

1972

# Hot Springs

Richard Hugo

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landscapes. Within that range all that is old in Italy gives fully of itself, not because it is mellifluously Italian (the hurt he knows well is here too) but because nothing in any of his worlds is without reference to the human, and the human in the voice is now triumphantly emergent and aware of the fullest meanings. What these poems completed in the movement of self that began with the earliest poems was taken back to the West, to Montana's towns, streams and Indians. It may be that Hugo had to step out of his home for awhile to complete himself. When he returned from the Italian interlude he settled into subsequent poems with a skilled comfort that found no corners closed off to him:

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 you food  
is slender and her red hair lights the wall.  
(“Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg”)

Hugo has spoken of Roethke's influence on him and of his early interest in the poems of Bernard Spencer, who deserves more than the unheard praise of aficionados. But his true relations are with poets like William Stafford, on whom Hugo has written, and with the great Welshman R. S. Thomas. Both Hugo and Thomas—and Stafford, to some extent—are tied deeply into elemental things that never change, and each stares hard at the people who differ little from those elements. These poets, and a few others like them, hold onto the minimally enduring with a fervid conservatism that has nothing to do with politics and everything with people for whom no change seems possible. These cold pastorals come down from Wordsworth, who taught us all to see starkness with a compassion that cannot bubble but opens a place for warmth where there had been only hardness. Hugo fits in this line, whose significance in our time we ought to recognize, though there are not now many poets who work in it. Of those who do he is one of the best. That should suffice for anyone's distinction.

## Two Poems by Richard Hugo

### HOT SPRINGS

You arrived arthritic for the cure,  
therapeutic qualities of water  
and the therapeutic air. Twenty-five  
years later you limp out of bars  
hoping rumors will revive, some doctor  
will discover something curative

in natural steam. You have a choice  
of abandoned homes to sleep in.  
Motels constructed on the come  
went broke before the final board  
was nailed. Operative still:  
your tainted fantasy and the delux hotel.

You have ached taking your aches up the hill.  
Another battery of tests. Terrible probe  
of word and needle. Always the fatal word—  
when we get old we crumble. They wave  
from the ward and you creak back down  
to streets with wide lots between homes.  
When that rare tourist comes, you tell him  
you're not forlorn. There are advantages here—  
easy pace of day, slow circle of sun.

If some day a cure's announced, for instance  
the hot springs work, you will walk young  
again in Spokane, find startling women,  
you wonder why you feel empty and frown  
and why goodbyes are hard. You go out healthy  
on the gray long road and when you look back  
no one is waving. They kept no record  
of your suffering, wouldn't know you  
if you returned, without your cane, your grin.

#### LETTER TO STAFFORD FROM POLSON

Dear Bill: We don't know the new heavy kind of wolf  
killing calves, but we've seen it and it's anything but gray.  
We have formed a new heavy kind of posse  
and we're fanning the Mission range for unique tracks.  
The new wolf is full of tricks. For instance, yesterday  
he sat all afternoon in a bar disguised as a trout  
and none of us caught on. He's a wily one.  
He even went home drunk and of course weaving slow,  
passed two cars of cops and the Union '76  
the usually sharp reliable and somewhat sly one runs.  
I guess we're not observant. Aside from the wolf  
things go well. This is where you may recall you stood  
looking at Flathead Lake and uttered a Stafford line.