

## Fables & Distances

### A Conversation With Alaska Writer

John Haines

by John A. Murray

“What’s the best book about Alaska? ... *Winter News*, I say, by John Haines—pure poetry; and by ‘pure’ I mean poetry about ordinary things, about the great weather, about daily living experience.”

—Edward Abbey, “Gather at the River,” in *Beyond the Wall* (1984)

Over the last two decades, one of John Haines’ strongest literary advocates has been Dana Gioia, who is currently head of the National Endowment for the Arts. Gioia wrote the introduction to John Haines’ *New Poems: 1980-1988* and, more recently, the preface for the critical retrospective *A Gradual Twilight: An Appreciation of John Haines*. In the latter, Gioia observed, “In a literary age characterized by middle-class professionalism and institutional security, especially among academic writers, Haines reminds one of the deep, historical connections between the artistic vocation and voluntary poverty. ... By spiritual necessity the prophetic writer must stand apart from his or her milieu and renounce the compromises that solicit its rewards. Renunciation, sacrifice and dedication ... [permit] the sort of freedom, candor and purity that characterize Haines’ work. In a literary era dominated by institutional life, he stands out as both a singular and exemplary figure.”

Haines, in this context, is a distinct presence in the modern age of poetry. He moved to the territory of Alaska in 1947, homesteaded a 160-acre plot near Fairbanks, and then proceeded to publish two dozen works of poetry and nonfiction prose, receive two Guggenheim Fellowships, and accumulate numerous other academic and creative awards. His works of poetry include *Winter News* and *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer*. His prose works include the essay collection *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire* and the compendium *Fables and Distances*. The entire career of John Haines, who is now in his 80th year, may be viewed as an extended conversation with the northern landscape, as inspired by the muses of solitude, longing, and recollection.

How will the lifework of John Haines be regarded by scholars and lovers of fine literature a century from now? Haines will likely be acknowledged as the first writer of stature to emerge from Alaska. He will probably be placed among the modern American poets of nature, including Robinson Jeffers, William Carlos Williams, Theodore Roethke, Gary Snyder, and W.S. Merwin. Haines may also be seen as an independent truth-teller in the tradition of Whitman and Thoreau. Above all, he will be honored as a craftsman of great personal

integrity who never wavered in his fealty to place and fidelity to excellence. Gioia expressed the appeal of the venerated Alaskan icon in the following way: “Living too long in the flatlands of contemporary literary culture, we often forget that the mountains exist. They seem so impossibly distant and formidable. But despite our neglect, they remain and allow a writer brave and hardy enough remarkable perspectives. Whether or not his own age acknowledges the fact, Haines is such a writer.”

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *Could you tell us a little about your beginnings: where you grew up, your family, and when you began writing?*

**John Haines:** As the son of a career navy officer, I was moved from place to place as my father was positioned on shore duty or at sea, mainly in the Pacific. We lived in California, Hawaii, the state of Washington, New England, and Washington, D.C. I have written of these years in one essay or another. My father was a reader, and he read to me at an early age from Rudyard Kipling, Longfellow, Thoreau, and many other writers I no longer remember. But he instilled in me a deep regard for words, for language,

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and for poetry as well as for stories in prose. It did not occur to me at the time that I might write, become a writer. I had, on the other hand, an early instinct for making things: for wood carving, making model airplanes and model sailing ships. In this also my father was a help, showing me how to use the tools and so forth. But it was not until my junior year in high school that I felt an early and serious interest in poetry. We were given to read Chaucer in Middle English, and I fell in love with that verse, the language, its cadence and rhyming.

During the war, while at sea in the south-central Pacific, I wrote an occasional verse to amuse myself and some of my shipmates. I did not have at this time any idea that I might one day devote my life to this strange craft and art. My instincts following discharge from the navy were to begin my art studies in Washington. It was not until my first winter at my homestead in Alaska that I began seriously to write.

**TBR:** *When not teaching, what is your life like on a daily basis?*

**JH:** Depending on where I am and in what immediate circumstances, and aside from the daily household chores, I will be reading, perhaps making notes for something I plan to write, and writing: working at my typewriter, revising an essay or a poem, working on another draft of something in progress. I do spend a lot of time corresponding with friends and other writers; I’m a letter writer, for sure. If I am teaching, I will spend some time with students out of class, simply visiting and trading observations on various topics, current politics, and the art itself. During the homestead years, so much of my time and energy was given to the outdoor work, it was difficult to find

time for the reading and writing I wanted to do. But the life then enriched the writing in ways I was not always aware of but remain deeply grateful for.

**TBR:** Which do you prefer to write, prose or poetry?

**JH:** I have no preference at this time. For many years I thought that poetry was the one means of writing available to me, and it did not occur to me that I might write prose: criticism, book reviews, etc. I was afraid that if I began writing prose, I might not be able to return to poetry, to verse. This of course proved to be untrue, but it required a good deal of thought and practice for me to resolve the conflict. At times in fact the prose, though written in sentences and paragraphs, becomes a form of poetry, and I would cite parts of my essay "Days in the Field" as an example of this.

**TBR:** Whom have you been reading recently?

**JH:** I have been reading the Austrian writer Joseph Roth, his novel *The Radetzky March*, a major work. And also his journalist work in the years before World War II, and his collected stories. I've also recently read a book of the last days of the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva and the ordeal she went through on returning to Stalinist Russia after some years in Paris, and which led to her suicide in 1941. But I also read much journalist work in one or another paper or magazine: the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Guardian Weekly*, and too much of our local daily newspapers, alas. My focus at the moment is on the German socialist figure Rosa Luxemburg, whose life and work I deeply admire. I wish we had her with us at this time; we need her or someone like her.

**TBR:** What advice would you have for someone just starting out as a writer?

**JH:** My advice—aside from the choices one must make as to earning a living, working at whatever most attracts one or is in some way imposed on one—is to read, as William Carlos Williams wrote to me many years ago: "Read, read, read ... all the writers whose work you admire, and some you do not admire." But beyond that, participation in the world of people and work, and I mean that basic work we all must do in order to live, and which our modern facilities appear to make so much easier than it once was. There are no rules in this, but I think of the life of a family doctor like Williams, the varied experience of Eliot as teacher, editor, or bank clerk and the lives of so many writers elsewhere, poets who chose work in government, law, and diplomacy. And of course there is always the teaching that one may choose to do. But as I say, there are no rules in this; one must move by instinct and hope for the best.

**TBR:** What is your view of creative writing programs?

**JH:** I have recently read two very good and insightful articles on this issue: one by Neal Bowers, "A Hope for Poetry," in the Summer 2003 issue of *Sewanee Review*, and the other by David Alpaugh in an issue of *Poets & Writers* last year. Both of these take up the problem of the professionalization of poetry, the all-too-dominant presence of the M.F.A. system, the values the programs instill in so many candidates, the job market, which has rightly been labeled "po-biz." It is for me a very mixed business. I have enjoyed the time I have spent teaching in a number of programs over the years, and have been rewarded in doing so with many good friends among former students, and, needless to say, a decent if intermittent salary. But there are far too many writing programs now, and their influence has become in many respects a negative one, as an adjunct of the corporate system. We have lost that independent spirit so characteristic of poets in the past, as uncertain as their livelihoods may have been. Too many programs, too many graduates and emerging poets who tend to form a sort of clique. But others have written on this, Dana Gioia especially, with considerable insight. I remain something of a survivor from the older tradition of independence, often at risk as to a means of living, but free to write and to speak without fear of academic reprisal or loss of tenure.

#### BOOKS BY JOHN HAINES

##### Poetry

*Dreamer: Collected Poems*

(Graywolf, 1993)

*New Poems: 1980-1988*

(Story Line Press, 1988)

*The Owl in the Mask of the Winter News*

(Wesleyan University, 1966)

##### Memoir

*The Stars, the Snow, the Fire: Twenty-five Years in the Northern Wilderness*

(Graywolf, 1989)

##### Prose

*Fables and Distances:*

*New and Selected Essays*

(Graywolf, 1996)

*About John Haines*

*A Gradual Twilight: An*

*Appreciation of John Haines*

Edited by Steven B. Rogers

(CavanKerry Press, 2003)

*The Wilderness of Vision: On the Poetry of John Haines*

by Kevin Bezner & Kevin Walzer

(Story Line Press, 1996)

**TBR:** What is your assessment of the current state of the publishing world?

**JH:** Closely related to this, and all too apparent at this time, is the reluctance of poets to speak out in that public voice once considered essential in a poet. It is difficult to imagine a Yeats or a Pope or a Dryden remaining silent on our current political situation, the war in Iraq and so much else. Our poets are confined to writing of their personal life, or of nothing at all in a verse that lacks that essential voice once common in our poets. Academic practice, with its search for tenure, has pretty well silenced that older voice. This is a loss, not only to poetry but to our common life generally. There are of course exceptions to this and, most prominently, Wendell Berry on occasion. A recent poem of his, "Look Out," has made a deep impression on me, something we badly need at this time. But all of this is a complicated issue, not merely a literary one, and not easily resolved.

**TBR:** Could you tell us a little about your major influences as a poet?

**JH:** There are many, and not necessarily literary influences, though these also are many. My years of art study early in my life had their influence and have remained so. Many of my

later poems have in one way or another returned to the art to which I was attracted when still young and very involved with painting and sculpture. And there is the life I have lived, most importantly the years given to the homestead life during the 1950s and 1960s. Those years were formative in many ways. They taught me to focus on the task at hand, in which the physical translated to the pen and paper, to thought, and to words—the physical act of composing the lines of a poem. And there were, still are of course, the poets I read and continue to read, their example and success; and they are too many to list. But certainly there were Eliot, Williams, Pound, Stevens; an early influence, Dylan Thomas; and the example of many writers of prose, the novelists like Hermann Broch, Thomas Mann, Jean Giono, Robert Musil; the Scottish poet and critic Edwin Muir.

**TBR:** *What do you think about the conventional formulation of “the burden of the past”? How does the literary past affect you as a living writer?*

**JH:** I do not see the past as a burden—far from it. The literary past is in many respects part of an inheritance from which we must draw our examples, our potentials. I cannot imagine my own life as a writer and poet without the work I have read and learned from, continue to learn from. The past, its success and example, may appear to be a barrier only to those who lack the strength to absorb the lessons in that older work and go on to forge something new that will deepen and enlarge the tradition we must all in one way or another come to terms with and be a part of if we are lucky. It was, initially, the example of poets like Eliot, Pound, and Williams that spurred me to write in a certain way. And then came the example of classical Chinese, in translation of course, that furthered my view of the craft. My early reading in the Spanish moderns and in German poetry also enlarged my sense of what I might achieve in my own writing.

The creative work aside, there are also the many texts in history and philosophy, geology, mythology, and science, the reading of which enlarges one’s sense of context and the place of humanity in that larger earth history of which we are part.

**TBR:** *Do you have an affinity for other writers from the northern latitudes, from Scandinavia, Russia, Canada, and elsewhere? If so, who in particular?*

**JH:** For many years I felt an affinity with Nordic writers, read them and to some extent, perhaps, learned from them. The Norwegian writer Tarjei Vesaas made a major impression on me when I first read him in the late 1970s, and there are, have been, many others. My reading in recent years has ranged elsewhere, but I may for one reason or another return to some of that writing. I must say, however, that I no longer think of myself as a “northern” writer and I believe my poems in recent years have become more solidly rooted in a tradition that is broadly American or European in the widest, most basic sense.

**TBR:** *Do you see poetry as a form of prayer, as an artifact that is something more than secular?*

**JH:** I think my answer to this would be yes, I do at times, often in fact, feel the poem, the potential of it, to be in some way allied to, connected to, that spiritual quality we associate

with prayer, and I’m certain that my early education as a Catholic had considerable influence on this. When as a boy attending Sunday mass I listened to the priest delivering the sermon, I sensed in myself some latent power that might one day find expression in the “word”: that word given to an imagined audience or congregation and which must stand for what we know as truth. I don’t mean to say or imply that when I begin work on a poem or an essay that I am aware of preaching to the multitude, but I do believe that for the true poet and writer there is that potential and underlying motivation. I’m certain that Robinson Jeffers, for example, with his background as the son of a minister, had something of that motivation. His poems are, often enough, sermons for the people whether or not they are prepared to listen, and as Jeffers understood, often enough they do not listen! Yet some do, and they are the readers to whom one will speak and who are waiting, prepared to listen.

**TBR:** *How did your early life as a painter influence you as a writer?*

**JH:** Those years of art study deepened my sense of art in general, and its place in human history, its deep relation to religion, the apparent necessity of it, whether the art is major or merely mediocre. Most importantly, perhaps, it helped sharpen my visual sense of things, of nature: landscapes and the human presence in them. I have had since very young a very keen visual sense. I loved as a child simply looking at things, whether leaves on a tree, light on the water, open fields, dark woods, or shadows. To focus on these as a painter or simply a pen-and-ink illustrator was for me inevitable. And there was also my sense of form, the object itself, which I felt necessary to grasp in some way, to make visible to others. I was attracted to sculpture in part due to the presence or potential of an object I could put my hands to, grasp, and feel. Had I remained with the visual arts, I suspect I would have continued to work in both painting and sculpture, as many artists have done.

During the war I sketched in watercolors and with pen and ink some of what I was witness to in the warships, the many atolls and distant landscapes to be seen there in the Pacific. But I also drew on my memory of landscapes back home, imagining woodlands, birds, and animals—nature, to which I was drawn when young.

**TBR:** *If you could have a conversation with one poet who is no longer living, who would that be and why?*

**JH:** This is an interesting question, one I had not thought of before. There is no “one” poet with whom I can imagine speaking, exchanging views on poetry and related issues. Perhaps because he once had the grace to respond to a letter I wrote him, to meet and talk with William Carlos Williams would be something of a gift, though it might be that he would no longer like what I’ve written as a poet. I would like to have met and spoken with the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, whose work meant a lot to me back in the 1960s, and whose onetime village, Soria, I made a pilgrimage to when I was in Spain in 1977. I could speak to him now of what happened in Spain toward the end of his life, perhaps also of the death of his young wife in Soria, and his later flight from Spain. Among contempo-

aries I would like to talk again with the poet William Stafford, a very dear friend and original writer. We had much in common in our thinking about poetry and so many social issues. A rare man and a good friend.

**TBR:** *What do you look for in a poem that you create? What gives it life and renders it worthy of publication?*

**JH:** This is a complicated matter, though at certain moments it might seem simple enough. There is the language, the form in which one casts it; there is the thought, the intellectual content; and there is the music, the cadence in the speech. There is often an idea, a subject, suggested by something current in the news, let's say, but also brought to attention in my reading, whether in poetry, in fiction, or in nonfiction: the thought and attention of another writer, and the example he or she might set for me. As I've had occasion to note in one essay or another, the thought and direction of a poem may require for me a considerable length of time, sometimes years, as in my "Poem Without Meaning." Despite the title, the poem does, of course, have meaning, though it required of me a long space of time to realize and define. What really matters in the end is that often elusive thing we call "truth": that the poem, the work, testifies to something we have felt to be essential in art and thought.

**TBR:** *Do you think the Far North has replaced the Far West as the new frontier?*

**JH:** I have come to dislike the word "frontier" as it is commonly used. It now seems to me to be outdated, though I was alive to it when younger and when I made my decision to come to Alaska after World War II. It is true, I think, that Alaska in certain respects has replaced the West as the American frontier with all the misunderstandings and abuses that phrase contains. But I think we have outlived most of this in terms of exploration and settlement, exploitation of resources, dislocation of Native people, and so forth, though in certain respects we have not outgrown it, as badly as we need to. The true frontier now exists on another plane, another dimension. We need to learn to accept certain inevitable limits. That is, we cannot grow, expand, or develop indefinitely. We must learn to live within the limits of land and resources, to make of this a true settlement. Wendell Berry has written of this, as well as many others. It now stands at odds with our present industrial dominance, with its mania for expansion and development. But there are increasing signs that some of us, perhaps a growing number of citizens, are coming to terms with this. I do not think there will be any viable future for humankind if we cannot learn to accept certain definable limits.

**TBR:** *What do you think initially drew you to Alaska?*

**JH:** It was, I think, primarily the government's offer of free land to returning war veterans that moved me to come to Alaska. It was in the news at the time and impossible to ignore. I'm not certain what I might have done had not this opportunity been made available. I had always been attracted to the Pacific Northwest, having spent some time on the Olympic Peninsula as a boy in company with my father who also loved those woods and trout streams. But it was the right thing for me to do; I know that, and knew it at the time, an opportunity not likely to occur again. I have more recently thought that were I

to start over again at a younger age, I might emigrate to Scotland or elsewhere in the British Isles, find a small acreage, build a cottage, and settle there, make of it a life in the old pastoral sense of this.

**TBR:** *What do you have to say about what's happened to Alaska in your lifetime?*

**JH:** What is missing now is that older sense of the frontier as it existed in an earlier America and which strongly characterized Alaska when I first knew it. We can no longer pretend that the frontier still exists here, no matter how often the word itself is used or misused. We have to face the fact of a changed character in the North American landscape, and learn to live with that and make the most of it. Or, perhaps we can say in a valid sense that the true frontier lies now in a coming to terms with the limits of land and resources and how we are to deal with this in the decades to come. Others, Wendell Berry most prominently, have written of this with clarity, insight, and conviction. We need now to listen and change our attitudes and our social and political behavior. Here in Alaska, as well as elsewhere, is a major opportunity to correct our past attitudes and behavior. Unfortunately, most of our "leaders" seem unable to grasp this and offer to the general public an example of understanding and renewed policy. We need something better, and we need it now.

**TBR:** *Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions?*

**JH:** The only ambition I now have, if it can be called that, is to finish the work I still have to do, both in prose and verse, that remains unfinished, and perhaps to clarify for myself and my readers what my hopes for poetry are in the years to come. Whether poetry, as we now have it, is up to this is a question not to be decided by me but by those to come who can return poetry to something like its ancient authority: as a voice for humanity in that larger sense we seem to have lost. ■

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