Not Diamonds

Frances McCue
Letter to Levertov from Butte
By Richard Hugo

Dear Denise: Long way from, long time since Boulder. I hope you and Mitch are doing OK. I get rumors. You’re in Moscow, Montreal. Whatever place I hear, it’s always one of glamor. I’m not anywhere glamorous. I’m in a town where children get hurt early. Degraded by drab homes. Beaten by drunken parents, by other children. Mitch might understand. It’s kind of a microscopic Brooklyn, if you can imagine Brooklyn with open pit mines, and more Irish than Jewish. I’ve heard from many of the students we had that summer. Even seen a dozen or so since then. They remember the conference fondly.
So do I. Heard from Herb Gold twice and read now and then about Isaac Bashevis Singer who seems an enduring diamond. The mines here are not diamond. Nothing is. What endures is sadness and long memories of labor wars in the early part of the century. This is the town where you choose sides to die on, company or man; and both are losers. Because so many people died in mines and fights, early in history man said screw it and the fun began. More bars and whores per capita than any town in America. You live only for today. Let me go symbolic for a minute: great birds cross over you anywhere, here they grin and dive. Dashiell Hammett based *Red Harvest* here though he called it Personville and “person” he made sure to tell us was “poison” in the slang. I have ambiguous feelings coming from a place like this and having clawed my way away, thanks to a few weak gifts and psychiatry and the luck of living in a country where enough money floats to the top for the shipwrecked to hang on. On one hand, no matter what my salary is or title, I remain a common laborer, stained by the perpetual dust from loading flour or coal. I stay humble, inadequate inside. And my way of knowing how people get hurt, make my (damn this next word) heart go out through the stinking air into the shacks of Walkerville, to the wife who has turned forever to the wall, the husband sobbing at the kitchen table and the unwashed children taking it in and in and in until they are the wall, the table, even the dog the parents kill each month when the money’s gone. On the other hand, I know the cruelty of poverty, the embittering ways love is denied, and food, the mean near-insanity of being and being deprived, the trivial compensations of each day, recapturing old years in broadcast tunes you try to recall in bars, hunched over the beer you can’t afford, or bending to the bad job you’re lucky enough to have. How, finally, hate takes over, hippie, nigger, Indian, anyone you can lump like garbage in a pit, including women. And I don’t want to be part of it. I want to be what I am, a writer good enough to teach with you and Gold and Singer, even if only in some conference leader’s imagination. And I want my life
inside to go on long as I do, though I only populate bare landscape with surrogate suffering, with lame men crippled by more than disease, and create finally a simple grief I can deal with, a pain the indigent can find acceptable. I do go on. Forgive this raving. Give my best to Mitch and keep plenty for yourself. Your rich friend, Dick.

Where the Poor Look Down Upon the Rich and Some People Dance the Cool-Water Hula

What Denise Levertov Has to Do With It

It turns out that the lifelong Northwesterner and photographer Mary Randlett knew Denise Levertov. “At first she kind of brushed me off,” Mary tells me. “We were at a party. Denise had just moved to Seattle and she was inundated with people.”

Mary and I are sitting in a coffee shop in Butte. Together, we’re visiting towns in Montana, Idaho and Washington that Richard Hugo wrote about so that Mary can take pictures and I can write about them. Hugo, Levertov and Randlett were all born within a year of each other — Levertov and Hugo, both dead now, were born in 1923 and Mary Randlett in 1924. But, it’s as if Mary was always younger.

“You know,” Mary says, “I drove Denise around. She didn’t have a car. She’d never learned how to drive because she’d lived in London and then in the East.”

Hugo had driven his Buick around the Northwest, visiting towns and writing poems about them. At home, Mary drives a Subaru with the license plate “Nuance.” For this trip, two weeks on the road, I’ve taken a rental car and Mary has tugged on my sleeve from the passenger side, saying “Pull over, Pull over.” She has an enthusiasm that rivets your attention to the landscape.

Mary gets up and goes over to a little shelf, where she takes down a creamer and pours milk into her coffee. “When I read Denise’s poems about Mount Rainier, I couldn’t believe it,” she says. “They were beautiful short poems, like paintings. I offered to drive Denise up Mount Rainier so she could see it up close. “No thanks,’ she’d
said. ‘I don’t want to see how man has touched it.’” Mary shakes her head and sips her coffee. “She was something else, Denise was.”

Hearing this reminds me of how strange it would be to imagine Denise Levertov in Butte, Montana. Though she was the same age as Mary Randellett and she loved visual art, I can’t see her in this rundown old mining city the way I can see Mary here. Mary just fits into places. She’s the photographer who assumes nothing and engages in everything.

Placing Levertov in Butte was an odd choice for Hugo. Clearly he had wanted to dedicate a poem to her, but this town wasn’t where any reader would expect to find a poet who was more of a fine art poet than, say, a street poet—a British woman who lived in New York for many years, summered in Maine, who then lived in San Francisco and finally in Seattle—all the while writing exquisite lyrics in which her persona, the first-person “I,” was graciously, urbanely, staged. Levertov’s prose explained the experiments of her verse, illuminating the poems as if they were delicately laid out by hand, upon velvet, the line breaks twisted together with tiny pliers, the gilded fastener of one pinched into the shimmering link of the next. Envisioning her in the sooty world of Butte, a town littered with mining detritus—old tools discarded along the hillsides, enormous cages that once served as underground elevators and gears the size of small houses and leftover carts from the shafts—is an exercise in juxtaposition.

Hugo must have felt the distance between them—both as writers and as people. He, the shambling “fat man,” as he sometimes described himself, from a poor town to the south of Seattle, and she, the scholarly poet whose father was a parson in England. While Hugo was serving as a bombardier over Italy and Yugoslavia during the Second World War, Denise Levertov was working as a nurse in London. Hugo was making one mess and she was cleaning up another. After the war, for the sweep of her career, Levertov committed herself to social causes, to progressive politics, and to bringing literature into places outside the academy.

Levertov and Hugo had met at the University of Colorado, where they both taught briefly at a conference in the summer of 1975. “Dear Denise,” he writes after returning West, “Long way from, long
time since Boulder.” Even a university town in Colorado was upscale for Hugo. For Levertov, it must have been a trip into the hinterlands.

Whatever their acquaintance, clearly, Hugo admires his colleague. “Letter to Levertov…” denigrates his whereabouts in comparison to her more glamorous existence:

You’re in Moscow,
Montreal. Whatever place I hear, it’s always one of glamour.
I’m not anywhere glamorous. I’m in a town where children get hurt early. Degraded by drab homes. Beaten by drunken parents, by other children.

He’s in Butte. And, perhaps more than most towns, this one tells the story of his own past—he could be one of the children who is beaten, degraded, and gets “hurt early.” In the poem, perhaps as in life, Hugo aspires to be a “writer good enough / to teach with you…” At the end, his parting line after a tour of Butte and of poverty itself is “Your rich friend, Dick.” He’s richer, the poem indicates, for his experience of being poor.

“My urge to be someone adequate didn’t change after the war,” Hugo writes in his book of essays The Triggering Town. And this urge shows up in “Letter to Levertov from Butte,” this poem he called “probably the best of the bunch” from his 1977 book 31 Letters and 13 Dreams.¹ “That poem,” Hugo says in a 1981 interview, “seemed to generate a lot, enabled me to talk about certain things that have been on my mind that I wasn’t able to handle in a more conventional form. I imagine I couldn’t have done that in a lyric.”² The poem weaves history of the place with Hugo’s self-admitted insecurities (“no matter what my salary is / or title, I remain a common laborer” and “I stay humble, inadequate / inside”) and stacks these up against Denise Levertov’s globetrotting. His plainspoken, chunky lines stand in juxtaposition to the delicate, hand polished aura of her poems. In hers, the images are figurines, and their proximity to the edges of the shelves (literally the line breaks) set the suspense in the poem. In “St.

¹ See Gardner, “Interview with Richard Hugo,” 143
² Ibid.
Peter and the Angel,” for example, she writes:

Delivered out of raw continual pain,
smell of darkness, groans of those others
to whom he was chained—

unchained, and led
past the sleepers,
door after door silently opening--
out!

And along a long street’s
majestic emptiness under the moon:

one hand on the angel’s shoulder, one
feeling the air before him,

eyes open but fixed . . .

You feel vulnerable in a completely different way when reading a
Levertov poem than you do when reading a Hugo poem. In a Hugo
poem, you are walking into the poorest part of town and, having
a look, fearing that you might belong there. In a Levertov poem,
you are observing the realm of the poem, and you feel unworthy of
the scene, because the poet is placing the world above you. You are
looking heavenward as you read it.

“Letter to Levertov from Butte” is Hugo’s way of connecting both
his psyche to a place and his sense of himself as a poet to another
poet. That way he’ll see himself more clearly. Hugo is trying to
cajole Denise Levertov into being a friend—you can feel that—only
I’m wondering if it’s also some basis for inadvertent competition: the
kind men have with women sometimes, while remaining oblivious to
it. The chatty greeting (“I hope you and Mitch are doing OK”) and
the nod to the far-flung places where she travels—these acknowledge
her as a colleague. But then Hugo pushes away from her, turning
instead to her husband when he describes the hardships of Butte:
“Mitch might understand. It’s kind / of a microscopic Brooklyn,
if you can imagine Brooklyn / with open pit mines, and more Irish than Jewish.” The subtext here might read, “You wouldn’t understand this kind of poverty, but the man in your life would.”

Then, after a creating a litany of the scarcity and desperation in Butte and in Walkerville, the hilltop town above Butte, places where Hugo pictures himself with a pathos that has you on the edge of tears because you can feel the innards of the town and his own sadness, he signs the letter: “Your rich friend, Dick.” The line feels triumphant. It’s worth remembering that the year that he taught with Levertov, Hugo was a National Book Award finalist. The near-miss for the prize was a wake-up call, a dash of ammonia under the nose so that he might be aware of his own elite and sanctioned place in American letters, as well as an introduction to the competitions that poetry can find itself in, which all leaves me wondering how self-effacing Hugo really means to be. Is he trumping her in the game of showcasing personal tragedy in American verse? “I only populate bare / landscape with surrogate suffering,” he writes at the poem’s crescendo, and it rings so true that I can feel Hugo winning out, admitting to his strategy of projecting his own desperate outsider persona onto the town.

Up High Are the Poor

Lois Welch, one of Hugo’s dearest friends, remembers Dick Hugo coming into Butte, looking up, pointing to Walkerville, and saying, “This is the only town I’ve been to where the poor get to look down on the rich.” From a vantage up in Walkerville, the smog that settled below, over Butte, might have made the larger city disappear if it weren’t for the steeples and a few ten-story buildings peeking through. Underneath the cloth of gray, the grids of houses and cemeteries crowding the valley floor were a series of enormous props held backstage while the tiny seminal village, Walkerville, insisted its way into the spotlight above the clouds.

There are no cemeteries in Walkerville, by city ordinance, yet down below they sprawl across the flats of Butte. Rumor has it that Butte has the highest number of graves of any town its size. Per capita, matched one-to-one with the living, there were more dead people in Butte than anywhere else. Of course, the dead always
outnumber the living, but in this place, it becomes an enormous display of evidence of mining tragedies and the cancer deaths from foul air, tainted water. In the flats of the valley, vacant of rich mineral deposits, the miners didn’t dig for ore. Instead, townsfolk sunk bodies into the earth.

On the day I come into the valley, I drive alongside graveyards that stretch for miles.

Along that same hill, Hugo saw in Walkerville and Butte a despair so pervasive that even he cringed under the weight of it. “More bars and whores / per capita than any town in America,” Hugo wrote. As in most of his poems triggered by towns, the impoverished places that Hugo had identified and never really come to know, “Letter to Levertov from Butte” sets his own life up against a place he sees as dire. His own life, by comparison, shimmers in the slag.

On October 11, 1904, the Walkerville streetcar slid backward over the hill and started its runaway slide down into Butte. As it picked up speed, the motorman jumped, and the car soared through the curve at Excelsior and Park streets, leaping from the tracks. It crashed into a large telephone pole, a line of fence, and the boardwalks, until it came to rest in front of W. A. Clark’s barn.

Clark, one of the “copper barons” of Butte, owned the Moulton Mine, a mining lode he had located in 1875. He was also part owner of the bank and later came into ownership of many more mines. In the construction of his mansion, now a bed and breakfast in Uptown Butte, Clark hired artists who hand-painted frescos in each room. Woodworkers hand carved all of the walls and banisters. The place was magnificent. Like most who made their fortunes on the extraction or processing of natural resources, Clark was competitive to the point of being sinister and cutthroat. When another investor, Marcus Daly, bought a nearby lode, the Alice Mine, Clark adjusted the water level in Moulton so that it would flood Daly’s tunnels. He became a senator even though he had been implicated in a bribery scandal; he later died in his apartment on Fifth Avenue in New York, far from Butte. Like so many who made fortunes in the West, Clark, after extracting what he could, retired to the safety and high-status quarters of the East.

No one was killed when the streetcar slid through the bend.
Though onlookers were nearby, only a few people were hurt, and the accident remains a cherished part of Walkerville lore. The streetcar also inspired several holdups. Each time, the same befuddled gripman was in charge. Eventually, in the throes of the Depression, the streetcar closed in 1937. No longer could residents of Walkerville travel down to Butte so easily, and a few shops grew at the top of the hill. By then, though, Walkerville was in its decline. The settlement lost population, sliding downhill to Butte.

Uptown Butte, a crosshatch of streets named for metals—Iron, Aluminum, Silver, Mercury, and Gold—still boasts magnificent dark brick structures and gothic, dark Victorian buildings. It features the kind of historic preservation I feel moved by, one initiated by neglect rather than vanity. Butte, unlike most boom-and-bust mining towns, had “a long heyday, for a mining camp,” Fritz Wolff, another writer tells me. In fact, in 1917 Butte had a much bigger population than it does now (some say it had upward of 100,000 people) and was said to be the largest city between Seattle and Minneapolis. Wolff is a former miner who works for the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, where he’s cataloguing abandoned mines. He says, “The incomparable high grade underground mines were strong through 1890-1960, World War I, World War II, the Korean War and then they got started on the Berkeley Pit.”3 The pit, opened in 1955, was an enormous open mine, a hole in the earth into which chemicals were poured to leech out precious metals.

As the town’s population again plummeted with the shutdown of the Berkeley Pit in 1982, only the hope of attracting tourist dollars and economic block grants would keep Butte going. Uptown Butte is poor to this day, and Walkerville is poorer still.

Settled before Butte and looking out over it from 6,172 feet above sea level, Walkerville first attracted workers to the early copper mines in the area. The houses were spread out—cabins really—with outbuildings and farm animals between them. Who, I wondered, would build a town against the slant of a hill? Walkerville could only expand by pushing down toward the valley. The slope is dramatic, and the view spectacular. At the top fringe of Uptown Butte, you can see Pipestone Pass and the

3 Fritz Wolff, informal correspondence with Frances McGuire, January 2008
mountains to the south, where the Continental Divide weaves back and forth.

Downshifting into first gear, I coerce my tiny Honda up, past the homes of the copper barons, past the bookstore and a coffee shop. It's a mountain, I realize, not some little bump to roll over. Further to the left, up at an elevation of 8,000 feet, is a statue of Mary—Our Lady of the Rockies.

I'm far from the tuck of hills near sea level in Seattle. As the engine on my tiny car spins and whirrs, I'm cresting the top and seeing on the left a "Welcome to Walkerville" sign. It's a metal sheet with a hunk knocked off of the corner. Behind it, a cinderblock building painted white, with faded blue letters: Blaine Center. There's the wheel of a handicapped symbol still visible, another blue swipe against the wall. In front, some bent playground equipment stands crookedly on top of the broken pavement. On the other side of the street, I see the village centerpiece: a large church with the steps coming steeply down to the road. Built by the true working class, the people who could barely scrub themselves clean for Sunday mass, the church was the institution that celebrated the opposite of mining: all the metaphors pointed skyward.

Small streets dip away from this road that I'm still begging my car to climb. The frame houses look weary in the dirt landscapes beyond them, strung under a wide gray silk sky. The top of Walkerville, like many crests along the ridge, isn't really the top, and I see that I am, instead, on one lift along a little washboard of more hills. Montana, after all, goes on and on. I'd forgotten that for a second. I'm over 6,000 feet up, and I can feel my ears sealing with air.

The Dark You Can't Imagine

Mining, in Walkerville, was the spark held up to dry grasses. It caught and inflamed the entire area until Butte became known as "the richest hill on earth." The first claims, the Alice and the
Lexington and others, were the inaugural ventures. Prospectors came for gold, as placer miners tipped pans in ancient riverbeds because the land seemed, at first, too unstable for tunnels, but they stayed for silver and then, ultimately, for copper. Once these early entrepreneurs hit strings of copper through the rocks in the 1870s, the investors became “copper barons,” and the population of Walkerville swelled to 4,000. (Today it is just over 700.) Just before they hit the metal, the men in the mining camp numbered around 50. The Alice Mine stood atop the hill by 1877, and by 1878, frame and log houses and outbuildings dotted the hillside. By 1900, the population of Butte was over 30,000 and the smog and sulfur smoke had become so heavy that dogs and cats couldn’t live in the city. When they found their way onto the streets, most died. But Butte kept growing; it reached 60,000, and some say even over 100,000. Today, fewer than 40,000 live in the city, and Walkerville is considered a neighborhood of Butte, just off of Uptown Butte, further up the hill. If you were to look at a scale diorama of the area, then cut a cross section, you’d see a warren of mine shafts like ant tunnels that make a honeycomb of the mountain that Butte is built upon. Like an ornate fossil, the tunnels through the hill are so extensive you might not believe that the city could be supported upright. And Walkerville is the unlikely crown, teetering at the top.

I’m here on a weekday, and the place is silent. No cars pass me as I bump over the holes in the street; on one side, houses are built up, with raised sidewalks and banisters following the shadow of the former boardwalks; on the other, houses are lower than street level and the stairs descend to them.

A mailman stuffs a roll of paper through the slot in one door. He’s the only person whom I see. No one stands at the curtains of any of the houses. Some homes have aluminum siding, and Daly Street, the main drag named after Marcus Daly, one of the “Copper Kings,” is a set of storefront ghosts. Pisser’s Palace is the lone bar, one even Hugo might not have ventured into, and the fake rocks of the façade.
have me wondering—why not use real stones? There are piles of them all over the vacant lots through town. Early on, the people of Walkerville put up false storefronts, tacked onto the barns. Maybe that's what inspired the use of synthetic rocks on the storefront on Pisser's.

On the site of the old Walkerville Mercantile, the place I trace back via photos, is the only remaining shop—a state liquor store. It reminds me of a decrepit New England "package store," like one you'd find in Quincy or South Boston. But Walkerville is even poorer—no grocery store, doctor offices, lawyers, or shops—only the liquor store in the washed-out green building and the small houses with the tar paper coming off. A few of them have high cyclone fences and whirligigs spinning out front, pointing to the north—in the direction of Butchertown, where the animals of Butte were slaughtered for meat.

Shaft mining began here when one of the earliest claims, the Lexington Mine, was bought for twenty dollars and a horse. The horse's owner, A.J. Davis, needed a way to get into Butte. The town's other major mine, the Alice Mine, was owned and operated
by the Walker brothers, for whom the town was named. They were soon joined by miners from Cornwall, England.\(^4\) Between them, the claim owners had, from 1864 to 1867, “located dozens of lode claims, including the Rainbow Lode in present day Walkerville.”\(^5\) Both Lexington and Alice established Butte as a “rich silver producer in the late 1870s through the 1880s,” and by the end of that run, Alice was the largest silver producer in the country.

Alongside the mine, workers built a cluster of homes and shanties, transforming the prospectors’ homes of the 1870s into something that resembled a town. Other mines sprang up; gallows for the hoists—long cables with “cages” for the men to descend in—stood above the town. Dirt pulled out of the shafts mounded up around houses and hoists, and the streets meandered around the heaps. Infrastructure to support the processing of ore began to appear adjacent to the mines: shacks and stacks, the early pictures show. By 1889 the cable car was running down the hill, and pipe stacks thrust upward from the mines. Big piles of sand and rock were dug out of the mountain. By the late 1800s, over 300 stamps, enormous crushers to pulverize the ore into gravel or powder, were slamming along, day and night.

Here’s how it worked. There were two classes of silver: free and base. Free silver was extracted from a fine powder, and the mercury that clung to it was sloughed off with other wastes into muddy water. The heavier metals sank and were pulled from the settling pans. With base silver, the ore went to the crusher and was reduced to walnut-size pieces. It was dried and mixed with salt. Then it was placed under stamps to crush it. (You can still see ruins of the stamp mills around Montana.) The ore was then roasted with mercury to pull chloride from sulfide and amalgamate. Children called it quicksilver; one longtime resident of Walkerville recalls carrying it in glass beakers around town. Because of the weight of the metal, the bottom would often fall out of the container and the leaden stuff would spill to the ground. Consider this on a grand scale: tons of mercury falling through bins, tossed off into the dirt—a catastrophic amount of pollution.

Until 1893, the Alice Mine was rated as the greatest silver

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producer in the country. Walkerville was known as a livelier camp than Butte and found its way onto the stock exchanges. Then, when the Silver Bill repeal of 1878 eliminated silver as a precious metal used in U.S. currency, many Montana mining towns went under. As Hugo wrote in "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg," locals developed a "hatred of the mill, / the Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls / who leave each year for Butte." But Butte had other metals to rely on—particularly copper. The Alice and Lexington mines, along with the rapid growth of others, attracted investors from the East. Union struggles followed. So did tragedy—in 1917, the Granite Mountain<>Speculator mine disaster killed 164 men and trapped 400 more. It sparked violence throughout the city. But, as some boosters of Walkerville will tell you, the Alice Mine created a community. Marcus Daly, the more benevolent of the copper kings, encouraged it. There was an Alice Reading Room; a hospital that guaranteed free care to the miners and their families; an Alice Mine and Mill Band; and an exercise room. In some ways, it was a mining camp version of the settlement houses—a rural Hull House on a hill in Montana. These activities were vital in the 1880s, before the town's economy went south.

The Walkerville of today, without working mines of substance, retains the ghosts of the glory days—a few towers and "gallows" frames to the shafts. At a coffee shop, earlier, I'd looked at a photo of the miners early in the century. They're all wearing dark clothes that appear to be made darker by the dirt. Their faces, even when wiped clean, retain the tint of the soot. In their pockets are white candles. They light up the photograph, and I think of these candles as a seraph's dynamite—angelic, barely able to hold a flame. The grit of the place greases over everything; even the people resemble aging cast-iron skillets, darkened over time.

From the wide, smoky sky, the miners descended into a darkness unfathomable to walkers upon open ground, a darkness that put their own bodies out of visibility. Imagine knowing that your hand is reaching for your head but you can't see its trajectory, you can only feel it, suddenly, as it makes contact. Think of those spaces below ground: moments when a whoosh through a bore hole would sink the flames of candles—a place where horses, sent vertically down the shafts, lived in a dark unknowable to those at the surface. The dark deprived a man of his senses because his smell and taste and
touch and hearing grew so heightened against the lack of sight; the blackness was the sound of trickling water, the humming of nerves. And the squeeze of dampness.

Before the era of motorized wagons on little tracks, before the era of remote-controlled blasts and automated diggers, the men did lower horses into the mines, a fact I can’t stop thinking about. The horses never saw daylight again. They were rolled onto their sides, bound in canvas jackets, tied at the legs with ropes, hoisted into the gallows, and lowered into the cage. From the front, if you were watching, you’d see the horse’s massive trunk and his penis, the ribs elongated to the bony intersection of his stretched belly, but not his head. You wouldn’t see that because it would be covered. Down he’d go, doomed to a life of pulling carts and living in darkness with dynamite blasts shaking the shafts.

_Not Diamonds_

I’ve pulled over to the side of a dirt street in Walkerville and am looking at the poem “Letter to Levertov from Butte.” Leaning into the dashboard of the little car, I want to rip through the page or slice the thing with a letter opener and see, literally, what’s behind the verse, as if the fat man might appear, Hugo in the flesh, standing right behind the curtain of that poem, finally coming out to his surrogate misery. This inspires me to see the town, the projection, as something whole and clear, something intact with its own pain.

And here, north of Butte, over the top of Butte, “I’m not anywhere glamorous,” I think, echoing Hugo. In the search for the poem, my desire to meld poem to town as if the amalgamation would yield something precious, the gems of language and the warm rush of intellect and heart merging, settles me beyond the uptown, over the hill from the last coffeehouse, the last sandwich. Here I wonder if “children get hurt early,” if they’re “degraded by drab homes. Beaten by drunken /parents, by other children?” Aren’t they everywhere? Aren’t the hygienic suburbs, with their plastic toys and three-car garages, just stage sets for an American mania of distortion and competition twisting children with full bellies into tortured beings, impoverished and distant, into consumers of self-mutilation and crystal meth?

But that’s just one slant, one pressed upon me by the dirt and rust of the place. I’m given to bouts of knowing that, simply by living in a particular slice of American culture, children are damaged. And
in the poverty that one feels from here, the few houses fallen with trailers pinned to their remains, or the tin hammered over clapboard with drafts rushing through, I can see how a child might feel in such depravity. In fact, though, Walkerville feels like a town in which no one actually lives—a town that Nintendo and Pottery Barn don’t reach, a place to which computer keyboards and running shoes will never find their way.

“The mines here are not diamond,” Hugo writes, and the tone gives way to a rant against “company or man,” the labor wars in which everyone was doomed, no matter which side he was on. In the face of it, the people of Butte began to live in their circumstances, says Hugo’s version of history, and they lavished extra coins on bar countertops and whores’ bureaus. Though Hugo claims he was a person “coming from a place like this,” I know he wasn’t, not quite. White Center, though rough and downtrodden, didn’t have the physical pollution of Walkerville—the land wasn’t ripped open and burnt in smelters. White Center, by contrast, was quiet, and the sea air rolled over it. The desperation of the small houses and truck farms never was this lively, this sopped over with sulfur smoke and rot. Hugo lets the despair of the place be mirrored in the poem instead of projected upon it.
Still, Hugo insists that he is like someone living in Butte:

I remain a common laborer, stained by the perpetual dust from loading flour or coal. I stay humble, inadequate inside. And my way of knowing how people get hurt, make my (damn this next word) heart go out through the stinking air into the shacks of Walkerville...

He wasn’t the first poet who wrote to console himself through difficult beginnings, but Hugo did devote his poems to retooling the central narrative of his life: He was an outsider; he’d been abandoned by his mother, neglected and shut out by his grandparents. His poems replayed the scenario over and over, and if you ask some critics about Hugo’s work, they will tell you that he was writing the same poem again and again. By admitting that he felt inadequate, he was creating a self in the poems, one that was reliable, and to be trustworthy, Hugo might have felt, was to reiterate his position as a man not worthy.

Though writing poems was indigenous to Hugo’s sensibility, whatever the trigger, the man himself seemed far from the image of a “poet”—often shambling, uncouth, uncool. Hugo emanated an aura of shame. It is the kind of humiliation that comes from a man who never had enough nurturing, who never understood simple affection—unearned and unconditional—and who had, as he put it, “problems with women.” Perhaps by dedicating the poem about Butte and Walkerville to Denise Levertov, Hugo was trying to overcome these issues and treat his colleague, a female poet, respectfully and as a peer.

When we were in the coffee shop, Mary Randlett told me that she “had to work on getting to know Denise.” It hadn’t been easy. “There was a little bit of space there, but we were the same age, and she had a sense of humor that was great. She could really be a human being.”

I wondered if Hugo found these same pleasures with his new friend.
While Hugo was flat-panning the background of Butte as if with a camera, sifting through the surface of the place and pinning his heart to the "stinking air... the shacks of Walkerville," I was thinking of the horses. Staring at the terrible old photos I'd run across in the bookstore down the hill in Butte, I envisioned the sweaty animals resisting the gags pulled through their mouths and cotton sacks rolled over their heads. I could see the corral where the dust and pebbles flew up under the flick of their hooves. There, they were rolled and bound. That was the image of Walkerville that devastated me. I could see the place as a hinge between Butte and Butchertown, places where animals were tied and shoved into service in a gravelike underground, or sent through the fences to slaughter. The images stick to dusty lots next to the sheds and trailers and houses that I pass.

Hugo, too, illuminating some connection to a place sooty and gone by, imagined his way in through images that led him to abbreviated anecdotes—his method of articulating the pain that lived in that town:

...the wife who has turned forever to the wall, the husband sobbing at the kitchen table and the unwashed children taking it in and in and in until they are the wall, the table, even the dog the parents kill each month when the money's gone.

Then, he pivots from the place into his past. "I know the cruelty of poverty," Hugo says, "the embittering ways / love is denied." His narration of the deprivation rings simultaneously true and self-consciously aware, the way a sociologist might integrate himself into a community so that he can authentically observe its comings and goings and then realize that his own participation is displacing what he is narrating.

Down the main drag, Daly Street, I turn at the liquor store. Behind it is a corner of old buildings—a concave darkness that reminds me of a borderland. It feels like a place I couldn't actually
go. I've reached some kind of limit. Ahead of me, there are some
dumps of earth and ore, perhaps a pile of dust, rock, wood.

I circle back around to see the town again, looking down over the
hill toward the Museum of Mines, the Montana Technical College,
and, beyond, out toward the interstate. No animals are out. Few cars
are parked. I work my way east, doglegging down narrow streets
until they tip me out onto Park Street and wrap me around some dirt
heaves and closed gates, cyclone fences and abandoned equipment.
A wall of dirt is off to my left, increasing in size, and I notice that
I'm headed down the hill, out of Walkerville.
Down Park Street, along the hill's barren spots, I see the parking lot
on the left and pull in. There are a few tourists—people speaking
German, holding cameras—getting out of their cars. I go up to the
portable, a trailer that looks like it's made out of cardboard, and
there's a guy selling tickets. Across from him is another trailer, wheels
removed, with a sign: Gift Shop. The man takes my two dollars
and points me through a round tunnel with wooden crossbeams
and creosote-wiped planks. At the end is a porthole of light. I walk
toward it, under a hill. It's like coming out of a mining shaft, one
laid horizontally. Along the way, I'm thinking of Hugo, how his walk
was marked with a limp in his later years, how he was out of breath
because he'd had a lung removed. His baseball days long behind
him, Hugo could hobble perhaps as far as his lawn chair to fish, or
make his way from the Buick to the house, or into a bar.

Me? I want to climb the mountains to the south of it all—I want
to find some land that is sheltered with trees and look back over to
the city and the run-down town above it. I want, almost immediately,
to be freed from the chute through the hill. I want to push back out
of it and walk to the parking lot. Instead, I am in the tunnel, walking
toward the light ringing from the round circle of the other end. I
imagine those dark-clothed miners, their dust-seeped faces, with
white, white candles sitting upright in their pockets.

When we push into the light, Mary and I are on a viewing deck.
There, below, is the biggest quarry I've ever seen, a mile and a half
wide, almost a mile deep: ridged along the earth, the colors of sepia
and iron around the rim, and the water a green orange—I look at
the whole pool as one might regard a steep, high waterfall—taking
in the water, section by section, the ridges of earth behind it, and my tiny scale in the face of such an enormous thing. There are even viewing scopes, the kind mounted on cement that you stick your face into so you can have the effect of cheap binoculars. I take in a breath, staring at the awesome lifelessness of the thing. The scene is an Anselm Kiefer painting, a hulking grace of color—shale and iron and bleached sand—ridges dug and held like bathtub rings or the lines inside a tree trunk—the layers are striking, like a painted then sculpted, sunset.

"God, the place is horrible," Mary says. "And beautiful too."
The Berkeley Pit, once an open-pit copper mine, is filled with chemicals and water. From end to end, the crater is a mile wide, and the water is more than 900 feet deep. So acidic is the fluid, so rich in heavy metals, that the pit is a greenish tint under certain light, and when the illumination shifts, it's orange. The spectacle is so brilliant, so illuminated and Latin American in color, that I am mesmerized. Then, the shock comes—this is one of the most toxic places on the earth. It's like realizing that the handsome man you've been admiring is really a serial killer.

It's a great big hole. Men came in and extracted things from it, leaving behind poisonous materials. Now it's full of heavy metals, and the level is rising each year. Estimates run one foot per month. Eventually, it will overflow and spill into the groundwater, flushing into the nearby Clark Fork River, filling tunnels under Butte until the city comes crashing down.

To offer the landscape a symbolic kind of healing, an artist from Missoula, Kristi Hagar, staged a performance art piece at the rim of the Berkeley Pit in 2000. Kristi had lived in Butte for a number of years and knew the land well. She brought together a crowd of people to dance the hula. On the edge of the pit, on a sunny, warm day, they danced, all of them wearing blue sarongs and singing a version of "Cool Water." Here's the way Butte writer George Everett describes it: "The group of men, women, and children clad in cloth sarongs as blue as the sky walked silently to the lip overlooking the Pit, formed ranks and then swayed gracefully to the sounds of the Sons of the Pioneers song, "Cool Water." The sound of more than a hundred and fifty dancers singing in harmony to acoustical guitars mixed in the light breeze with the sound of rustling fabric."6

For months before the dance, Kristi Hager traveled around the state and encouraged people to form hula groups. In small towns, people gathered. They practiced the hula. They learned the music and enlisted friends to learn it too. When the day came, several hundred novice hula dancers arrived in Butte, singing and swinging their hips for healing water. It was, as one participant noted, "remarkably outrageous."

The Cool-Water Hula smoothed a gesture toward healing over the pit. It was a method much like Hugo's writing poems, bringing Montanans into "crea[ing] / finally a simple grief I can deal with." Along the way, during the realization of the sorrow in the world, "hate takes over," Hugo writes. Leaching precious metals from the earth and leaving poisons behind in an enormous hole is an act mimetic of discarding people through slow poisoning, engulfing "anyone you can lump like garbage in a pit, including women." Even in this despair, when you feel Hugo tossing all hope aside, "Letter to Levertov from Butte" rises from the pollution. It grows beyond his woeful set of projections. This is where I feel released from the sense that Hugo is competing with Levertov, and his insistence upon rivaling her for a trip down the social ladder.

The Cool-Water Hula reminds me of why people write poems in the first place—lyrics are ephemeral, and they mark a moment in time. Poems are ways of keeping track of places. As Mary Randlett and I, almost forty years apart in age, emerge in sunlight on the deck over the Berkeley Pit, I think how unlikely it is that we come to the places we come to, like the doomed snow geese that landed in the orange water of the Berkeley Pit for a rest in their migration and died; how unlikely our friendships are, and how far we have to reach out to secure them.