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Richard Hugo on His Poem *What Thou Lovest Well Remains American*

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Richard Hugo

**RICHARD HUGO ON HIS POEM WHAT THOU LOVEST
WELL REMAINS AMERICAN**

*The following was recorded in 1980 at the Lower
Columbia Community College in Longview, Washington,
during the 5th Annual Poetry Gathering.*

THE TITLE POEM FROM THAT PARTICULAR book is called "What Thou Lovest Well Remains American." You remember the first poem about that church where we were all having so much fun? Well, there's a guy I used to go to Sunday school with there — it was a very small congregation, just a few kids — and this guy's name was George. And he was a fat guy and he didn't have very good coordination. And he couldn't play ball with the rest of us, you know, we didn't want him on the team, on the basketball team. And he wasn't very bright. And he lived with his mother and grandmother, and I don't know where George's father was, I never remember seeing him. I guess he was dead or had moved away, I don't know. But George lived with these two women. And during the Depression, somehow they scraped up enough money to buy George trombone lessons. Now, no way was George ever going to learn to play the trombone. You know, after six months he was just kind of squawking on it. Anyone in this room could have learned three times as fast. So George seemed to be kind of a lost ... but he was a harmless kid. You know, you don't make all these distinctions when you're a kid. We liked George.

So, some of us used to go see him — go over to his house, he lived a little farther away from the town than the rest of us, a few blocks. And on the way, we passed a house and there was a woman lived in this house and her name was Jensen. I call George's family Grubski in this poem but that wasn't their name. Anyway, this woman's name was Jensen, as I remember. She was a hermit. You never saw her outside the house. I don't know if you remember what's it's like when you're a little kid, but you make myths out of people like that, not real-

izing that these people are living in terrible fear. They don't want to go outside. I mean, your sense of compassion just isn't there. So we used to go by and she'd have her face to the window like this, looking out. And we'd go a couple more blocks up the hill to George's house.

Now George lived in a really strange house. The front stairs came up over the front door to the second floor and ended at a blank wall. Do you see what I'm saying? In other words, to get into the front door of the house you had to go in behind the front stairs, and there was the entrance to the house. And at one time, George and his mother and grandmother were afflicted with the condition that then in White Center was loosely called Saint Vitus' Dance, but I don't know if that's what it was. I don't know if you know what that condition is, but people flutter and tremble and shake. And it's a terrible condition. And anyway, whatever it was, George recovered and his mother recovered, but the old lady never did recover, and she just went out shaking.

George's mother would welcome us into the house and we'd be standing and greet George and his mother. And the old woman would come in and be shaking hands, and George's mother would say something like "oh, mother, how wonderful that you're joining us. Why don't you entertain us all by sitting down at the piano and playing for us one of your original compositions?" And I don't know if you believe this but that's really what would happen, is this old woman with these shaking hands would sit down and play some wretched tune that she'd written herself.

Well. I don't know if you remember what it's like to be a kid. But I'll tell you something you had when you were a kid and you don't have it anymore — that except for the kids here. You had a great sense of the absurd. Do you remember it? Can you ever remember wanting to laugh like hell at some adult because you just knew this person was ridiculous and you had to repress it? You didn't dare do it? I mean, everybody's had that experience. Well, you can imagine what we were going through at this very moment. I mean we're kids. Here's George's pious mother and George with his big dumb face hanging out. And this old woman with these trembling hands playing this wretched music. And we are trying very hard not to laugh. God, it's so painful

you couldn't believe it. And finally we just couldn't wait, we'd get outside and just burst into laughter, rolling around on the ground. Outside — we managed to hold it, not to embarrass her.

Well, about thirty five years went by and I hadn't thought of these people. I was having a hell of a hot streak writing — this was in the early 70's — oh boy, was I writing. I don't think I'll ever have another one like it. I hope I do. I was just churning out the poems. And a lot of it was pretty good stuff too, for me. I was just looking around for one more poem to write. Anything, anything. And all of a sudden I thought of these people. My God, George and his mother and grandmother. And I looked back and I thought, that was really funny back there. But now I was a lot older and I thought yeah, it was funny alright but there was something sad going on there too, you know? And how did I know this? Well, a lot of time had gone by. And I at one time was a pretty good ball player. I could hold my own in some fairly fast company in Seattle. But I'd gotten fat and I'd lost my reflex and I couldn't play ball with the boys anymore. And I never could play a musical instrument. And I used to be very nervous in front of audiences when I read. I drank very heavily in those days. So my hands used to shake when I read, gave readings. And then what am I about to do? Well, I'm about to recite for you one of my original compositions, that's what I'm about to do. So you see, I think if you think you're so much better than other people, maybe you just haven't lived long enough, you know? Life is a tremendous democracy. It grinds us all down equally.

This is "What Thou Lovest Well Remains American":