

Introduction to John Haines: Descent
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This volume bears witness to John Haines's position as a true man of letters. The essays, reviews, chronicles, memoirs, comments and poems (spanning over four decades) testify to the breadth and depth of his concerns. The life—rooted for decades in Alaska—and the writing are bound together inextricably. Haines speaks for the land and the land speaks to Haines. It is that simple and that complex, that joyful and that rueful.

Increasingly, we can see that the premise of any meaningful discourse about anything first must take into account life on earth—that which sustains and that which endangers. This might seem self-evident to anyone at any time but life on earth tends to be the first thing that civilization takes for granted. There have been cities to build, religions to elaborate, sciences to discover, technologies to hone and arts to create. The premise has been that the earth will take care of itself and, indeed, it will. How human beings are connected with this caring is another question and one that looms larger every day. To live on the earth as something more than a user is a charge that has occupied Haines's days and works.

Haines is foremost a poet, one for whom poetry is the primal call that connects language with the earth. To a world that looks at the earth as a resource and that views poetry as a medium distinguished primarily by stylistic ticks—two views that go hand in deadening hand—a voice such as Haines's may appear beside the point. This would be a serious misapprehension; Haines's regard for the connections between the earth and poetry stems from the chthonic impulses that gave birth to poetry to begin with, that elemental rapture of physical spirit.

This is not to make him a shaman or any such figure. Romanticizing older cultures is of no interest to him nor is arrogating spiritual insight that must be dearly and slowly won. What interests Haines throughout the various modes represented in this volume is to clear away the numerous confusing, self-justifying and downright mendacious vapors that surround various human projects—be it drilling for oil or writing poems. He is a critic in the pure sense—a truth teller who has no use for relativism. As he puts it, “A river is more than water flowing.” It takes a poet to say that, one whose voice is unimpeded by the calculations that drive corporate pragmatism, to say nothing of greed.

The work of poetry is to restore the depths of meaning to language. For Haines that depth emanates from our living on earth. We are part of the great family of dependent creatures. The poet's responsibilities—a topic of great importance to Haines and one to which this volume bears eloquent testimony—have little to do with the buzzing literary world. Rather they are the responsibilities of one who treasures language and inspiration and who seeks to find the means to help us find the fullness that we know is in each moment of our lives on this planet whose richness is literally incredible. They are the responsibilities of one who realizes that poetry is much more than a vocal decoration. In its rapt attentiveness poetry ever courts wisdom.

In the meantime we stumble along and Haines is unsparing about those stumbles. He has never courted favor but he has never constructed an armor from his ideals. I think of all those days and nights in that homestead south of Fairbanks, of the profound dwelling that he did and that took such a deep hold in him. We come and go on the face of the earth—that is our fate but how we do it is everything. In the pieces collected herein—pieces taken from the pages of newspapers and literary journals, pieces that were forewords to books and talks to conferences—Haines’s voice is true and clear. It is an intensely American voice in the sense that it insists we can be connected to the land in ways that may redeem and vivify us. It insists that the place of poetry is central not peripheral. It is rooted in memories that come from one man’s life and memories that are the dream life of the earth. If, as I believe, the poets who will endure are the poets who have something genuine to impart to us, then Haines is one who will endure. This volume adds to the trove that he has bequeathed us.