

Stanley Plumly

REMEMBERING HUGO

James Welch tells the story that when Richard Hugo was doing a visiting teaching stint at the Iowa Writers Workshop--this is now some thirty years ago--Welch went to visit him. It should be no surprise to anyone who knew Hugo that he lived on the edge of Iowa City in a trailer park--whether by choice or because housing for visitors was tight. (This was the same trailer park, by the way, that Flannery O'Conner thrived in when she was student at the Workshop.) It was a Saturday, there had been the usual weekend Workshop party, with lots of poetry and fiction talk, lots of catching up on the week past, and lots of winter drinking. Welch and Hugo got back to Hugo's trailer in the very wee hours, so wee, in fact, that Welch recalled that by the time he got to bed--which consisted of the couch in the combination living room, dining room, kitchen--dawn was breaking. One of my own great memories of Dick--other than his beautiful flat dark understated voice and his Hugo-wide broad forehead--is his Buddha-body, a fountain of space filled large, a presence of enormous physical and soulful displacement, especially when sitting. And like the Buddha, Dick gave off a vital force from the seated position. So here's Jim Welch trying to fall into a deep restoring sleep, with his head propped at a bad angle on the arm of the couch, the sun just starting to come up. And sleep he did, for about an hour. Then suddenly he wakes up, with a knot in his neck, opens his eyes and tries to focus. It's that ghostly gray time of the morning when it's hard to pick things out. But finally he's in no doubt

that Hugo, who has not slept at all, is sitting in his underwear across the way at the kitchen table-- huge, in silence, with a sixteen ounce can of beer in his hand, which Hugo lifts, as much in a toast to his guest as to greet the dawn. "Seize the day, Jim, seize the day."

Of course this story is funny, but as with all Hugo stories it's also extremely poignant--and a powerful emblem of the power, tragic and comic, in Hugo's poetry. These were hard years in Hugo's life, a time when a lot of things were catching up with him. The looming figure in the trailer is exactly the character who would end up in Philipsburg, bereft of even his last good kiss.

Richard Howard once described Dick as a stand-up tragedian. And if you ever heard Hugo read, or recite, his poems before an audience you know what Howard meant. Hugo, I think, was the most compelling reader of a poet's own work I've heard. It wasn't just the size and projection of the voice: it was its tone, its timbre. both immensely vulnerable and absolutely in command. Sliding into a poem--say, the sad heavy memory of 'White Center' or the droll 'Plans for Altering the River' or an American classic like 'What Thou Lovest Well Remains American'-- Dick would go into a kind of trance, as if he were at this moment writing the poem out loud; his eyes would sort of close, and the great deep basal choir inside him would take over. Part of his power was in the working-class

pentameter that builds his poems--a flint-and-steel, brick-and-mortar yet drum-and-fife pattern that moves inevitably, inexorably across the space. The poems were already vocal, spoken, just on the page, almost martial in their pace. Over and over again, declaration, narration, qualification, meditation. You could hear, if you really listened, your own father's--and Roethke's father's--big voice, the voice of authority and joy's gravity, the voice of residual alcohol and smoke, richness and texture. The poems were full, alive, massive in their feel, but also smart and wise, and, most of all, complex. And what the poems were saying was that everything grand was also lost; everything close and cherished was also, somehow, anonymous; everything lifted was also meant to be, necessarily, put back down. The light and the dark, the whole rainbow of our experience realized as a single color: gray, that admixture of resignation and passion, reconciliation and anger. Gray was Hugo's flag.

For me, Hugo's lasting importance has a great deal to do with his sense of and commitment to the elevation of the broken life, the dead-end circumstance, the hopeless hope, what thou lovest well. What is moving in his poetry is his ability to raise these poverties to richness and tragedy. There is, perhaps not so oddly, in the feeling life of his work a resident happiness, because there is so much courage. In the Second World War, when he was a fly-boy, he would go up every day in those B-24's on their long bombing missions, riding the line of fighter attack and ground fire. And every day he would get sick, since he was afraid to fly. But that was his business.

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