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Making Sure (Once Again) It Goes On

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The day was probably cloudy. Little did I know how fateful the moment was, thirty years ago, in the fall of 1962, on a flight of stairs at Portland State University where I was a first-year instructor, following in Richard Hugo's wake on the way to his poetry reading. I overheard a student behind me say, "He doesn't look like a poet," and I looked at him and agreed, remembering from recent readings Robert Frost and Stephen Spender, all splendid white hair and solid, thinking also of Leroi Jones (not yet Amiri Baraka) and not yet thinking of Carolyn Kizer or Adrienne Rich because I had not yet heard a woman poet give a reading.

I remember the fateful moment, but I can no longer visualize the staircase nor the young woman who thought she knew what real poets look like. Nor can I be sure my memory of a wide back in a denim jacket, of short brown hair and a trail of uproarious laughter dates from that moment or from all the others which were—surprisingly—to follow. I can be sure that my notion of what "poets" look like was never so clear again.

Hugo would later tell his own "you don't look like a poet" story: In a bar, a guy on the next stool asks, by way of making conversation, "What do you do?"

"I'm a poet," Dick replies. The guy turns away, looks into his beer. Silence.

"I'm a truck driver," Dick says after a bit.

"I thought so," the guy says. "You don't look like a poet."

Not long ago I read that the best way to forget something is to repeat it. It sounds crazy, but my superimposed memories of Richard Hugo—colleague, friend, neighbor—have blurred that

early reading from *A Run of Jacks*, his first book. The only poets I had yet heard wrote of "universal" things—that is to say, things British or Eastern or otherwise remote from the green and cloudy region I called home. From Hugo, I remember fish and the strange familiar names of our region, the roaring lilt of his voice, and an elation that the ordinary counted and persisted. Subjects that might depress soared on those words, in that voice. I ignored the fact that he worked for Boeing. What I heard was poetry that sounded like my world, my language.

Poets became a part of my lived world. I finished my Ph.D., moved to Missoula to teach Comparative Literature at the University of Montana, and married a Hugo student and poet. A Ripley Schemm moved back to her native Montana, taught composition in the Forestry school, turned out to have worked on Hugo's first book at the University of Minnesota Press. She and Hugo were married in 1974. Professor and poet Warren Carrier, who had arranged the reading in Portland, became head of UM's English department, started up the MFA degree and hired Hugo.

In the giddy early days of the new program, Hugo could never believe his good fortune as students turned in poems that sent him up and down the hall saying, "Listen to this, isn't this great?" The colleagues—James Lee Burke, Earl Ganz, Bill Kittredge, James Crumley, Madeline DeFrees. The MFA students—James Welch, Rick DeMarinis, Ed Lahey, Roberta Hill, Elizabeth Libbey, Quinton Duval, David Long, Neil McMahon.

Most of all, I remember his reading in the lovely old theater in Main Hall, his triumphant reading in May of 1979 after his return from that Guggenheim year on the Isle of Skye with Ripley and stepdaughter, Melissa. He was at the peak of his powers, and happy. That night he was triumphant. He read that title poem,

"The Right Madness on Skye" :

> Now I'm dead, load what's left on the wagon
> and have the oxen move on. Tell absentee landlord driver,
> Harry of Nothingham, slow. I want my last minutes on earth
> filled with this island. For a long time
> my days were nothing. My remarkable late surge
> I attribute to fanciful chefs: clouds in the salad.
> My dramatic reversal of fate insists on this will
> read aloud in this poem this day of my death.
> Have the oxen move on. Tell Harry of Nothingham, slow.

Do I remember his concluding with a triumphant upward jab of his fist and a big laugh—or do I import that gesture from other readings? Do I remember a tide of delighted applause? I wish we could squeeze out of the oak dining table at 2407 Wylie Street all the stories and poems and poetics and merriment that transpired there in those eight happiest years of his life. A night, for example, in June 1980, when poets Madeline DeFrees, Paul Zarzyski, David Steingass and Jonathan Holden (also a critic) sat with Jim, Dick, Ripley and I—all of us so delighted to see one another that conversations vibrated like taut strings across the table, news of new poems and reading trips—and Holden's professional questions for the book he was writing.

The excitement, that was it. Nothing in those years was more exciting than poetry. Though creative writing had been taught at UM since 1919, the MFA program had just started up and was thriving, and President Carter invited Hugo to the White House. And the president of the university paid his way. It's hard to remember how vibrant the culture of this country was before these

twelve Reagan-Bush neoconservative years took their toll, now that so much effort has to go into defending the very existence of the arts.

It was nothing particularly grand, either, the excitement of those days, though the stories passed from one generation of students to the next have become legend. That he was uproarious, intimidating, vulnerable. Too heavy. He drank and smoked and ate too much ice cream. Great storyteller. Self-pitying. Lover of baseball. Depressed. All true. All that and more. A man who loved poetry and playing softball, who loved fishing and jazz and big cars and big blonds.

Richard Hugo taught at UM from 1964 until his death in October 1982. He always felt lucky to be teaching. Over his desk hung the etching from 1614 Boren Avenue in Seattle, saved from the wreckers, the trigger for the poem of the same name. On his desk, a few well-sharpened No. 2 pencils, but not the cup full of them one remembers from *Kicking the Loose Gravel Home*, Annick Smith's film of Hugo's life and work. He'd slit his mail open with a shiny letter opener, deftly, from the left because he was left-handed, with the same tender efficiency as he cleaned fish. I would overhear him talking with students. *Take someone through the poem. Put a crocodile in it.* Solicitous. Frowning. Always a bit amazed that they came to him with their concerns. I think he never knew how good he was, how he got students to write good poems. His essays in *The Triggering Town* both show how he did it and how uncertain he was about everything except his love for poetry.

As I write, the first *CutBank* lies on the desk before me. Editor: Bill Kittredge. Managing Editor: David Long. A solid 120 pages.

Whatever their strong ambitions, Bill and David didn't start this fine magazine with their eyes on its future collectiblity. Their eyes were on strong writers: Gildner, Stafford, Carver, Plumly. All their fine works still lay ahead of them.

Twenty years have passed. The University is turning 100. Since 1985, I have run the Creative Writing program with the help of Patricia Goedicke, Greg Pape, Bill Kittredge, Earl Ganz and numerous part-timers. This is *CutBank 40: Crossing the Divide*, a double issue of writers from Alcosser to Zarzyski. The excitement goes on. We read now with post-modern eyes. We are more at ease with loss and absence, those Hugo-esque themes; we have learned we all live on the margins here–and it's great. Editor Judy Blunt says no writer can live in the West without knowing Hugo's work. Each of the writers in this fine centennial issue of *CutBank* attests to that.

Dick, we *are* making certain it goes on.