

William Matthews

an excerpt from

*Hugo in Colorado**

LATE summer in Boulder, 1975, and Richard Hugo was arriving to begin a year as visiting professor. I drove down to town from my canyon house to meet him at Reg Saner's place, and we sat outside and talked.

Hugo is an anecdotalist: his conversation has long, sure arcs, and a steady bass line. He loves Dixieland and swing, with their utilitarian structures. The melody is stated (ABA one time through), improvisations follow, and then everyone gathers to the melody and rides out. He talks like this. It's tempting to make an easy analogy to the ways he writes, but one needs to remember that he also loves Mozart, whose structures are likewise solid (the sonata form is ABA, after a fashion) but whose spendthrift melodic invention is germane to Hugo, too.

He told a story that night about a cannibal in Glacier National Park. Something wild and inexplicable had driven a poor bastard to eat someone in the park.

I knew and loved Hugo's poems enough to see the appeal the story held for him. The cannibal had degraded himself in secret; indeed, his isolation and degradation were linked. He'd crossed a line and couldn't come back. He ate only one human, but he'd be a cannibal forever, and it's as if, retroactively, he had always been a cannibal, as if by eating someone he'd finally confronted his destiny.

The cannibal got in his car and drove west, picking up a hitchhiker now and then. In California he got stopped by the Highway Patrol for a routine tire-tread or emission control check. He pulled a finger bone from one pocket

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and confessed fervently, having found in the cop and a stunned hitchhiker a chance to tell his story, and also the misunderstanding audience he needed and felt he deserved.

Hugo rounded off his story: "Can you imagine what to say to this cannibal if you were the psychiatrist appointed to interview him first?" Reg Saner is mercurially quick, and had an answer. "First off, I'd tell him that it's wrong to eat people." We all rumbled, laughing. Saner's house is at the very base of the Flatirons, and it was freshly dark. He had provided sweaters for his guests. Boulder is only a boutique at the base of the Rockies, and the thick, mineral black of the mountains and the sharp dark of the mile-high air combined to remind us how the West could toss its huge shoulders and shrug off everything human. In 1975 I was a recent arrival from the East, and it would be years before I understood how much western space and geology meant to what Saner and Hugo said that night.

When it was time to break off and go home, we had ice cream. Hugo loves ice cream, promiscuous flavors like butterscotch ripple and mint chocolate chip. Certain versions of urban good taste (cassis, ginger) seem foolish in Missoula.