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Carol Deering

## An Interview with Richard Hugo (1982)

A writer of essays, novels, and poetry, Richard Hugo taught at the University of Montana in Missoula, where he directed the creative writing program. He is the author of, among other works: *Death of the Kapowsin Tavern*; *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir*; *What Thou Lovest Well, Remains American*; *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*; *The Road Ends at Tahola*; *Selected Poems*; and *The Right Madness on Skye: Poems* (poetry); *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing* (essays); and *Death and the Good Life* (novel). This interview was conducted in 1982, shortly before Hugo's death. It was originally published in *Art Notes* magazine.

Carol Deering: I heard you say at the reading that you grew up in Seattle.

Richard Hugo: Yes, that's right. In a community right on the southern edge of Seattle, a place called White Center.

CD But your poems have a wide-open spaces feeling to them...

RH Well, I think you're probably commenting on the more recent work. You see, of my first three books, two were almost entirely Pacific Northwest poems that cen-

tered in places, rivers and lakes and so forth, in the Seattle area. Then my third book grew out of Italian and Yugoslavian settings. Now those three books are out of print. A few of the poems of the first three books are included in the *Selected Poems*, and I think you'll find mostly Seattle-area poems in the first two books. But the oldest book I have in print is *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir*, in which Montana is the setting, so it is more wide-open spaces, that's right.

CD In *The Triggering Town*, you mentioned taking creative writing in high school. Have you been writing consistently since then?

RH Yes, I'd been writing even before that, as a matter of fact. It seems like when I was in grammar school that I was putting words on paper. I started very early. I mean, I guess when you're putting words on paper, you're writing. So I can say I was writing when I was nine or ten years old.

CD Has your poetry gone through stages that you recognize?

RH No, it hasn't. As a matter of fact, I think reviewers and critics generally agree that I haven't changed very much over the years, that it seemed like there was a certain kind of poem that I wrote. I settled on that early and never varied much from it. This leads to somewhat of a monotony in my work, I think, if it's read at any sustained length of time. But I think that's true of some poets who have a far better claim to being worthy than I do.

CD Do you ever experience writer's block?

RH Yes. And, as a matter of fact, in the last year and a half, I've slowed down a great deal by comparison. That is to say, I had a very sizzling almost ten years, about nine years,

which is probably the longest hot streak I've ever had as a poet and probably ever will have. Yeah, I get it, and writer's block essentially just means that you're not able to take the stance. Usually what really happens is you don't really want to write. You've lost the impulse, and the impulse to write is sort of like a faith. You have to get the faith back.

CD So, you don't use any tricks to try to get out of . . .

RH Well, there are certain things you can do. That is to say, there are certain stances or voices you can write in in the poem. One thing I tell students sometimes, when they ask me about writer's block, is to become a Nazi. That is to say, I tell them to write in the imperative voice, because everyone has the streak. All people, I think, have that streak in them. Consequently, you'd start ordering someone around, tell someone to do something. Even one of my favorite love poems is written like that. It starts out, "Look, my love, on the wall, and here, at this Eastern picture." So you see, actually it's kind of a command. "Watch this." "Look at that." "Do this." Sometimes you can write your way around a block or through a block, doing that.

CD In *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*, were those real letters and real dreams?

RH Oh, no! (Laughter)

CD Do dreams play a role in your writing?

RH Yeah, somewhat. Let me qualify that. Two of the dreams of the 13 Dreams were real dreams. Small parts of two other dream poems were from dreams, and all the rest were made up. The letter poems were not written as letters; they were written as poems, all of them.



CD Do you carry on a poem correspondence with anyone?

RH No.

CD Okay. Do you ever show anyone your work in progress?

RH No, I don't.

CD Do you work on more than one poem at a time, or do you stick with one until it's finished?

RH I nearly always stick with one until it's finished. Sometimes I violate that principle, but not very often.

CD Can you get a good perspective of what you're writing, or do you have to put it aside for awhile?

RH Well, when I'm "on", I can work fairly fast, and I can get a poem, I would say, in five or six drafts. Perhaps in four or five days, I can finish a poem, working, say, three to four hours a day on the poem. This is when I'm really going and sailing. Right now, I can't hit that pace at all. I'm stuck on poems. I'm writing somewhat differently and using different psychological techniques than I used to. For one thing, I'm fictionalizing more what I write about, fictionalizing the base of the poems, instead of writing out of actual experience.

CD Do you think that's what most poets or writers do—start out with real experience?

RH Well, I think it was true for a long time, ever since Wordsworth, at least. But that's changing now. And I think it's changing with the generation of poets that comes just after me. I think that there's a tendency now for some of the young poets to fictionalize events some-

times in the past, in a rather remote past, that is to say, a past that occurred before the poet was born. In one book I picked for the Yale Series of Younger Poets, one of the poems is written as if the author understands and completely comprehends and has digested the experience behind the poem, but in fact the experience behind the poem would have happened around World War I, and obviously, he wasn't even born yet. So, what he did was fictionalize an event, and then somehow in the writing of the poem the event became real enough to sustain the poem.

CD Ray Bradbury once said in a *Writer's Digest* interview, "What (a writer has) to do is be this kind of hysterical, emotional, vibrant creature who lives at the top of his lungs for a lifetime and then corrects around the edges so that he doesn't go insane." Do you see the creative writer as different from other people?

RH Well, I don't know that I see him as different. That's an interesting statement of Bradbury's. It's idealistic. That is to say, obviously, no-one has that much stamina. (Laughter) Everyone has to relax once in a while. If all writers were like that, they'd all be institutionalized. But I know what he means. I think what he's saying is that you have to operate at the limits of your own personal powers at the time you're writing or preparing to write. But, of course, no writer writes all the time. You have to stop and go to the supermarket and get food and sometimes you have to get drunk, or, in my case, go fishing. Or go watch a baseball game.

CD How do you know when to stop tampering with a poem?

RH Oh, I don't know about that. Paul Valéry said that a poem is never finished, it's just abandoned. I think there

comes a time when you either think, "Well, if I keep on, this is going to become an even better poem than it is." And then sometimes you feel, "No matter what I do, this is never going to get any better." So, it's like you lose your interest.

CD I see. Are you a good judge of your work?

RH I probably am, now. I have a pretty good sense of what poems of mind are good, although on some poems of my earlier work I'm far more fallible, I think, than on more recent work. Up until about ten years ago, maybe a little more, I wouldn't have trusted my own judgment on my work too much. And I think it's a rather dangerous thing for a writer to do. It's really up to others to say, to readers and people who are interested in your work. It's really not up to you. In fact, your own evaluation of your work is quite meaningless, when you come right down to it.

CD Back to *The Triggering Town*. You mentioned four current writers, three of them poets, whose work stimulates you to write. Who are they?

RH Oh, I remember saying that. Well, I think Bill Stafford and Phil Levine, and a young poet named Dave Smith. I asked Dave Smith about that one time, and I said, "How come you inspire me?" He said, "It's because I steal from you!" (Laughter)

CD What is the Wylie Street Writers' Association?

RH Oh, that's just a joke. On Wylie Street the Blackfeet Indian poet and novelist James Welch lives three doors from me, he and his wife. His wife is a colleague of mine. Ah, then my wife and I live on Wylie Street. And across the street Rick and Carol DeMarinis live, and they're writers. Rick has published three novels and a novella with



a couple of short stories in book form. So we just call ourselves the Wylie Street Writer's Association because we all happen to live on Wylie Street.

CD Robert Bly has said that he needs to write in isolation. Do you work best this way, or can you write anywhere?

RH I can write anywhere, but I think probably I am in isolation when I'm doing it anyway. Bly is right, actually; you do do it in isolation, but isolation has more than one form. I think he means actual physical isolation. I believe he has a great amount of property that his father gave him, and that in some area that is just his to know about there's a shack or cabin or something where he goes to write, and where no one can disturb him. There are no telephones or anything like that.

CD But can you make your own isolation?

RH Well, I could write in a public library or I write at home sometimes with things going on around me.

CD How do you write? Do poems flow, or is it hard work?

RH Well, it's both. Sometimes they come easily, and sometimes it's hard work. I think one thing about writing that a lot of people don't understand is that there isn't any difference. That is to say, you can work hard on ten poems and none of them ever quite comes off, and you spend, maybe months on them. And then all of a sudden you sit down and one very good poem, one of your better poems, comes quite easily, and you think, "Well, if it comes this easy, why doesn't it happen all the time?" Well, the hard work you did on those other poems accounts for that. That is to say, the hard work you do on one poem is the work you do on all poems. So poems don't come easily to people who don't work hard. You've got to get to work. So, the



work often seems wasted because the results aren't immediate, or there doesn't seem to be a causal relationship between the hard work and what you finally end up with. But the relationships between poems are much closer than I think people imagine.

CD Do you keep a journal?

RH No.

CD You've already said you go through about five or six drafts. So you revise in a separate process rather than a poem's just coming to you all at one sitting?

RH Well, I try to get a first draft down if I can, so I'll have a complete whole to work with. And then I can go back and start revising.

CD I see. Does a title ever come to you before the poem does?

RH Yeah, sometimes. But I caution beginners not to let that happen.

CD Why is that?

RH Well, usually the title tends to dictate the limits of the poem, I think, to a young writer; so they'll put down the title "Autumn Rain" and then they think they've got to keep talking about autumn rain. And when they run out of things to say about autumn rain, why then they'll repeat themselves or start discussing their own meaning and so forth, when the real problem, of course, is that the title told them this is what the poem is about and they believed it. But maybe that isn't what the poem wants to be about. So sometimes, if you wait until the poem is over before you title it, you'll avoid getting trapped.

CD I've heard mention of a poetic review called *Anonymity*. Do you think poems should be published without the poets' name?

RH Oh, I don't think so anymore. I mean, I don't know why anyone would do that. That goes back to the experimentations of the wonderful critic I.A. Richards in the '20's. One day, he just decided to put a bunch of poems in front of students, without names on them, and he asked the students to criticize these poems. And he ran headlong into something I don't know if he'd expected or not. He found that if these students studying literature at Cambridge (or Oxford? I guess it was Cambridge) didn't know who had written the poem, they could not judge it. And he realized that criticism had gone a long way downhill, that they weren't teaching people to criticize through the text anymore. This was one of the beginnings of what was called the New Criticism, deep and close textual analysis. And then for many years, once this experiment was conducted, a lot of professors started giving anonymous poems to the students. This tested the students' ability to criticize poems, and so students suddenly were very embarrassed. That is to say, they were suddenly criticizing poems by Wordsworth, not knowing it, you see, and by Coleridge. In fact, one of I.A. Richards' students, it seems to me, passed very harsh judgement on Gerard Manley Hopkins' "The Windhover," which, of course, is considered one of the great poems in the English language. But it would be a poem where, had a person never seen it before (and remember, this happened in the early '20's; Hopkins had only been in print about four years at the time because his poems weren't published until thirty years after his death), it would be the kind of poem that I can imagine making a mistake on. It's a very difficult poem; it's an unusual poem; the language is strange in it. I happen to know it's a great poem because Theodore Roethke told me

it was a great poem, but I'm not sure I'm a good enough critic to have recognized a poem that difficult and unusual as a good poem. I'm pretty good on more conventional work. I mean, I can usually tell if a poet knows what he's doing.

CD I read that you've written a novel—a detective story!

RH Yes, that's right. It's been published, and it's been doing fairly well, and I'm working on another one.

CD Oh! What prompted you to write fiction?

RH Well, I've always loved mysteries, and I had wanted to write a mystery for years, about thirty years. When I was in Scotland and had a lot of extra time, in '77 and '78, in addition to writing poems, I just started to write the mystery novel.

CD Do you have to think differently to . . . ?

RH Oh, yes. Oh, yes! In fact, it helps if you don't think at all! (Laughter)

CD Would you ever write a play?

RH I tried to write a play down in Little Rock about a year and a half or two years ago. That is the most difficult of all forms of writing, I find, and I didn't do well at all. In fact, I would say that is something I will never be able to do. I did give up on it. There was a play writing teacher at Montana who urged me to try to write a play, but it's too hard. One of the problems I've found is, I keep worrying about the technical problems. I had certain things I wanted to happen, and he told me, "Never worry about the technical problems. Those are the director's problems." And he told me about one play where there's



just a simple stage direction it it. All it says is "The universe destructs." That's all it says. And somehow the director has to decide how to completely destroy the universe, you see, on the stage! And he says, "Don't worry about these things. They're not your problems." But, my God, when you're writing the play, they certainly do become problems; they're very hard to ignore.

CD Well, how do you teach creative writing?

RH Well, I think *The Triggering Town* sort of tells you how I go about it with the younger people, that is to say, freshman and sophomores. I tend to teach them to concentrate on sounds and rhythms and properties of the language, and solving superficial formal problems in writing a poem, and then hope the substance leaks into the poem.

CD In the creative writing department, what different classes do you offer?

RH At Montana, we have beginning creative writing, beginning fiction writing, and beginning poetry writing, which you can take once each time for credit. If you're majoring in creative writing, these classes actually don't count toward your degree except as an overall elective. Then we have intermediate fiction writing and intermediate poetry writing, which you can take three times for credit. The same thing with advanced, and then we have the graduate workshops. So, we have it on all levels. Fiction and poetry. I would like to get, maybe, some translation workshop going in conjunction with the foreign language department; and someday, if you could get someone to teach it, I'd like to see offered an MFA in creative writing for writing essays. I would like to see the essay form revived and concentrated on. I think it's a wonderful form. I've written a lot of essays, and I think one

of them is all right. (Laughter) It's very hard, too. Of course, whatever you don't do much of, you always think of as hard.

CD Do you really believe, "If you want to communicate, use the telephone"?

RH Well, I hate the word communicate. That's why I said that, because it's a word that grows out of a sort of technology. The odd thing is, people communicated better before they started to use the word "communicate". It's almost as if the use of the word itself has stopped us from doing it. I think the same thing is going on now in the problems of writing. I think once you talk about "the acquisition of writing skills," you've already blown it. Instead of teaching someone how to write, I think our language leads us away from the very thing we want to do, often. We're using affected and overblown language—"the acquisition of writing skills"—good God! When you use language like that, who the hell wants any writing skills, you know? I mean, let me go to a movie or something.

CD Do you have any advice you'd especially give to beginning writers?

RH No, not really. I mean, the impulse to write, I think, is a curious thing and somehow is invested in some people and not in others. There's very little one can do about that. I mean, it's either there deep enough to sustain itself forever or it isn't, and I think it's nothing anybody ought to worry about. I just think, you know, just keep working—it's a very discouraging, very difficult thing to do—and I think, just don't let the discouragement and the difficulties stop you for too long at any one time. That's all I would tell young writers: it's hard, it's hard for everybody, and just hang in there. It's just an endurance

contest, is all. It's almost like anything, I think, in that respect. Don't look for great, overnight success. That's very rare.

CD Well, thank you very much.

RH Well, my pleasure, Carol.

(May 7, 1982)