

CRAIG RUSSELL

Crab

CRAB. HE GOT HIS NAME from his gait: a scampering, scuttlescurriness that, while not being truly lateral, gave the impression of a general sidey-ways-ness. And his hair. Red. A red that could not be easily categorized without reference to the sea: lobster red; crab-red flecked with sand-red. Underneath the hair the long, thin face: a white beach of a face scattered with a constellation of freckles, like tiny crabs washed up over the bleached sand.

Crab lay in his shell. He lay, legs curled up to ease a slight ache in his belly, under a floral duvet carapace, eyes closed tight, trying to shut out the inevitability of the insidious day that had already mustered outside his window and now waited for him with an indifferent malevolence. But his eyes could not shut out the day. Sounds were creeping in from outside, bringing flashes and cascades of colours to dance within Crab's skull. Distant children playing a game outside shouted and screamed at varying volumes and pitches and their cries sparked across Crab's brain as bright blue flashes and deep violet clouds. A thunderstorm of colour.

It had always been so.

When Crab was six or seven, he had mentioned to his mother the colours that danced in his head when he listened to music or when there was a loud noise. He had never mentioned it before because he had simply assumed that everyone's world was like his own, filled with the colours of cacophony. A discussion with an increasingly irate teacher, in which Crab had insisted that *of course* one saw sounds as well as heard them, had almost brought the

subject to the surface. The even then cowardly Crab had, in the face of the growing wrath of the teacher and the swell of contemptuous laughter from his classmates, retreated into his shell. However, when he had explained fully to his mother that his baby brother's cries were starbursts of azure and that the sound of the milkman's float bubbled at the bottom of his field of vision as a sinuous orange rippling, he had not been prepared for the reaction. His mother had turned pale and fetched Crab's father, who had interrogated his small son, too small for his age and bone-lazy, in his almost hostile blue-black baritone. Crab had become very frightened. In a matter of those few minutes he had become isolated: separated from his family and the rest of humanity. That which he had assumed was universal and commonplace was now clearly unique and personal to him. His isolation sprang not from the fact that *he* saw sound, but that *everyone else* did not. He began to sink into a solipsism where the validity of all around him was called into question. His parents were clearly horrified. Crab would lie awake at night straining to hear the hushed conversation of his parents. The words 'odd,' 'not right in the head' and 'disturbed' had slithered across his darkened bedroom as green and yellow snakes of light.

About a month after the revelation, Crab's parents had taken him to Edinburgh. When they had got off the train they had taken a taxi and Crab had been filled with a sense of event and expectation. Their destination had not, however, been the Castle or the zoo but the looming menace of a dark stoned hospital that towered above the tiny Crab like a shoreline cliff of grey-black rock. The consultant had ignored Crab other than as an object of perfunctory study and had addressed his obsequious parents in a tone that was both reassuring and patronizing. He had used a lot of words that Crab—and for that matter his parents—did not understand, but one word in particular repeatedly towered above the others. It was a noble edifice of a word; syllable built upon syllable in an architecture that was distant and classical: synaesthesia. It had sounded to Crab, who was already interested in such things, like some ancient kingdom inhabited by heroes and sirens, centaurs and minotaurs.

"Synaesthesia," the consultant had explained, simplifying his language and speaking more slowly and slightly louder, as if addressing foreigners, "is an uncommon but not rare condition where

there is a ... well a sort of *short circuit* ... ” (he had smiled a superior smile as he emphasized the words, clearly feeling he had found a reference within the comprehension of his dullard audience) “... within the visual cortex of the brain. In other words, when your son hears something, the message is passed both to the auditory and visual centres of the brain.”

Crab had noticed both his parents lean forward with a stiff-limbed, frowning intensity, as if straining to seize and hold tight onto each and every incomprehensible word. The consultant had smiled impatiently as he sought an even simpler route to understanding.

“Basically, his senses are a bit mixed up. He sees colours and shapes when he hears certain sounds. With some patients it is their sense of smell that interferes with the visual cortex. They see odours.”

“He’s no’ mad?” his father had asked, “He’s no’ making it a’ up or havin’ hallucinations?”

The consultant had laughed, as if at a child who had asked why people in Australia don’t fall off the world.

“No, Mr. Ramsay, he’s not mad. In fact it is little more than an inconvenience to him.”

“Can it be cured?” his father asked; again the consultant laughed.

“No, it cannot. But as I say, it is not a serious problem. I would say it is congenital in your son’s case, rather than the result of an injury”

Crab’s father had frowned even more and leant even further forward. The consultant retraced his steps.

“Congenital means he was born with it, Mr. Ramsay. As I say, it is not a serious problem. In your son’s case it doesn’t seem to impair his vision too much. Many people with this condition do not, in fact, see it as a disability or a problem ... in fact they often see it as, well, a gift. Many people have suffered from synaesthesia ... Vladimir Nabokov, for example”

“Who?” Crab’s father had asked.

“The author of *Lolita*,” the consultant had responded, smiling and looking at Crab’s mother’s legs.

“So there’s nothing to be done?” Crab’s had asked father, almost with relief.

“No. Nothing. The only other thing I have noticed is a slight

problem with his right inner ear. I feel that this is creating problems with his balance and may account for why he tends to lean into the right when he walks."

"We've been wondering about that ...," started Crab's mother. His father's glare put her back into her silent place. His father turned to the consultant.

"What can be done about that?" Crab's father had asked and braced his entire, limited mental resources to engage the answer.

"Nothing." The consultant had smiled as he closed the folder in front of him and Crab and his parents became invisible.

The visit to the hospital had been a turning point in Crab's relationship with his parents; in fact, in his relationship with the world. From that day on he was aware of a difference. Not a uniqueness, but a difference. A setting apart. His father, too, must have felt it: henceforth he seemed to treat his son with an unease, a sideways-glancing wariness. Crab, even at that young age, had determined that his father had decided that the boy was just 'not right,' no matter what the doctors said.

Outside Crab's window, in the swirling malevolent day, a car roared down the street, its engine sounds melding hideously with the thumping bass of too-loud music. The bass notes jumped and juddered as chromium-coloured shards inside Crab's head. He pulled the duvet down tighter. He farted. As the smell crept around him he made a resolution to eat less junk. As junk was all he ate, and because his frame was so meagre, to cut all junk from his diet would mean starvation. His stomach gave him trouble. He never complained about it, despite being a hypochondriac. He would seek refuge from his predatory pupils by going to his doctor with complaints from asthma to rhinitis to back pain—but never about the complaints that really did plague his stomach. He was afraid to ask his doctor about his stomach in case an examination revealed that which Crab had expected for twenty years; that which had killed his father.

Crab had watched his father dissolve into a skin-draped skull on a hospital pillow, slowly devoured by his own stomach, or at least the cancer that grew within it. They had increased and increased the levels of drugs, but the pain had ripped through each curtain of morphine and reached down, deep inside and twisted and tore at him. Crab had long decided to end his own life the day he was diagnosed with the same evil—it never entered his head

that he might be spared—and that was why he never asked his doctor about his stomach. He farted again to ease the dull ache in his belly but only succeeded in smoking himself out from the stifling integument of his own duvet/shell. The single room was still dull and he rose and opened the curtains. Beyond the window the estate huddled dark and ugly under a steel sky. His athymy was externalized; his despondency given shape in a joyless landscape under a gloomy sky. Fuck, Crab thought.

One of the ugly clusters of ugly children and adolescents shouted, “Hey Crab!” and brayed moronically as Crap scuttled past and through the school gate. He had lived with the name Crab for as long as he could remember. It was a self-generating sobriquet. He had been called it in primary school, at secondary school, at university and then he had been re-christened with it by his pupils when he became a teacher. Groups of people who had never met, who had no contact with each other, had spontaneously named him Crab. The only constant was himself; the crab similitude that he carried with him. He ignored the name-caller: it was the most insignificant of insults in a day that would be heaped with injustices and indignities of much more significant magnitude. He maintained his short-strided, slightly sidey-ways progress, gaze down and focused only a few feet ahead, into the pale grey concrete tomb of a school.

MacDairmid, his Head of Department, a squat, broad, little bull of a man, was already in the staff room when Crab arrived. Crab secreted an obsequious “good morning” to which MacDairmid did not respond. Instead he continued to excavate a nostril with a ploughblade thumbnail. MacDairmid—“Mac” to the rest of the staff but “Mr. MacDairmid” to his pupils and to Crab—had been a marine commando who had served in Northern Ireland and one of the few, obscure and tiny parts of the world that still had a Union Jack fluttering above it. He was supposed to know a dozen different ways of killing a man with otherwise innocuous household implements—a coffee-cup, like the one he was holding when Crab came in, or a pen or a shoelace. It was a joke amongst his colleagues, but not to Crab, who found it eminently believable and always encountered MacDairmid trepidatiously, particularly when he found him holding such an object.

"There's a new boy started in 2A1, Mr. Ramsay." MacDairmid, as always, did not look at Crab as he spoke. "I have been informed by the headmaster that he suffers from the same *condition* as you" MacDairmid examined his thumbnail and resumed an exploratory trawl around the edge of his nostril. "Syno" The word trailed off, dying more from MacDairmid's lack of interest than confusion.

"Synaesthesia," said Crab, with an unintended hint of pride. He felt the thrill that ran through him on those rare occasions that he came across another *synaesthete*: someone he could talk to freely, with whom he could compare respective palettes of sound colours—always different, from individual to individual.

"Mmm ... yes. Anyway, this boy's condition is similar to yours, and the head thought it might be an idea for you to talk to him. His name is Bennett."

"Of course, it would be...." Crab's voice trailed away as MacDairmid turned to another colleague and resumed a conversation in a tone of conviviality with which he had never engaged Crab. The bell rang. An urgent, over-loud trilling that pulsed black bars across Crab's field of vision. It was one of the few sounds that really interfered with Crab's ability to see. He steadied himself against a chair until the clamour subsided. He was the last to leave the staff room. Bremner, the tweed-suited Mathematics Head, let the door close behind him just as Crab approached it. Such was Crab's invisibility to others. Bremner had not intended to be rude, it was just that he perceived the room behind him to have been empty. Crab did not object: he preferred not to be noticed. The alternative was the vague, disinterested contempt of those who did notice him, those for whom his presence was unavoidable, like the pupils before whom he would shortly stand and talk. If he were lucky, they would ignore him, and he would recite his mantra from the same text without interruption; were he unlucky, then one of the pack would turn on him, entertaining the others with Crab's impotence and humiliation.

He entered the classroom unnoticed. Two boys were jostling each other violently in the ritual dance that preceded a fight. The others were shouting or laughing or sitting sullenly, malevolently bored. Crab's heart pounded. If a fight started he would be obliged to break it up. What if they turned on him? He shouted as loud as he could, calling on them all to sit down and be quiet.

They ignored him. At that precise moment one of the boys slammed his forehead into the face of other and the class exploded. Crab clutched the edge of his desk. What should he do? What *could* he do? He was the teacher, the adult, the authority in this classroom. Come on. Think. What should I do?

He did what crabs always do. He contracted with his most natural reflex and retreated into his shell. He picked up the chalk and turned to the blackboard and started to talk through the lesson. He tried to close all awareness into a tight envelope of immediate existence, but the sounds of the fight and the shouting of the class sparked and flashed and spun within his head as a maelstrom of colours. He kept talking. He wrote on the board even though he had his eyes screwed tight shut, which did nothing to abate the firestorm in his visual cortex. A silver shape, large, and jagged and blinding, sliced through all the other colours: MacDairmid's voice was raised almost to a scream.

"What in God's name is going on here?"

Crab turned. MacDairmid stood, Atlantean, arms outstretched, holding two bloodied boys at arm's length, by their collars. He stared directly at Crab: his bellowed question had been intended for him, not for the class.

Crab stood mute. Still. Trying to persuade predators he was a stone or an insignificant bump in the sand. He looked out over the sea of hating faces. Near the back of the class, adrift on the Ocean of Contempt, Crab caught sight of a head like his own. Crab-red hair atop a pale, freckled face. Alone. Stranded. Still and startled, like him, in the heaving sea of adolescent faces. The new boy. The boy with synaesthesia.

Bennett.

Another Crab destined for the same sad sand.