Classic Poetry Series

Richard Hugo

- poems -

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Death Of The Kapowsin Tavern

I can't ridge it back again from char.
Not one board left. Only ash a cat explores
and shattered glass smoked black and strung
about from the explosion I believe
in the reports. The white school up for sale
for years, most homes abandoned to the rocks
of passing boys--the fire, helped by wind
that blew the neon out six years before,
simply ended lots of ending.

A damn shame. Now, when the night chill
of the lake gets in a troller's bones
where can the troller go for bad wine
washed down frantically with beer?
And when wise men are in style again
will one recount the two-mile glide of cranes
from dead pines or the nameless yellow
flowers thriving in the useless logs,
or dots of light all night about the far end
of the lake, the dawn arrival of the idiot
with catfish--most of all, above the lake
the temple and our sanctuary there?

Nothing dies as slowly as a scene.
The dusty jukebox cracking through
the cackle of a beered-up crone--
wagered wine--sudden need to dance--
these remain in the black debris.
Although I know in time the lake will send
wind black enough to blow it all away.

Richard Hugo

Degrees Of Gray In Philipsburg

You might come here Sunday on a whim.
Say your life broke down. The last good kiss
you had was years ago. You walk these streets
laid out by the insane, past hotels
that didn't last, bars that did, the tortured try
of local drivers to accelerate their lives.
Only churches are kept up. The jail
turned 70 this year. The only prisoner
is always in, not knowing what he's done.

The principal supporting business now
is rage. Hatred of the various grays
the mountain sends, hatred of the mill,
The Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls
who leave each year for Butte. One good
restaurant and bars can't wipe the boredom out.
The 1907 boom, eight going silver mines,
a dance floor built on springs--
all memory resolves itself in gaze,
in panoramic green you know the cattle eat
or two stacks high above the town,
two dead kilns, the huge mill in collapse
for fifty years that won't fall finally down.

Isn't this your life? That ancient kiss
still burning out your eyes? Isn't this defeat
so accurate, the church bell simply seems
a pure announcement: ring and no one comes?
Don't empty houses ring? Are magnesium
and scorn sufficient to support a town,
not just Philipsburg, but towns
of towering blondes, good jazz and booze
the world will never let you have
until the town you came from dies inside?

Say no to yourself. The old man, twenty
when the jail was built, still laughs
although his lips collapse. Someday soon,
he says, I'll go to sleep and not wake up.
You tell him no. You're talking to yourself.
The car that brought you here still runs.
The money you buy lunch with,
no matter where it's mined, is silver
and the girl who serves your food
is slender and her red hair lights the wall.

Richard Hugo

Farmer, Dying

for Hank and Nancy

Seven thousand acres of grass have faded yellow
from his cough. These limp days, his anger,
legend forty years from moon to Stevensville,
lives on, just barely, in a Great Falls whore.
Cruel times, he cries, cruel winds. His geese roam
unattended in the meadow. The gold last leaves
of cottonwoods ride Burnt Fork creek away.
His geese grow fat without him. Same old insult.
Same indifferent rise of mountains south,
hunters drunk around the fire ten feet from his fence.

What's killing us is something autumn. Call it
war or fever. You know it when you see it: flare.
Vine and fire and the morning deer come half
a century to sip his spring, there, at the far end
of his land, wrapped in cellophane by light.
What lives is what he left in air, definite,
unseen, hanging where he stood the day he roared.
A bear prowls closer to his barn each day.
Farmers come to watch him die. They bring crude offerings
of wine. Burnt Fork creek is caroling. He dies white
in final anger. The bear taps on his pane.

And we die silent, our last days loaded with the scream
of Burnt Fork creek, the last cry of that raging farmer.
We have aged ourselves to stone trying to summon
mercy for ungrateful daughters. Let's live him
in ourselves, stand deranged on the meadow rim
and curse the Baltic back, moon, bear and blast.
And let him shout from his grave for us.

Richard Hugo

Letter To Kizer From Seattle

Dear Condor: Much thanks for that telephonic support
from North Carolina when I suddenly went ape
in the Iowa tulips. Lord, but I'm ashamed.
I was afraid, it seemed, according to the doctor
of impending success, winning some poetry prizes
or getting a wet kiss. The more popular I got,
the softer the soft cry in my head: Don't believe them.
You were never good. Then I broke and proved it.
Ten successive days I alienated women
I liked best. I told a coed why her poems were bad
(they weren't) and didn't understand a word I said.
Really warped. The phrase "I'll be all right"
came out too many unsolicited times. I'm o.k. now.
I'm back at the primal source of poems: wind, sea
and rain, the market and the salmon. Speaking
of the market, they're having a vital election here.
Save the market? Tear it down? The forces of evil
maintain they're trying to save it too, obscuring,
of course, the issue. The forces of righteousness,
me and my friends, are praying for a storm, one
of those grim dark rolling southwest downpours
that will leave the electorate sane. I'm the last poet
to teach the Roethke chair under Heilman.
He's retiring after 23 years. Most of the old gang
is gone. Sol Katz is aging. Who isn't? It's close now
to the end of summer and would you believe it
I've ignored the Blue Moon. I did go to White Center,
you know, my home town, and the people there,
many are the same, but also aging, balking, remarkably
polite and calm. A man whose name escapes me
said he thinks he had known me, the boy who went alone
to Longfellow Creek and who laughed and cried
for no reason. The city is huge, maybe three quarters
of a million and lots of crime. They are indicting
the former chief of police. Sorry to be so rambling.
I eat lunch with J. Hillis Miller, brilliant and nice
as they come, in the faculty club, overlooking the lake,
much of it now filled in. And I tour old haunts,
been twice to Kapowsin. One trout. One perch. One poem.
Take care, oh wisest of condors. Love. Dick. Thanks again.

Richard Hugo

The Church On Comiaken Hill

for Sydney Pettit

The lines are keen against today's bad sky
about to rain. We're white and understand
why Indians sold butter for the funds
to build this church. Four hens and a rooster
huddle on the porch. We are dark
and know why no one climbed to pray. The priest
who did his best to imitate a bell
watched the river, full of spirits, coil
below the hill, relentless for the bay.

A church abandoned to the wind is portent.
In high wind, ruins make harsh music.
The priest is tending bar. His dreams have paid
outrageous fees for stone and mortar.
His eyes are empty as a chapel
roofless in a storm. Greek temples seem
the same as forty centuries ago.
If we used one corner for a urinal,
he wouldn't swear we hadn't worshipped here.

The chickens cringe. Rain sprays chaos where
the altar and the stained glass would have gone
had Indians not eaten tribal cows
one hungry fall. Despite the chant,
salmon hadn't come. The first mass
and a phone line cursed the river.
If rain had rhythm, it would not be Latin.

Children do not wave as we drive out.
Like these graves ours may go unmarked.
Can we be satisfied when dead
with daffodils for stones? These Indians--
whatever they once loved or used for God--
the hill--the river--the bay burned by the moon--
they knew that when you die you lose your name.

Richard Hugo

Underwater Autumn

Now the summer perch flips twice and glides
a lateral fathom at the first cold rain,
the surface near to silver from a frosty hill.
Along the weed and grain of log he slides his tail.

Nervously the trout (his stream-toned heart
locked in the lake, his poise and nerve disgraced)
above the stirring catfish, curves in bluegill dreams
and curves beyond the sudden thrust of bass.

Surface calm and calm act mask the detonating fear,
the moving crayfish claw, the stare
of sunfish hovering above the cloud-stained sand,
a sucker nudging cans, the grinning maskinonge.

How do carp resolve the eel and terror here?
They face so many times this brown-ribbed fall of leaves
predicting weather foreign as a shark or prawn
and floating still above them in the paling sun.

Richard Hugo