

FINDING IT HARD TO NAVIGATE

By Douglas Messerli

**The Day Sam Goldwyn Stepped off the Train** Robert Crosson (New York: Agincourt, 2004)

**Signs/ & Signals: The Day Books of Robert Crosson**, edited by Guy Bennett and Paul Vangelisti (Los Angeles: Otis Books/Seismicity Editions, 2008)



On the morning of December 10, 2001, Paul Vangelisti's wife, Malgosia found our mutual friend Robert Crosson on the floor of the small studio he inhabited behind Paul's house. He had collapsed, evidently after having delivered the daily newspaper to Paul's door. As Paul left the house on his way to work, he yelled out to Bob, not realizing that Bob had fallen inside to the floor, dead.

Crosson's last journal entry, published in *Signs/ & Signals: The Daybooks of Robert Crosson*, is a painful reminder of how everything around him became a fodder for writing for this author: dated Sunday, December 9th, Bob describes the comings and goings of those near to him before, between two slanted lines at the center of the page, reporting the ominous news:

"very-  
still" [underlined three times]  
(out):  
  
all I can hear is  
"my heart-beat"  
—in my left ear  
: ((a passing "plane"  
in the distance.))

At 6:45 p. m. he eats macaroni salad and "Angels-Delight," purchased from the Pioneer Market. At

6:50 Malgosia returns.

These are the major facts of his life, as I reported them in *The PIP Anthology of World Poetry of the 20th Century, Volume 5/Intersections: Innovative Poetry in Southern California*:

Born in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania in 1929, Robert Crosson remained in the East until his family moved to Pomona, California in 1944. He attended the University of California, Los Angeles, and received his B.A. in English in 1951, briefly joining the Communist Party during his college years. After college he began working as an actor in television and film, in 1954 landing a small role in *White Christmas*. The following year he appeared as the character Danny Marlowe in *I Cover the Underworld*, and acted on television in series such as "Dragnet," "The Millionaire," and—through the help of his friend Jack Larson, who for years played Jimmy Olsen—"Superman." During those years Crosson encountered the several celebrities he describes in his later book of poetry *The Day Sam Goldwyn Stepped off the Train*. But Crosson grew increasingly dissatisfied with the Hollywood scene, which, combined with his brief political activities, dimmed his prospects for further Hollywood employment. In 1959 he traveled to Europe, working his way through various countries as—so he reported—a piano player, a black-marketer, and pimp.

In 1960 he returned to the United States, enrolling in Library Science at the graduate level at the University of California, Los Angeles. Eventually he dropped out, taking night jobs and attempting by day to write his first novel, *Midland*. Jobs as a painter and carpenter, another movie role in *Mike's Murder* (1984), and a 1989 Poetry Fellowship from the California Arts Council, allowed him to survive during these lean years; however, as he grew older Crosson grew increasingly dependent on "the kindness of strangers" and friends, particularly Los Angeles poet Paul Vangelisti, who—when Crosson was evicted from the Laurel Canyon house where he was caretaker—took him in. Crosson lived with Vangelisti from 1993 until his death in 2001.

I knew Crosson, however, not as a has-been actor, but as a incredible story-teller and wonderful poet. I first heard Crosson's name and read some of his work on the 1989 California Arts Council panel which awarded him a small fellowship. I had never met Crosson, but Vangelisti, who was also on that panel, assured me that we would instinctually like one another. And when I met Bob a few months later, Paul's prediction became fact. Like many others, I loved Bob, primarily because of his complete disregard of cant and doctrine, against which he would rail in brief asides in the manner of W. C. Fields or Mae West, but also because of his gentle friendship.

True Bob was both an alcoholic and a heavy smoker. Although his death was listed as a heart attack, he was told by a doctor previously that his smoking would soon result in his death. In 1991, Bob appeared in my performative work, *The Walls Come True*, picking me up in his truck at least two times so that we could travel to the Diana Daves' home in the Valley to rehearse. The trip on both occasions was excruciatingly frightful, as Bob drove at a snail's pace so that we might not hit anything along the way, while nonetheless nearly clipping any car parked *en route*. When Bob was later arrested for drunken driving in 1996, he describes his ordeal in prison as an 67-year old man who could hardly keep up with the other prisoners:

I find it hard to navigate (I cannot navigate steps). Outside officers order to come out *fast*. I can't. (I pull at the chains). Black gentleman in front of me, in face of the order, retorts: "We're coming—but *this old man is holding us up*."

In response to the charges, Crosson pleads "No contest," and is released. Bob continues in his *Daybook*, "Paul picks me up...Find truck (yet) parked at curb." A footnote explains that they "celebrate with a drink at Rustic," one of Bob's favorite watering holes.

The following year, 1997, Bob joined numerous other poets and artists at the conference on Catalina Island I describe below in the essay titled "History." The trip over by ferry had frightened and exhausted Bob, so when most of the conference participants decided to walk down the hill into town for dinner, Bob and I stayed behind. It gave us several long hours to renew our friendship, to discuss gay issues, and, for me, to hear more of Bob's wonderful tales. He retold one of his favorites: how when he and his brother were young, they had had sex, his brother afterwards responding, "How could anything that feels so good be bad."

At Bob's memorial service (where I also met Bob's friend Jack Larson) Crosson's brother—from who he had been separated most of his life, the boys having been sent to different families—reported that several of Bob's stories were simply not based on fact. "I love Bob dearly," he said, "but...well, he loved to make up stories." For example, Crosson's long insistence that his mother died upon his birth, we were told, was simply not the case. She died a few years after his birth.

As far as I was concerned, the veracity of Crosson's tales about himself and others, was of no matter. I could have listened, and did listen for hours at a time.

Perhaps more importantly, as I grew to discover, Crosson's own poetic work, although clearly eccentric, was fascinating. He published, during his life time, only a few books—*Geographies* (1981), *Wet Check* (1983), *Calliope* (1988), and *The Blue Soprano* (1994)—but he continued to write until his health began to seriously deteriorate the year of my dinner with him. In 1997 Guy Bennett published a short chapbook, *In the Aethers of the Amazon: Poems 1984-1997* and in 2004, Agincourt printed a collection I once had hoped to publish, *The Day Sam Goldwyn Stepped off the Train*. Like the man, Crosson's work in this volume was irreverent witty and yet, at times, heart-wrenchingly beautiful. His poems always surprised, never fitting into easy patterns or reader expectations, which, I suspect, often put some readers in the position of the poet himself, finding it "hard to navigate." A few lines from the last poem of that book will have to suffice as example:

Of Course

Whilst I still can.  
Whilst. I do.  
Whilst the otter to the edge of the pond  
Whilst

(I have never seen an otter)

Whilst the midnight of morning  
holds me close  
Whilst the dogs are quiet  
(especially the birds)  
Whilst the hush of a new day  
allows no helicopters  
and prayer is silent.

Whilst memories yet hold me prisoner  
of my hulk, whilst Whitman yet holds  
such daring of his & lord of his affection.  
When silence pervades

and any punctuation is unnecessary.

(as a child I was told "you think too much."  
Parentheses rarely apply.

Beginning with a Beckett-like "I can go on, I do," Crosson both mocks Romantic conventions (with the repeated "Whilst" and his pretended devotion to nature) and yet embraces it, like his beloved poet-friend Whitman. The work is both a commentary on itself, is itself *about* the language which he uses, while remaining an old-fashioned ode to the surrounding world of early morning. Bob was like that, an irreverent postmodern Romantic, who as he bent down to pet a cat might spew some dark comic quip out the side of his mouth. And in that respect, Crosson was an antidote for all seemingly passionate fakers one faces every day. The other morning, Paul Vangelisti admitted to me: "I miss Bob. Our world needs him even more now." I agreed.

*Los Angeles, March 6, 2009*

Reprinted from *Green Integer Blog* (March 2009).

**Photo:**

Jack Larson, unidentified woman, and Robert Crosson