

Frances McCue

an excerpt from

Dreaming Richard Hugo

1. *Dreaming the Milltown*

Though I never met Richard Hugo, and though I didn't know that I wanted to meet him until long after he was already dead, I've been barging into his life for more than twenty years. In 1986, just after I moved to Seattle—from San Francisco, and before that, Massachusetts—I attended an academic symposium entitled “Remembering Richard Hugo.” There I watched William Stafford, James and Lois Welch, Carolyn Kizer, David Wagoner, and William Kittredge ruminate over their lost friend. I stood in the back of the room holding my skateboard, flicking the wheels. This was four years after Hugo had passed on; I was twenty-four years old.

Ten years later, after immersing myself in the essays of *The Triggering Town* and in all of those beautiful, stark, syntactically unique poems that Hugo had written, I founded a Seattle literary center with some friends: Richard Hugo House. Over the years, as the writing house grew and thrived, I became more and more involved with Hugo's friends and family. I continued to read his poems over and over, and I visited the towns Hugo had based them on. I interviewed his childhood friends, adult colleagues, past students, neighbors, and former Boeing co-workers. I even tried to reach his ex-wife Barbara and the nurse who took care of him for his final days in the hospital, but neither wanted to speak with me. These rejections made me even more curious about my subject, the dead poet from White Center, Washington, who wrote about overlooked, non-poetic people and places—guys stumbling from taverns, boys nailing fish to dock pilings, and rivers running “slow and sick.”

With letters and manuscript drafts from Special Collections at the University of Washington archives, and the interviews I conducted on video, I

began to see Richard Hugo as a real person. In a way, he became a sort of absent father to me. And since my own father *was* absent, this worked out well. Along the way, I started to write about Hugo and my pursuit of him. Then, my pages grew laced with apparitions; I'd dream my way into conversations with Hugo, using actual quotes from my findings in interviews, from my reading, and from the archives.

. . . Ripley, Lois, and I head up to Ripley's cabin near Choteau, in north central Montana. Lois will take the dogs and the gear in Ripley's car, following us or leading us at intervals. We'll drive, I'm imagining, the way Hugo drove in Annick Smith's film, tucked under a broad, sunny day with the landscape flipping past. Smith was an old friend of Hugo's; she knew him back in the early sixties when they'd both moved out from Seattle. In the seventies she shot the documentary, tracing Hugo back to White Center and through Montana. In much of the film, Hugo glides along in his Buick while his voice-over reads poems. We'll roll through a few of the places Hugo cites in his poems. I have my map with the towns circled, and I trace the route with my pen—up Highway 200 out of Milltown, and through Bonner, the old Stimpson Timber Mill town that Hugo mentions in a poem about a friend swimming in the Blackfoot River, "Where Jennie Used to Swim," and then further north. I'm driving a PT Cruiser the rental company woman gave me when the smallest car wasn't available. It's like driving some kind of retro dream, and though it's not a fat Buick low to the road, there's still a tinge of the past in it. Ripley sits on the passenger side, and Ida sleeps across the backseat. Our windows are halfway down as we motor from town; in early fall, the wind smells of sage and dirt.

After we've settled into the cabin and I've put my things on one of the beds with the red wool blankets, I'm ready for a run. I call little Ida and bid Lois and Ripley goodbye until dinner.

"Watch out for the bears," Ripley says. She is kidding only a bit. I decide to tie some bells onto Ida's collar. Lois is pouring drinks for the two of them, and she and Ripley are looking over the food stocks. Watching them, I see two older sisters; I can't believe my luck in having such friends. Hugo, it turns out, brought us together.

“Chili will be ready when you get back,” Lois says.

Out on the trail and then onto the gravel road, I’m looking up and starting to jog. In front of me is a row of mountains, gray and red rock, and a gap through them where the canyon goes, following the Teton River. I’m trying to find my breath, but it’s more difficult than usual. Looking up and balancing my footing at the same time, I’m panting all the while.

To my left is a wall of mountains stacked up like a row of cairns. They take on the shapes of faces. Over on the right is a ridge where Hugo and Ripley were filmed in *Kicking the Loose Gravel Home*.

Here, they walked as the wind from the aspens pushed at them and the view gave way to rock, salted against the sky. “We ripple aspen the way we move out / in the morning meadow wind,” Hugo wrote in “At the Cabin.”

If we tumble coupled down the rock side
bouncing from the last ledge out in sky
in final isolation like the eagle, like the bones
of Crees, we’ll shatter on the valley floor
separate as stars.

I want to walk that ridge, too, and I promise myself that I will before we leave.

On the forest road, as I make my way into the canyon away from the cabin, the gravel is a cream color until the road winds between the mountains and grows scant, taking on a blue tint. I’m running more slowly, trying to lift my arms so they can carry some of the burden of my legs, but my feet are scraping the road; the air is thin here, and I feel dizzy with my pace. Around the cottonwoods, through the jack pines along the river, the light startles me. Early evening tones always unravel me, especially when the yellows and whites hit just so. Here, they do.

Suddenly I’m next to the brow of a mountain, a row of cairn heads with pines on top. I can smell wet rocks from the river, see aspen leaves tremble like paper coins. The road curves around with the river until at one junction, just when I give up on running and stumble to a walk, the water shoulders up against the rock and forges a narrow crevice.

At the end of the path, where it meets the river, I’m immersed in the last swath of sunshine. It’s the perfect time to fish, at the close of afternoon light, the time when bears come to streams. I’ve taken a turn off the trail because I smelled that fresh rock and water scent, and I want to get to the source of it.

What I see, when I look up from the path, isn't a moose or an elk. I don't see a black bear or a cougar. What I see is a Buick: a dark-blue convertible, settled low to the ground. The taillights are in the shape of long fish. The car is the same one we followed from the other side of the high-grass prairie. Here it is, parked by the south fork of the Teton.

I have the feeling that I should know what is going to happen, but I'm not quick enough, so I set out to piece things together. The process is unsettling and thrilling at the same time—like coming into a place long described to you but never before visited, a past you might have been narrated into but had never trusted.

I walk past the car and see that it's pulled as far in as possible toward the clearing along the gravel bar. The Buick is so low that it looks as though it has probably taken a few swipes to its underbelly. The trunk is open partway, and inside is a lawn chair. I also catch a glimpse of a blue duffel bag and some propane lanterns. Even these things, ones any fisherman might toss into his car, look like they belong in my attic. I have the impulse to pick them up and take them home, except they are in someone else's car.

"Let me help you," Hugo says. "You'll need a chair, too." He's come up from behind, and for some reason I don't jump at the apparition. To see someone show up along a river in twilight, someone I've imagined for so long, doesn't, right this moment, feel strange at all. Something else takes over—the watcher inside who suspends disbelief and pivots toward the poet.

He nods toward the river. There, on a little spit projecting into the stream, he's perched his lawn chair—an aluminum frame with faux-canvas bands woven across it.

"Jesus," he groans. Opening the door to the Buick, even for Hugo, is like prying open a sealed box. A puff of dust and a pop of air escape, and when he leans into the back seat, a moldy odor is released. The car stinks of old cigarettes—really old, as if they hadn't been smoked in years but the car would forever carry the stench. I am reminded of wet upholstery rotting from the inside. He pulls the chair out. The door squeals and lurches closed.

The hinges on this chair are rusty, and it's a struggle to push them open. I'm wrangling with the thing, and I have no idea what to say; I'm in the middle of a crazy poem, and my mouth is hanging open.

"Atta girl," Hugo says when the chair creaks and its frame bends back like an envelope pulled wide. He reaches over and takes my chair, angling it toward his own, and he moves aside a bucket, the one I suppose he brought for the

cutthroat he hopes to catch. "There's a good spot," he says, pointing next to his own armrest. As he sits down, slowly and with a hand behind him to feel his way into the chair, his weight pushes against the straps. From behind, he's like a too-big loaf pushed into a small breadbox.

Partly, I want to push my seat all the way over to his; I want to get a good close-up. But, I'm afraid of the moment, too—the wash of intimacy, of being as visible to him as he is to me.

As he turns toward me—that's when I study his face. His eyes are half closed and bloodshot, but there's a light in them, a tiny lamp of focus. He's looking at me, and his mouth opens with a laugh. Some of his teeth have gold caps. Here he is forever middle-aged, and I am much younger. With rounded shoulders, he is leaning to the right as if his leg were shorter on that side, and I realize how I've miscalculated his size all this time. Hugo is not as tall as I'd thought. As this realization forms, I recognize it as a truth trying to make its way into the world and that, sadly, I am its only conduit.

He leans out, grabs the armrest of my chair, and drags it across the gravel, closer to him.

I sit down in the chair and ease forward, taking off my jacket. "Any nibbles?" I ask.

"Not a thing. But there's something jumping in that eddy by the jack pine over there." He points across the rush of water.

The late afternoon darkens the river, and I stare out, trying to see what Hugo is glimpsing: the little eddies and currents and ticks of bugs against the water obscuring the fish mouthing the surface. I watch Hugo squint and take a pull from a long-neck Budweiser he has picked up from the sandy earth beside the chair. He pinches a single golden salmon egg from a little jar and slips it onto a shiny hook.

"Do you ever fly-fish?" I ask. This is Montana, after all—home of *A River Runs Through It*. The movie was long after Hugo's time, I realize just as I say this.

"Nope. Who could catch a fish with a fake fly? Only Jim Welch can do that."

"It's artistic," I say. I feel clumsy, as if I'm starting an argument that I don't want to start, or making up the whole conversation for both of us.

"Artistic my ass," he growls. "It doesn't get the job done. Besides, it's too much work. I'm here to sit in a chair and watch things." He picks up his fishing rod. "Christ, yes, what I really wanted to do was fish. Poetry came from something else. We were on our way to fish when I found these towns, or else

on the way back from fishing, which is when I got my drinking done.” His laugh extends, almost a guffaw.

Still breathing deeply from my run, I look around for Ida. She’s not in the river or playing on the bank. I decide not to imagine what animals might have taken her by the scruff of her neck. Things worry me, even out here along the south fork of the Teton River. For one, Richard Hugo is sitting next to me, and I want to ask him about his poems, and then I want to know about his clothes, what is in the cooler, whether he is lonesome.

“Did you like it when you had a daughter and a son?” I ask, watching Hugo pull his rod to and fro. What I really wonder is, could he ever take care of anyone? Could he run a household and take a child out for a ballgame? Did he push his hands across Melissa’s and Matthew’s hair, soothing them to sleep?

“Yes. Sure I did,” he says. “Finding that family was like that moment when I was a kid, that time I was looking out over the hills, beyond our neighborhood. In those days we thought of Seattle as a series of four hills—First Hill, Third Hill—and I realized, looking out, that I would write poems all my life.”

“You just knew?”

“I’d have to know,” he laughs. “Otherwise, what would a guy from White Center, a guy who was going to bomb people in the war and come home and work at Boeing—what would he ever be doing writing poems?”

He shakes his head as though his own idea were unfathomable to him. “I knew what it was like, even then, to be in love with my own responses to things.” He turns and looks at me. “Ripley and those kids—they gave me a place to have those responses.”

My throat is clogging up. I want to know what each of those responses was—how it felt when his grandfather beat him or when his mother came to visit, bringing her new husband along and then leaving without her son as he watched her boat nose its way across the sound to Bremerton. I want to know if being left behind felt to him as it had felt to me, a child also raised, for part of her childhood, by her grandparents and her single mother.

I want to say, “How did you get over being an outsider?” Instead, I watch Hugo pick up the fishing rod and cut off the worn, golden hook with some fingernail clippers. I can’t say anything.

“Come on, kid,” he says. “You’re thinking too much. Being an outsider is what you’ve got.” He shuffles the chair a bit, digging the legs into the sand.

If I said, “Hey, I know. I’m outside everything—can’t you tell that?” our paths might have converged in a new way. Instead, I unwrap a piece of gum.

Hugo pushes back in the chair. "Drink?" he asks.

"Okay," I say.

He unscrews the Thermos and pours whatever it is into a metal cup that he digs out from underneath the chair. It looks like coffee. Then he takes a bottle from a bag next to him and unscrews the lid. I think it is peppermint schnapps. "Gives the coffee a lift," he says.

We both sit, quiet in the light, next to the river. I strain to hear the jingle of my dog's collar and tags, and the bells I tied to her, but I can't hear anything except the river over rocks. I can taste the schnapps concoction, just like an Irish coffee, and I can smell the dry husks of buffalo grass around the river.

"Well, I've been looking for you for a while now," I say. The coffee pricks the back of my mouth. "I mean, I've been wondering about you." My words, hurried and junked together, disrupt the tone of the water's shuffle over rocks and the image of Hugo dipping a line into the river.

"Yes," he says, "I suppose you have. It's something that comes from the poems, don't you see?" He pulls a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and knocks them against the armrest until one ekes its way out and he pinches it up to his mouth.

I feel as if I'm watching a butcher or a tradesman with stubby, thick hands as he carves meat or lays pipe. But this is Richard Hugo, and I know that he's a poet and he's going to head home to the kitchen table where his wife will pour his coffee, and he'll scrawl through some drafts and have them typed by the department secretary. He'll see the children in the yard; he'll think of all those places where he's been swept up in longing, and out those words will come.

My dog's yelp pierces the canyon and rises above the river water. "Ida," I shout. "Come!"

She runs across the rocks and, panting, trots up and leans against my leg. We turn back to the cabin where we will be with women whom Hugo loved. There is no Buick parked when I pass the spot.

My head is squeezed, and I'm dizzy in the twilight and the altitude. As I walk along a trail from the river to the gravel road, my vision seems as though it's being pulled on a cart alongside me, jerky and low to the ground. Ahead, the sun lights a tissue-crumple of clouds. I've come to Ripley's cabin, a place where Hugo was once an outsider and then was most himself. There, he'd cleaned trout on the little porch table, the one sunned in eastern light; he'd heaved buckets of water up to the railing posts; he'd lain down on top of the

red blankets and closed his eyes. I would do the same. We would overlap, Hugo and I, in this familiar place with the people he'd loved.