

# Rick Campbell

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an excerpt from

## *What Thou Lovest Well*

. . . Once, when walking through Cincinnati in the flush of a blooming love affair, I tried to explain my reaction to the good poem. It was physical, I said—like watching Roberto Clemente play right field. When Clemente dove and slid on his belly to make a catch, or threw someone out at the plate from the base of the outfield wall, all I could do was shiver, whistle, yell, say *Wow* or *Shit*. I reacted. I couldn't respond critically. I couldn't say what the catch meant or adequately describe how Clemente did it. I just felt it. When Hugo says, "What we want to save grinds down finally to the place it happened," I come out of my chair. I try to be polite, but I have to do something. I know this is only a modern, ex-jock version of the classic Emily Dickinson response, but I like it.

When I first read Hugo I sensed that somehow he looked at things and felt the world as I did. I couldn't have said this then, and I didn't really know how I looked at things, but I could understand the gray places, the "magnesium / and scorn sufficient to support a town." Our inner landscapes were similar, but my scars weren't as deep as those of the man who spoke through those poems. In a landscape of need, Hugo created a richer, more painful scene than I knew: a land where "Cruelty and rain could be expected. / Any season." And the poet dreamed a land where

North surely was soft. North was death  
and women and the women soft. The tongue  
there was American and kind. Acres of women  
would applaud me as I danced, and acres  
of graves would dance when sun announced  
another cloud was dead.

In Hugo's towns I found the "certainty of failure / mined by a tyrant for its pale perverted ore." In my own town things weren't this bleak, but when we are young our failures seem as cold and long as a winter night's drive from Laramie to Missoula.

Emotionally, for reasons that seem clumsy and all too common now to be set down here, I felt marooned in a fading, endlessly confused land and life. Failure surrounded me like the worst days of a New England winter. At the risk of sounding too melodramatic, I'll say I had the Hugo landscape inside me. No other literature had ever given my life back to me so clearly, with so much grace. Did I feel better for it? I suppose. Things became less hopeless and I climbed out of self-pity, though perhaps not very far out of it. I began to see my life as material for poems. That in itself may not be good, but the making of poems showed me something I could do, something I wanted to do. It was an epiphany, a calling, and maybe a saving.

Sounds good. I would have made it anyway, but probably as a furniture mover or land surveyor. At that moment, and still, poetry gave and gives me a way to look at my life, to perform dangerous self-scrutiny and come away with something. That alone, in this world, is a great blessing. To be able to make simple things, to put my name on them, is important. We all knew this before critical theory and Marxism explained alienation, but not enough people get the chance to fight back.