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On John Haines

Sam Hamill

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careful pace which the poems themselves suggest—that is the kind of book Madeline DeFrees has written.

Lex Runciman

In A Dusty Light

John Haines

The Graywolf Press

P.O. Box 142

Port Townsend, WA 98368

\$5, paper

It is frequently noted that poetry begins in silence. It is altogether too frequently noted, especially in Schools of Writing, that the silences between words and between lines in a poem become “luminous.” In the poetry of John Haines, however, the silences are indeed luminous. If there is a mantle of “inhumanism” to be passed from the poetry of Robinson Jeffers, it must go to Haines. In his best poetry, there is not so much *people*, as evidence *of* people. His poetry chronicles geography, inner as well as outer.

HOMESTEAD

I.

It is nearly thirty years
since I came over Richardson Hill
to pitch a bundle of boards
in the dark, light my fire
and stir with a spoon
old beans in a blackened pot.

. . .

The land gave up its meaning slowly, . . .

The “I” of Haines’s poetry is never intrusive. His poetry appears to be heard at a volume slightly below the murmur, and it is never himself to which he calls attention, but to the details of living, the ash, the spark, the small steady flame at the center of being. His poetry is a gentle prodding, reminding us of the balance of natural things, the futility of avarice, that “the land will not forgive us” our plundering.

The past returns in the lightning
of horses' manes, iron shoes
in the idleness of men who circle
the night with their sliding ropes.

Everything we have known for so long,
a house at ease, a calm street
to walk on, and a sunset
in which the fire means us no harm . . .

Rolling back from the blocked summit
like an uncoupled train
with no hand on the brake,
gathering speed in the dark
on the mountain grade.

In a Dusty Light also demonstrates Haines's ability to extend his range beyond the poetry of *Winter News*, *The Stone Harp*, and *Leaves And Ashes*. In two poems-in-sequence, *The Homestead*, and *News From the Glacier*, he sustains a poetic and explores it, mines it.

. . . We are awake
in our own desolate time—

clotheslines whipping the air
with sleeves and pockets,
little fists of plastic bags
beating the stony ground.

There are no tricks in these poems, no flashes of lyrical brilliance, no parade of wit nor self-proclaimed intelligence. Just fine notes from an active life of constant meditation, direct statement of disciplined observation. As he says in *Alive in the World*:

. . .
afternoon disappears into evening,
full of ghosts, torn spirits
in the wind, crying to be seen . . .

Trees of the earth underfoot,
what all of us walk on,
shatter and pass through,
going blindly into our houses.

This is not the kind of poetry adored by critics and professors. It is not eminently teachable. It requires no vast body of footnotes. It is

real poetry, the music of a living language doing the job of mending the spirit, of teaching by enchanting.

Sam Hamill

Fire in the Bushes

Patrick Todd

Clearwater

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\$3.50, paper

If every poem is of necessity a recollection, then Todd's technique goes a long way toward shortening that gap between what is seen and its notation. This is not to suggest that he opposes himself to memory; rather, he seems more interested in the crystallization of it within an instant, in realizing in the poem the meeting point of a thousand crossed lines:

COUNTRY WEDDING

All nervous in country lace the bride
rode down the mountain with her father . . .
wagon reins springing easy in the early sun
Fifty mums banked the church walls white
Thick cream candles
The groom sat mute for the stiff picture
Both hands closed big as hammers

Women owned this time round the holy cake
The old fathers . . . faces puffed red
from years of whiskey and the blazing wheat
waited out weddings like a funeral
Even the sleepy minister hated circles
of screaming kids and spotted
a yellow toy he'd love to crush

Gone the bride in white lace
whose wedding moon lit up a long lazy s
of geese over McGuinnigan's pond