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On David Long

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REVIEWS

Early Returns

David Long

Jawbone Press (1981)

Seattle, Washington

David Long's first book of poems, *Early Returns*, contains some of the most beautiful lyrics I've read in a long time. I hesitate to write beautiful because Frost once said that a writer can only use that word twice. I've just filled the quota. Most of the poems here are autobiographical, but their sentiment is never pushed too far. They are held together by Long's commitment to the landscape, by his ear and by his use of craft. Marvin Bell in a recent issue of *Poetry* praises those contemporary poems which are "reeking of the human and the physical." Long's work deserves that same praise. Indeed, the first poem of the book, "Northeast," sets this tone.

I was ten & lonesome
at the end of summer when storms
came out of there
failed hurricanes doubling back
in the North Atlantic
driving across Newfoundland.
Suddenly my father was home.

We went in our mac coats
into the rain, strung guy wires
softened with rubber hose
on the young maples. I could
stand leaning into the wind
nothing holding me up.

That day our fields turned blue
we wedged the 2 x 4s hard
against the bedroom windows
while a seam under the eaves
caught the fury of air

again & again, moaning
like our town's civil defense.

Then a big hardwood
we had no idea was hollow
worked loose & splayed across the road
roots twitching like field mice
in the northeast wind. Later

the storm's mauled eye
paused over us
& before the volunteers
with chainsaws came
before the sky moved again
we stood together on the soaking earth
new quiet rising
in the country between us.

His careful, exact eye, like the eye of the best snooker player I know, seldom misses. "Roots twitching like field mice" is a tremendous focusing detail that mimes the storm's fury. The poem ends with a solitude similar to that with which it began: "new quiet rising/ in the country between us." But we know the experience has changed the young boy, and the space separating the father and son is where the poet will establish his own voice.

"To Danny," the strongest poem in the first section, addresses a friend at one time important in the poet's life. I say at one time because the poem ends, "Today I breathe you, I dream you,/ you fill me like my own leaving/ I'm not afraid to let you go." For Long to sound this confident, he has had to learn who he is, and this self-definition is painful. I quote from the middle stanzas:

Why would I tell you: *go easy?*

Why is any change dry heaves?
That winter you & I hiked
through snow up to our cold crotches

& you showed me the crater
on the shadow side of Mt. Watatic
you'd dug for a tipi

for spreading out the bundle of your life.
I saw the nicked arms
of the blue juniper unfolding in dusk.

I wanted to shout & kiss your beard
but I did a worse thing.
I gave you advice. I could die.

Not a poem easily written, it demonstrates the necessity of change, solitude, and the certain amount of "leaving" the poet must go through to write: themes that run throughout the book. Long constantly moves between a wilderness of self and the important lives he must share. "What a man sees alone should be returned/ to the ring of light where the families sing/ & smoke rises to the stars in a single glowing/ braid."

Long is a political poet in the sense that Levine notes in his interview with Studs Turkel: ". . . a political poet is one who doesn't necessarily tell people how to vote or how to think and what specific attitudes they should have, but . . . who deals with the political facts of our lives, . . ." Long writes in the poem whose title quotes José Hierro, "To Work Because What Remains Of You Tomorrow May Be Fire Instead Of Wood."

I come home distrusting the placid
sheen on our streets. Even the defenseless

drunk duck-stepping from the VFW has nothing
to fear.

Though the poet goes on to recall how he watched with friends the draft

lottery on television and how he accepted the easy rhetoric of the sixties, he ends by looking hard at his solitary response to the political climate, a response molded from honesty and experience.

From my open doorway I smell the coming storm.
I know it never ended. My house tomorrow

must be as clean & ready as cordwood
and I must honor the fiery vocabulary of example.

I admire in a first book a poet's recognition of literary forms. Included in this collection are a sonnet with four stanzas of terza rima and a couplet, and poems written in octaves, quatrains, unrhymed tercets and couplets. The sestina titled "You Don't Know Who To Thank" is altered in the sixth stanza by adding a seventh line, and the envoy also has one extra line. I think he earns the right to change this form, in the way that each new generation of poets must find in the old forms, its new forms.

David Long's book is no small achievement. Throughout, the poems appear to have been written effortlessly, a testament to the poet's craft. And though a full third of the poems are written in more or less conventional forms their craft rarely upstages the poet's work of exploring his soul — his most important task. His letter poem to Ed Harkness concludes, "The ears are blessed/ & twist in & in forever. Don't you forget it./ Love, David."

Jack Heflin