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With Ripley at the Grave of Albert Parenteau

Richard Hugo

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are hunted down, fair game, to turn on spits
and freshen the mouth's appetite for wine,
I once for three acts watched a sparrow flutter
around an opera house's chandelier
while every eye was fixed upon Mimi
and no one noticed the bird until he dropped
dead on the stage abaft of the soprano.

With Ripley at the Grave of Albert Parenteau / Richard Hugo

He is twice blessed, the old one buried here
beneath two names and a plastic bouquet from Choteau.
He lived his grief out full. From this hill
where Crees bury their dead to give them a view,
he can study the meadow, the mountains
back of mountains, the Teton canyon winding into stone.
I want to say something wrong,
say, this afternoon they are together again,
he and the wife he killed by mistake in the dark
and she forgives him. I don't want to admit
it's cold alone in the ground and a cold run
from Canada with a dog and two bottles of rye.

Say he counted stones along the bottom of the Teton
and the stones counted him one of them.
He scrubbed and scrubbed and never could
rid his floor of her stain.
He smashed his radio and the outside world
that came from it, and something like a radio hum
went on in him the slow rest of his life.
This is the first time I knew his white name.

We won't bring him real flowers this afternoon
jammed with the glitter of lupin and harebells.
This is the west and depth is horizontal.
We climb for a good view of canyons and we are never
higher than others, never a chief like him.

His grave is modern. His anguish goes back—
the first tone from struck rock. You and I,
we're civilized. We can't weep when it's needed or counts.
If you die first, I'll die slow as Big Bear,
my pale days thin with age,
night after night, the stars callow as children.

Getty / Richard Hugo

Today, I remembered Getty, the old man
at Price's lake who rented boats and coughed
and told me he was gone. Moss caked his lungs
and a sky I'd forgotten drifted in his eyes.
The brooks I caught were dazzling and wild.
I shouted 'Lord love Getty' at the trees.
Nothing came back. The young sheen of willows
hung over cedars dark and grumpy with age.

I came back early next spring but Getty
prophetically blue, had gone, that winter
I stayed home in Seattle and wrote hard
to make 'alive' and 'violent' do for the sky.

Some days the fish don't bite. You know that.
And we die at wrong times, like Friday.
Whatever day Getty died, it could not be special
or wrong, an old man like him, alone
with a lake, no urge to go after trout
and no particular feeling when nylon
arcs out over the water, hangs that one moment
all moments pulse, first kiss, first soft light
in the eyes of the girl who seemed nothing last week,
and settles soft as a far teal
and waits.

Let's see. What happened today: a mild fight
in the tenure meeting. We voted nine to one 'no.'