William Stafford

*Richard Hugo, Poet: 1923–82**

FAME of a special kind—narrow, but very intense—had found Richard Hugo at the end of his life, which came at Seattle's Virginia Mason Hospital on October 22, 1982, after a succession of illnesses: he and his health were monitored by his band of admirers, through telephone calls and notes, and then out along a network of information back and forth among themselves.

From his hospital bed Hugo stayed his characteristic self, his voice strong as he treated serious things as a joke, as usual: "God—I'm fifty-nine years old—this is getting serious!"† And his wife Ripley was on hand for consulting while Hugo conducted the drama of his life with expressions of sympathy, excitement, and wry complaint, keeping in touch.

Among other poets, even though he was one of the most approachable of people, he was regarded with awe: he had been a technical writer for Boeing; he had played baseball; he had drunk with many a hearty companion, and caught fish in streams with wonderful names. And his poems delivered, with accuracy and fervor, those parts of his life.

A strange figure for a poet, to most people, he was burly and gruff. His poems had a thump to them; and he read to large, appreciative audiences with an extra emphasis, not disguising the straight, hard-driving lines. It would be hard to call their cadences graceful, but their meaning was graceful. Their steady, caring perceptivity was graceful.

In his breezy, risky way, he allowed what he said and wrote to lurch around and surprise people. His prose, for instance, is stealthily artful—in an

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†Hugo was actually two months shy of his fifty-ninth birthday.

elbowy way. He was not afraid to make abrupt commitments, and then to refine them. When he wrote about Theodore Roethke as teacher—Roethke almost an idol among Northwest writers—there was no obeisance to the master: "Sometimes he read poems aloud and then couldn't explicate them clearly when he tried. I think he often didn't understand much of what he read." This offhand judgment is from a chapter of Hugo's *The Triggering Town* in which Roethke is being lavishly credited for particular accomplishments—but not for all accomplishments.

Hugo and Stafford, c. 1965. Courtesy of Ripley Hugo.

Hugo's fame among poets began when he was conjured out of his job at Boeing in the early 1960s and enticed to teach writing at the University of Montana by Warren Carrier—the Wyatt Earp of that English department, hired to ride in and bring order to what had been chaos. Hugo flourished there—"Professor of Poetry," he chortled. And generations of students drifted into his aura in Missoula, off the ranches and reservations, even from The East; and once in the spell of Rattlesnake Canyon and the circle of writers in Missoula, they eddied around, reluctant to forsake the atmosphere created for artists in that environment.

The heavy, shambling spirit was Hugo, who conducted excited conversations about craft and substance in class—and around the bottle on the kitchen table in his old house near the campus, besieged by Montana storms but surrounded by pictures, messages, clippings, broadsides, recipes, manuscripts of poems, reminders, and odd indecipherable scraps of paper tacked, nailed, clipped, pasted, wired, hooked, and magnetized to cupboards, walls, refrigerator, and stove.

What was it that entranced this life for those who came to know it? Richard Hugo had learned how to savor loneliness, how to salvage and at the

same time to celebrate failure and neglect. He put a tang of sweetness into the spectacle of sadness. Students could fail and succeed in an atmosphere of acceptance. A champion of slobs and losers, Hugo balanced pity and love while doing his own awkward dance of existence.

To see him caring for his guests was to realize a new level of generosity. With what a wistful, piteous concern he peered into the fridge at night, fearful that the stores might close and leave the party lacking in ice cream!

In later years, Hugo could no longer claim failure and loneliness. He and his wife Ripley ("My marriage has brought me such happiness that it is depriving me of the sorrows and images that enlivened my writings") entertained streams of grateful writers in their home; and the two of them traveled—a year on the Isle of Skye and a revisiting of Italy, where Dick traversed and vibrated to the scenes of his service on a bombing plane in World War II. When they came back it was to reading circuits, prizes, a post for Hugo as judge of the Yale Series of Younger Poets.

He couldn't claim failure and loneliness anymore.

But he never forgot where those companions of his earlier years had been, and where they lurked still, for himself and for everyone. The power of his stance—and the abiding quality in his poems—comes from a perception that never wavered: each person has need; each person will die; each person stares out of a story full of suspense and surrounded by mystery.