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Jim Welch's Last Hard Springtime

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JIM WELCH'S LAST HARD SPRINGTIME

In My First Hard Springtime

Those red men you offended were my brothers.
 Town drinkers, Buckles Pipe, Star Boy,
 Billy Fox, were blood to bison. Albert Heavy Runner
 was never civic. You are white and common.

Record trout in Willow Creek chose me
 to deify. My horse, Centaur, part cayuse,
 was fast and mad and black. Dandy in flat hat
 and buckskin, I rode the town and called it mine.
 A slow hot wind tumbled dust against my door.
 Fed and fair, you mocked my philosophic nose,
 my badger hair. I rolled your deference
 in the hay and named it love and lasting.

Starved to visions, famous cronies top Mount Chief
 for names to give respect to Blackfeet streets.
 I could deny them in my first hard springtime,
 but choose amazed to ride you down with hunger.

"Listen to this!" Richard Hugo said as he loomed into my office doorway one afternoon in the winter of 1967. From a sheet of paper in his hand, he read—he almost roared—the poem printed above. The entire poem. "Albert Heavy Runner was never civic!" he exclaimed. "What a line!" Expostulating still, he lunged down the hall to read it to the next colleague whose door was open. He must have mentioned Jim's name because someone later pointed Jim out to me, among the graduate students perched around the seminar room at the end of the hall. Graduate poets Ed Lahey and Rick DeMarinis were talking—Ed, a big Irish talker from Butte, Rick, a very funny ex-mathematician. Jim was smiling, not talking, wearing a

short-sleeved plaid cotton shirt. He was tall and skinny and cute, with thick straight black hair and big glasses. We didn't talk.

No one before Hugo, nor after, during my entire academic career, ever burst into my office to read any piece of writing whatsoever. Not for lack of great writing—or awful writing, for that matter—by authors live and dead. Nor even for lack of enthusiasm. Sometimes, after all, we do get really excited about passages, papers, poems. It's just academic decorum: one doesn't burble in the halls. That day Hugo had been teaching for just two years and was still responding in his larger-than-life way to the enormous highs and lows of the classroom. "Albert Heavy Runner was never civic" is still a terrific line. It was Hugo's kind of line. It launched Jim's literary career.

It turns out that Jim was taking Hugo's poetry seminar that winter, and that this was his first Indian poem. He was Blackfeet and Gros Ventre, had previously attended the University of Minnesota and Northern Montana College. It was his second quarter as a graduate student, his second poetry class ever. In later years, Jim would tell interviewers how, before he met Hugo, he had been writing "majestic mountain poems," poems about places he barely knew: New York, San Francisco, about wheeling gulls, feigning a kind of wordy sophistication he thought poetic. Finally Hugo called him into his office. Clearly, he didn't think much of Jim's poems. They talked. Hugo wanted to know what Jim did know about, since he obviously didn't know anything about poetry.

"Indians," Jim said, after a long pause. (He must have relived his whole life—all his experience, all the courses he'd ever taken—in that long silence.) "The Blackfeet."

"Why not write about them?"

"No one would be interested."

"You never know. Give it a shot."

This was the shot: "Those Indians you despised were my brothers." Wham! Hugo did suggest later that "despised" be changed to "offended." Everyone else who tells the story says that, after reading the poem, Hugo exclaimed: "Albert Heavyrunner was never civic? After a line like that, I have nothing to teach this guy!" He was wrong, of course. Jim learned things tiny and huge from Hugo for years to come. He had already learned one Hugo technique: take a reader through the poem—you, you, you. What Hugo didn't know was that he had sparked that afternoon, with that poem, a connection between Jim and me—and himself—that would last the rest of his life, and ours.

Jim and I never spoke to one another until the Opening Day of Fishing Season Party at Annick and Dave Smith's cabin at Valley of the Moon on Rock Creek in May of 1967. But that's another story.

Jim had started out studying fiction as a senior at the University of Montana, working first with John Hermann, a fiction writer out of Stanford and the University of Iowa workshop, and then with Jesse Bier, a novel-writing Americanist from Princeton. Jim had graduated with his BA in Liberal Arts in the spring of 1965. That fall he started the MFA program in Creative Writing. He gave me the impression that the department chair had asked him and Lahey and DeMarinis and a few others to take the graduate courses. Since the graduate program in creative writing was just beginning, they needed warm bodies. Jim had already written a first novel and some short stories. After the Hugo poetry workshop, he wrote poems steadily for five years before returning to fiction.

Hugo had come to UM in the summer of 1964 with one book under his belt and an MA from the University of Washington, where he had studied with Theodore Roethke. He and his wife Barbara had spent 1963-64 in Italy, Dick having quit his longtime job (1951-63) at Boeing. Everyone says Hugo had been a technical writer at Boeing; technically he was the "Procedures Communications Staff Supervisor in the Transport Division Facilities." (No wonder we called him a technical writer!) He and Barbara were on the verge of divorcing when they arrived in Missoula. She left almost immediately after they moved into an apartment next to the Union Bar Cafe and Laundromat in Milltown, just east of Missoula. Hugo drank too much, was given to histrionics, and was grateful to the point of disbelief when his poetry students responded enthusiastically to his teaching. After Barbara left, he lived in a university-owned bungalow on the north edge of campus, and welcomed students with beer and funny stories. His second book, Death of the Kapowsin Tavern, was published in 1965. I had helped arrange Hugo's reading at Portland State College in 1963, just after his first book, A Run of Jacks, came out. I remember that he wore an enormous denim jacket and read with that amazing booming voice. He brought them both to UM.

Jim had studied fiction during Hugo's first year at UM. He probably attended a Hugo poetry reading. (There had to have been one.) Jim's friend and fellow graduate student Dave McElroy was in Hugo's poetry workshop in 1966. Jim asked Dave to show Hugo some of his poems, feeling too shy to approach Hugo himself. Hugo, according to Jim, told Dave he wouldn't read them, saying, "He [Jim] doesn't want to talk to me," as though he were offended. (Little did Jim know then how thin Hugo's skin could be.) So Jim signed up for the poetry seminar in the

winter of 1967. I had arrived that fall of 1966 from Portland State where I had been teaching for four years. I'd been hired at UM to teach comparative literature, specifically drama and literary theory. Hugo's office was next door to mine in the English Department. His unacademic booming laughter frequently interrupted the decorous silence of the hall. The doorway reading of Jim's first Indian poem was just like Dick and utterly unlike the rest of my colleagues.

After this propitious beginning, Jim went on to become a respected student in Hugo's workshop, pounding out poems almost daily. That led to his being part of casual gatherings at Hugo's house. As summer approached, he mowed Hugo's little lawn and then joined the guys watching baseball on TV—and drinking beer, of course. The poetry conversation was nearly as intense as the sports talk, so Jim was getting a kind of poetry immersion, while Hugo's loneliness was assuaged. Thus began their long friendship.

Within a year, Jim was publishing poems. Within two, we were married and living at Roseacres Farm, just north of town. Within four, his first book of poems—Riding the Earthboy Forty—was published in New York. In six years, his first novel—Winter in the Blood—would be reviewed on the front page of the New York Times Book Review. In eight, we would be Hugo's neighbors on Wylie Avenue. By then, Hugo was happy and remarried, to poet Ripley Schemm, and all our hard springtimes were over.