Stephen Corey

an excerpt from

# *Letter to Hugo from Athens: An Introduction*

*You know the mind, how it comes on the scene again*
*and makes tiny histories of things. And the imagination*
*how it wants everything back one more time, how it detests*
*all progress but its own . . .*

—Richard Hugo, "Letter to Matthews
from Barton Street Flats"

*This is only to assure you, Art,*
*that in a nation that is no longer one but only an*
*amorphous collection of failed dreams, where we have been told*
*too often by contractors, corporations and prudes that*
*our lives don't matter, there is still a place where the soul*
*doesn't recognize laws like gravity, where boys catch trout*
*and that's important, where girls come laughing down the dirt road*
*to the forlorn store for candy.*

—Richard Hugo, "Letter to Oberg from Pony"

Dear Dick,

Over the past couple of decades I've traveled quite a bit on behalf of *The Georgia Review*, but I'd never made a trip specifically for research purposes until I chanced to learn about your early notebooks being housed in the library archives at the University of Montana. The tip came from a woman named Frances McCue, who has lovingly studied your life and work for many years now, and who even helped to found a flourishing poetry center bearing

your name—the Richard Hugo House—in an old residential neighborhood of Seattle, just over the hill from your early stomping grounds in White Center.

No, you didn't know Frances. She was almost forty years younger than you and didn't even hear of you until several years after your death in 1982. But she's been steadfast in promoting your poems as well as in trying both to verify and to imagine the sources of your remarkable talent and accomplishment. I had the good fortune to share a Seattle restaurant table with her in the late summer of 2005, after I had made a presentation at your House, and she told me then about her Hugo studies—and about those notebooks of yours. She had spent time with them and was convinced they contained a lot of material that deserved to be shared, but her own detailed studies were focused elsewhere: on the main repository of your papers at the University of Washington, on the Montana and Washington locales you made so movingly yours and ours in your poems, and on the insights she might glean from Ripley all these years after you'd left her a widow—and from some of your students and good friends who remain alive. So Frances was in essence offering me the gift of this particular area of your legacy. My gears began turning immediately and steadily, because my love for your work and my belief in its bedrock importance to American poetry—and life—has never wavered since I first picked up *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir* (1973) and *What Thou Lovest Well Remains American* (1975), shortly after the latter's release.

No, Dick, you don't know me, either—though you might recall me, depending on how memory works wherever you are now. I met you briefly in the spring of 1981 when you came to read at the University of South Carolina near the end of the first of my three years teaching there. Your work was genuinely hot in my mind at that time, so I'd read all the collections you'd published since I'd come across those mid-1970s poems—and that "all" was a lot, since those final ten years were *your* hot time, in various ways. Books such as *31 Letters and 13 Dreams* (1977), *White Center* (1980), *The Right Madness on Skye* (also 1980), plus your now classic essay collection, *The Triggering Town* (1979)—all of these were under my reader's and writer's belt when I arrived early to be sure I got a good seat at your performance.

You turned out to be the only other early arrival, sitting in a corner of the lobby adjoining the amphitheater-style classroom where you would read. Your fingers were laced across your ample belly, and you appeared to stare aimlessly across the way—your figure's presence a poster child for the term *squat*. (I'm not sure whether I noticed then that you carried no books or manuscripts—probably not—but at your reading I learned why: you recited all your work from

memory.) I adopted a boldness I did not really possess and approached you. You were congenial, and we spoke for the few moments that remained before other people began to arrive. I'm sorry that I don't remember anything either of us said; I realize now that I was in the shock of celebrity adoration, which can cause amnesia even when we believe we are being perfectly attentive.

What I do know is that that moment was the conception of the Spring 1983 issue of *The Devil's Millhopper*, the small independent poetry magazine I'd helped to found in 1977 and had worked with since. In 1981 I had already run across, and then continued to run across, many other writers who cited you as an important poet and influence. I decided to explore that phenomenon, both for itself and as a way of increasing the reach of my truly little publication. (Our subscription list in 1981 could be counted in the dozens, I think. *Maybe* we had a hundred.) I wrote to you about my plan a few months after your South Carolina stop, requesting your support in the form of an interview and some poems. You were again cordial, and you seemed—in your extended return letter—both flattered and appreciative. You said you would agree to the interview provided that you could ask the questions as well as answer them—you were tired of other people's predictable questions—and you would show me some new poems if any came to be available.

That issue of *The Devil's Millhopper* honoring you began to take shape, with invited submissions of poetry and prose coming in from such notables as Robert Dana, Gary Gildner, William Matthews, and William Stafford. Then, with a seeming suddenness that may have been entirely otherwise from your perspective, your health went south in a major way for the second time in the space of just a few years. The cancer you had thought entirely gone wasn't, and by the fall of 1982 you were dead. The promised self-interview and the new poems had not materialized; your issue of *The Devil's Millhopper*, still in production, would not be an honorific but a memorial.

Frances knew about that issue by the time I met her—I'd sent a copy to Ripley soon after it came out, and eventually I sent one for the Hugo House library—and its existence was instrumental in my landing that speaking engagement at the House. I'm sure she knew, in a benignly opportunistic way, that I'd perk up at the news about her research and your notebooks.

So here I am again, twenty-seven years after that first letter, writing to you about once more pushing your work before a wider audience because—as you said in "Reading at the Old Federal Courts Building, St. Paul"—we who claim some connection to the arts are constantly compelled "to demonstrate

how / worlds are put together, one fragment at a time." Frances is here in these pages, as she ought to be, anchoring the lineup with a substantial portion of her huge project; I think you'll be amused by, and proud of, the ways you keep coming literally alive in her efforts. I've also brought back your old poet friend Gary Gildner, to whom you allowed yourself to spout some uncharacteristically venomous political views when you wrote your "Letter to Gildner from Wallace." The closing of the houses of ill repute in that tiny Montana town—Lana Turner's birthplace—elicited your deep anger at all forms of hypocrisy: you said, "One thing about politicians, they can never be whores, / they're not honest enough," and then

> They wonder why no one believes in the system. What system?
> The cynical lean with the wind, whatever one's blowing,
> if you'll pardon the vulgar expression.

I had thought about reprinting here the wonderful little anecdote Gary told for that *Devil's Millhopper* gathering, "An Omelet for Dick Hugo," but he had a new one to offer and I went gladly with that instead. (See whether you can recall the New York City evening he describes.) But my thoughts also returned to the other works in that 1983 compilation, and I kept recognizing that many of them still deserve more readers. I couldn't just reprint that whole issue in this *Georgia Review*, of course, but I did decide to bring back three particularly fine pieces, all of which I'm convinced you would approve: your buddy William Matthews—who also wrote a fine introduction to *The Real West Marginal Way* (1986), the "autobiography" that Ripley put together (with the help of Lois and James Welch) from the papers you left behind—tells a smart two-pronged anecdote recalling his Colorado times with you; William Stafford, who managed to eke out twenty more years on the planet than you—nine before you and eleven after—was at your deathbed and used that experience to write a warm and insightful elegy; and Rick Campbell, a young poet barely thirty when you died, tells a detailed and moving story of the deep influence your work had on him from 1975 forward—an influence I'm certain you would have been proud to know of when you were here. (Or maybe you did. Campbell speaks of having one brief meeting with you, and who am I to assume the conversation didn't turn in that direction?)

I'm also including here something that might set you back a bit on your angelic heels: a handful of letters you wrote to your mother and stepfather during those middle-aged, between-marriages years (1964–72) when your Boeing-tech-writer-turned-poet's life was gaining traction. When Ripley showed me

those dutiful missives during my 2006 visit to Missoula, my first thought was that they were probably too insular for *The Georgia Review*'s smart-but-not-necessarily-deeply-entranced-by-poets-and-their-poetry readership. However, I soon came to realize that, like the best of all manner of letters, yours to the "folks" are finely revelatory of your essential character—which is, in turn, a key to the ways you saw the world and wrote your poetry. Don't worry, though—I'm not going to attempt a description of that "character" here; I'll let your letters explain you on their own to the readers of *this* letter, simply noting how engaged I was by your varied remarks about traveling in this country and in Italy; about the life of a writer in and out of academia and the teaching profession; about the impact on individuals of such momentous public events as the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.; and—let's face this, too—about the necessary negotiations, explicit and implicit, between parents and their adult children.

So, yes, I spent a couple of days in the home you shared with Ripley during what turned out to be the last large handful of your years. She was kind enough to invite me to stay there when I was in Missoula to do my research, so I spent time sitting at "your" round dining room table, the unlikely spot where you did a fair bit of your writing despite whatever bustle might sometimes have surrounded you. I was also privileged to sit in and to peruse your marvelous study, which Ripley has preserved—beautifully if eerily—just as it was when you died. Your poetry collection, especially of first-edition cloth volumes from the middle fifty years of the twentieth century, is astonishing. Sitting in front of a fire in your study's fireplace—October nights in Montana are not balmy—while touching and reading classic works by Eliot, Roethke, and others . . . well, you know what I felt.