

“YOU ARE SOMEONE AND HAVE A RIGHT TO YOUR LIFE”

By Larry Tyle

These words of encouragement come from poet/author Richard Hugo in his book *The Triggering Town*, a collection of essays and lectures aimed at aspiring writers. Entertaining and filled with very practical information, it is now used as a text in writing programs across the country. Advice comes in aphorisms: “You owe reality nothing and truth about your feelings everything. ... In the world of imagination, all things belong. ... Think small....If you can’t think small, try philosophy or social criticism.”

One might say that good poems come from a rich life experience and end up on the page in the poet’s own unique mode of expression. Hugo’s CV certainly encompasses many of life’s harsh realities: being orphaned as a youth, flying 35 bombing missions as a B-24 bombardier in World War II, divorce, alcoholism. His poetry hits hard like a plane crash, yet often reaches a transformative resolution. “Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg,” a poem about the decline of a small town, ends with this passage:

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.

Hugo was establishing himself as a poet even as he wrote for pay as a technical writer for the Boeing Aircraft Company. In 1948 he took classes at the University of Washington from famed poet Theodore Roethke. His classmates included David Wagoner, Carolyn Kizer, and James Wright, who also became recognized poets—and his lifetime friends. Hugo’s first book of

poems, *A Run of Jacks*, was published in 1961. Many of its subjects derived from his experience as a sport fisherman.

All Hugo's subjects are skillfully transformed to elements of story in poems that reflect keen observations of the life around him. "Missoula Softball Tournament" reaches its climax in this resonant passage:

... Under lights, the moths
are momentary stars, and wives, the beautiful wives
in the stands now take the interest they once feigned,
oh, long ago, their marriage just begun, years
of helping husbands feel important just begun,
the scrimping, the anger brought home evenings
from degrading jobs. This poem goes out to them.

In 1964 Hugo was invited to be visiting lecturer at the University of Montana, Missoula, where he would later become Professor of English. As his stature grew, he was invited to conduct workshops in the Northwest and across the country. I had the opportunity to attend a Hugo workshop presented by PSU as part of the Haystack conference, an annual event held at Cannon Beach. It was theater—entertaining and definitely a learning experience. No question the poet held sway. He would roar with laughter at a clumsy attempt at verse, then kindly criticize. He would encourage us, "Love the language; find your own favorite words."

Hugo died suddenly of leukemia in 1982. During his lifetime, he produced 13 books of poems. He will be remembered as a regional/Northwest poet with national significance. A collection of all his poetry, *Making Certain It Goes On*, is available from the Oregon Poetry Collection at the Oregon State Library. In Seattle, the Richard Hugo House stands in his memory, a place for aspiring writers and performers to develop their creative talents.