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The Right Combination

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THE RIGHT COMBINATION

Dick Hugo knew the power of right combinations. Years ago, in his poetry workshop at the University of Montana, I too learned the importance of associations. An object clarifies an idea or gives a person heart. Rivers go with towns. A life runs out where the last house breaks the current. A lunker trout is love that always gets away. When I left his workshops to teach seventh grade in a small Highline school—much to his disgust—I found out the worth of other associations and how they change. By spring, snowballs and paper airplanes gave way to squirt guns and water balloons. The loneliness of an old farming town fit any Hugo poem. Some things just go together. No explanation needed, as Dick would say from behind the wheel of his long yellow Buick convertible.

I'm certain Dick would link that hulk of a Buick with a young and preferably blonde co-ed sitting opposite the driver's side. And if she looked longingly at him as he drove through Missoula streets, her hair catching the sun, the combination clicked. For me, the vision was complete, even without the girl or a hitchhiker he'd picked up for company, whenever he pulled up in front of my house in Butte for lunch and a visit. Not always on Sunday, but usually on a whim, he'd stop on his way to fish the Jefferson or find a dying town to build a poem on. And what a sense of timing. I wonder if he knew how much I needed old friends and old days. Then the visits stopped. I hadn't seen him in over a year. My letters went unanswered. One June morning, I looked out the window and saw a familiar yellow car, a thinner Dick Hugo walking to my door. There were too many questions to answer at once. Where have you been? What have you been doing? How did you lose all that weight? I must have sounded hysterical.

"I lost it all in Iowa," he said. "I completely broke down and had to leave the chair. I went to Seattle for treatment. My God, I ran up two thousand dollars in phone bills. I was calling everyone I knew."

A vision returned of his kitchen at one a.m., the end of a party and a bottle of Jim Beam. Dick was trying to call Italy but couldn't remember how to say seven in Italian.

“Did I call you from Iowa?” he asked.

“No, Dick,” I said.

“Well then you and Mao Tse-tung are the only two people I didn’t call.”

The same tactful Dick. If he’d left you out, you were in noble company.

No booze and a wonderful marriage made Dick a happier man. It was good to have him back. Then his health began to fail. He had a lung removed and was facing a hard recovery. I drove to Missoula to visit him and we had lunch at the kitchen table in his house on Wylie. He looked out the window at my little yellow Mustang.

“That’s a nice car,” he said. “I’ve been driving that Comet out there. Ripley wrecked my Buick. She wasn’t hurt, thank God.”

I recognized the tone of his voice. It went with strong lines in weak poems.

“Small cars are nice,” I said.

“Yeah, but you have to steer them and everything,” he said. “They’re not like big cars. You just whisper your destination to the engine—*Great Falls*—and hang on.” The spark returned to his eyes. “Do you remember that redhead in the fall workshop, you know, the one with the heavy thighs . . . ?”

It’s spring again in Missoula and Dick would say it’s time for all old poets to come home. I’m back trying to make the right combinations but some things just aren’t the same. Big cars aren’t in style any more. They’re unpatriotic, selfish. They pay no mind to a failing ecology and posterity. They’re downright unclean. But I saw a ’62 Chevy convertible the other day, not quite as regal as a Buick. Its blue metallic finish had oxidized to flat steel gray. There was a blonde girl gazing at the young man driving. With her hand on his shoulder, he looked as if the world was his. I made a quick association—the taste of rain, love, and whiskey, with a good tailwind and time to spare. No explanation needed. Everything fit.