

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 17 *CutBank* 17

Article 32

Fall 1981

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Recommended Citation

Heflin, Jack (1981) "On Rich Ives," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 17 , Article 32.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss17/32>

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Notes From The Water Journals

Rich Ives

Confluence Press (1980)

Lewiston, Idaho

Many contemporary poets write about animals as a way of talking about the loss of wilderness in their lives, or as a way of avoiding self-consciousness. Rich Ives is comfortable in writing about this other landscape, and when he comes back into his personal reality he knows he will have been something else. Larry Levis in his essay "Notes On The Gazer Within" thinks that "the muteness or silence of the animal equals that of the poet. Perhaps there is some secret similarity between the species." Whether Ives is writing about animals, distant ancestors, or the woodcarver, he wants to lessen the distance that separates him from the landscape of wilderness.

With the opening image in the first poem "Inheritance," the division which exists between man and nature begins to break down: "Early each morning/ the last loyal farm animal/ comes in through the kitchen window." Like Whitman, like Snyder, Ives is able to sympathize with all living things, and, throughout the book, he tries to articulate that sympathy which resides at the border of consciousness. His journey is both outward into nature and inward into the mythical realms of the interior self. "I turn, but I am not where I should be . . . Only the barn is where it belongs,/ whistling in the dry wind,/ and the farmhouse, waiting."

One of the best poems in the book illustrates how myth is restored when consciousness and wilderness come together. I quote the last five stanzas from "Songs Of The New Body."

There is a song of fire
that frees the breath of plants,
a death song of animals
that brings their bodies back again
remembering sunlight and substance
and how they came to be held

in their own stomachs.

There is a song of air
sitting quietly on the bed of the tongue,
listening to the wind, waiting
and planning the one good thing
it will say in the lives of the blood.

There is a song of earth
that fills the distances with *Here, Here*
and *Remember this*, a steady chant, a hum
in the delicate wires of wheat.

*The rocks I open with slow fingers
become dark loam calling to roots.
I begin by palming the seeds.
I have a handshake that grows
its own neighbors. I have a foot
that steadies the other side of footprints.*

There is a song of change
that has lost its memory.
Everything will be living differently.
Everything will be living.

One of the major themes in the book is that the real loss of the 20th century is a loss of feeling. For the poet to write, he must restore his senses. Ives moves intuitively back to the primitive, back to wilderness. The following piece is taken from "Spain, 1961."

I have seen things floating
to which I was once attached.
I have hoisted the flag
of the legions of lost sheep.

I have kept nothing but my body's reason,

simple as breath,
and it answers no other questions.

As if fatigued with rational discord, Ives greets the supreme freedom of the body's senses.

Always the striking image derives its power not from rational thought but from the distance between the two objects or ideas described. Ives does this wonderfully throughout the book as in "an old man with a lantern/ digs up the darkness/ and drops its sleeping eyes/ in an old leather pouch," or "A window opens at the end of my hands." The effect of these images is often hermetic, they do not allow themselves to be discussed rationally. They exist. Their use supports the lost connection between man and nature.

Stylistically, Ives combines this surreal imagery with a prosaic language, playing the unusualness or excitement of the former off the ordinary quality of the latter. When this technique works the reader shares the mystery of the forgotten lives or selves that the poet recreates. At times the poet's ear falters, lessening the impact of the poetry. The heavy-handed sound patterns in "A small turbulence of terns/ hovers," detract from the powerful image that follows, "skimming the changing surface for the small/ survivals it carries like breathing coins."

Notes From The Water Journals is an intelligent, mysterious book. Throughout, I'm impressed by the ease with which Ives enters other realities: "Still there are times I come upon them alone/ and the circling hunger moves in a single animal./ Standing deep in my human tracks I take aim and fire,/ falling in the snow as the bullet enters . . . and a part of me moves out from the change,/ turning four-footed to the hills in search of family."

Jack Heflin