
 I must hold my black tongue. ("In the Idiom of the Sun" *SAW* 10)

Crusz's insistent references to black, crow and raven pose some problems of connotative effects and effectiveness. Salman Rushdie speaks of the motivation behind the prophet's choice of a name in *The Satanic Verses*, that he intentionally "adopted . . . the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths. . . ." (*SV*, 93) It does not succeed in the novel though the strategy has

a good chance of succeeding in the genre of fiction. In poetry, where each poem stands on its own, it is perhaps unrealistic to hope that such subversion would succeed, especially when these words are only occasionally used against the grain.

The title of Crusz's fifth volume, *Still Close to the Raven*, is an assertion of the poet's continuing affinity with the raven, a triple metaphor for his concerns about conditions in his original homeland, his ethnocultural sensibility, and his personal mythology of place within the Canadian context. However, a reader's reflex reaction to it might well be negative because instead of a tone of assertion one might hear a note of apology; or if it is of assertion, one might well ask why this closeness to a place one left half a lifetime ago? The poem, "why I can talk of the angelic qualities of the raven" is similarly ambiguous. The philosophical conclusion is that racism does not spring from colour-consciousness but from an attitude, the same attitude that made Adam slap God "on his cosmic ears." The subversion, for those who would like to see it, lies in the fact that the preceding stanzas use positive images for "black" and negative ones for "white," thus undercutting the placatory ending.

**C**RUSZ'S POEMS ARE NOT as overtly concerned with racism as are Cyril Dabydeen's and Himani Bannerji's among South Asian Canadian poets, but he is conscious of it in such poems as "Sitting Alone in the Happy Hour Cafe," and "In the Idiom of the Sun." Protest works more effectively for Crusz when he brings his gentle satire to accentuate his metaphors. Sun Man plans to defy suburbia by letting

... his grass grow wild  
like the hair on his dog Bonzo  
... and dandelions laugh  
through their yellow teeth ("Sun Man in Suburbia" *SAW* 14)

Crusz's own position on colonialism (and the neo-colonialism of the Canadian scene) come through in "bouquet to my colonial masters." It could be considered a response to the current rash of Raj-nostalgia and glamorization that has erupted in movies and memoirs. It foregrounds the indisputable reality of imperialism, namely the rape of women and of the land. What seems exotic in Gauguin's South Seas island paintings becomes metaphor for the colonial exploitation and plundering the land of its wealth. British freighters coughed black smoke and took "sandalwood artifacts / still leaking their exotic perfume / from your dark holds." The image, though ostensibly listing spices and sandalwood, connects to the rape in the second line through "your dark holds." The poem also provides a very interesting example of the scrupulous care with which Crusz revises his poems. In an earlier version, the third and fourth lines read:

Silence follows  
the dismemberment of tongues.

The revised "Silence spills / from this abattoir of tongues" is not only more denotatively correct (limbs not tongues are usually dismembered) but is more powerful in several ways. This is eloquent, articulate silence, and the choice of "abattoir" has a horrifying finesse that synonyms such as "slaughter" would not have.

The last stanza probably states Crusz's own position. Rape and plunder notwithstanding, he celebrates the legacy that the colonial masters left: "Shakespeare! / a tongue to speak with." These lines recall Derek Walcott's powerful lines:

I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

The agony of choice is not as acute in Crusz. As a native-alien, Crusz's repertory has little of the treasures of classical or contemporary Tamil and Sinhalese literatures that at least equal, and likely surpass, what Shakespeare, Milton or the Bible have to offer a South Asian Canadian writer. Crusz's literary heritage is first and last in the English language. His landscape, however, is equally Sri Lankan and Canadian.

Arun Mukherjee sees Crusz creating his own personal mythology. Michael Estock refers to the "myth of place" that underlies much of Crusz's work. Creating personal mythologies is a Canadian hallmark and Crusz's metaphors provide referential links as he charts and explores this myth of place. Irving Layton says, "I do think you've got something going for you, call it sensuous vitality if you wish, and certainly an un-Canadian intensity." It is intriguing that Estok and other "mainstream" readers tend to focus more on the place as *there*, from where the Sun Man came whereas South Asian Canadian critics such as Mukherjee, Cyril Dabydeen and myself, see the place created as *here*, in Canada. Mukherjee, in particular, thinks Crusz's best poems are those that delineate and comment on the Canadian reality rife with commercialization and racism. I think that his best poems are those that chisel metaphors about poetics and send them singing into Canadian literature to the sound of Kandyan drums.

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