

## REVIEW:

John Haines, *THE STONE HARP* (Wesleyan, 1971)  
65 pp., \$2.00

AFTER READING JOHN HAINES' FIRST BOOK, *Winter News*, I was very curious about what his next book would be like, because as good a book as *Winter News* was, it struck me that its strength also revealed its weaknesses. While the book had an interesting, authentic tone of voice and a very particular sense of reality, it also created a very single-minded vision, and while there were at least a dozen strong poems in the book, there was a kind of sameness about them, almost as though he were writing the same poem over and over again. *The Stone Harp* is a more risky and ambitious book, and generally, I think, a very rewarding one. Haines' concerns have broadened to include the political and the sociological (one of the book's three sections is called "America") and the more overtly prophetic (the last section is called "signs"). What is most interesting about the book, though, is Haines' development of a more powerful and eccentric sense of imagery. When these images work, as they do in the last three stanzas of the title poem, the result is almost eerie.

Now there is all this blood  
flowing into the west,  
ragged holes at the waterline of the sun—  
that ship is sinking.

And the only poet is the wind,  
a drifter  
who walked in from the coast  
with empty pockets.

He stands on the road  
at evening, making a sound  
like a stone harp  
strummed  
by a handful of leaves . . .

Some of the most admirable poems in the book, although not always the most successful, are Haines' political poems, because although he takes on the role of poet-revolutionary, he is always a poet first, a revolutionary second. He dwells in the world of individuals and experience, not ideas and propaganda. He maintains a complex, if frightening, attitude toward political problems, and while he has nothing but contempt for government, he is hopeful about the role art might play in affecting revolutionary change.

There will be many poems written  
in the shape of a grenade—  
one hard piece of metal flying off  
might even topple a government.  
— "A Poem Like a Grenade"

or

Stay in the shade of a chimney.  
Study the facades and window blinds.  
Learn to speak a few words well.  
With a rifle or pen,  
take aim at the state.  
— "From the Rooftops"

But he never loses sight of the plight of the individual. Take, for example, "*The Sweater of Vladimir Ussachevsky*," possibly the strongest poem in the book, which I quote in its entirety.

Facing the wind of the avenues  
one spring evening in New York,  
I wore under my thin jacket  
a sweater given me by the wife  
of a genial Manchurian.

The warmth in that sweater changed  
the indifferent city block by block.  
The buildings were mountains  
that fled as I approached them.

The traffic became sheep and cattle  
milling in muddy pastures.  
I could feel around me the large  
movements of men and horses.

It was spring in Siberia or Mongolia,  
wherever I happened to be.  
Rough but honest voices called to me  
out of that solitude:  
they told me we are all tired  
of this coiling weight,  
the oppression of a long winter;  
that it was time to renew our life,  
burn the expired contracts,  
elect new governments.

The old Imperial sun has set,  
and I must write a poem to the Emperor.  
I shall speak it like the man  
I should be, an inhabitant of the frontier,  
clad in sweat-darkened wool,  
my face stained by wind and smoke.

Surely the Emperor and his court  
will want to know what a fine  
and generous revolution begins tomorrow  
in one of his remote provinces . . .

Some of Haines' sociological poems are a little too easy, like  
"the Color" which is described as "simply a dark,/laboring mass,"  
but which frightened people so much

They all drew back  
into themselves,  
and immediately  
began building walls.

Or they have moments of sentimentality, or embarrassing romanticism:

Like my own heart, a flower  
folded in upon itself,  
bitterly dreaming,  
it wore brightly the color  
of blood and rebellion.

— “In the Middle of America”

But the best of them maintain an originality of perception that is the major strength of the book:

At four in the afternoon,  
My candle is only  
a shadow on a yellow bowl—  
a narrow sun, but it reddens

a dish towel  
hanging in its wooden harbor  
like a memory of drying sails.

— “The Kitchen”

The poems in the other sections are also mixed, mirroring most of the same strengths and weaknesses already discussed, occasionally slipping into formula, describing the moon several different ways, abusing “the darkness” or favorite surrealistic objects of experience like stones or the stars or ashes. But *The Stone Harp* is an important book, because while it retains the same unity of vision we experienced in *Winter News* (a sense of the emptiness and cruelty of existence and a reverence for human suffering) there is also an added dimension to this book, the heightened consciousness of the variety and complexity of human experience. And it is this added dimension that seems to have given Haines a powerful way of seeing the world, and seems to have opened up a new world for him to see.

— IRA SADOFF