

MOVIES IN A SMALL TOWN

Poems by Walter E. Butts

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ABSTRACT OF THE VOLUME

This creative thesis contains thirty-four poems, an abstract of a critical paper, and a full bibliography of readings completed during my tenure in the Master of Fine Arts Program from January, 1993 through January, 1995.

Of the thirty-four poems, six have been published, or are forthcoming in literary magazines. The remaining poems are finished, and are currently being considered for publication. The manuscript was conceived and written while I was a student in the Program. It is divided into four sections, arranged to follow a progression, beginning with themes of self and relationships with family and others, then moving from a sense of change onto a sequence developing aspects of the inner self, followed by a section connecting with the outer world and family again, then concluding with a broader view, having confronted the past, the self, and the interiors of the mind.

The abstract of my critical paper, "Reinventing the Self: Despair and Transcendence in the Poetry of Richard Hugo," outlines my goals and conclusions in this study.

The bibliography includes readings completed during my four semester projects, as well as those read for participation in the two-week residency periods.

January 1995

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THE COMMUTER

It hardly seems worth it, to live,
I mean, so far away from work.
The woman on the bus sitting
next to me shakes off her sleep.
A man enters his life's equations
onto the eerie green glow
of a lap-top computer. Behind me,
a woman talks incessantly
through her phobia of silence.
The driver plays morning news.
I prefer the one most libelous newspaper.
My life then is somehow honest. This week
has been downsizing and a failed deal.
Yesterday, in the office, I swear
I almost wept. At night I screamed
awake from a dream of cats with
horrible human faces. 3:00 a.m.,
our cat was crying for its food.
I don't know why I want it all
to last -- this job that has me
traveling sixty miles, my restrained
and modest marriage, the kids' good
grades in school, even the baby's
relentless need. Still,
everyday I join the anonymous walk
from one office building to another,
then rise and return from the city's
slow burn and smoke. Lately, I imagine
instead of stopping at our towns,
we keep traveling together until we become
the only world we know, like one of those
lost expeditions of arctic explorers
who, when discovered after years
of ingenuity and survival, no longer
devour each other from hunger,
but for the ritual.

DAY TREATMENT

At the top of the subway stairs,
eyes popping like an astronaut
who has just been unhooked,
he knows
he is a bright flash, then nothing.

He grips the railing like a child
making its first tentative way
through a terrifying new world.
He is like a man
with a gun barrel in his mouth.

I tell him not to be afraid.
I lie, and say everyone's safe.
This is what my work is,
to have the mind believe in itself,

even when it can't imagine a foot
descending down the next step.
I take his hand
and we go together into the screaming.

LOST

You began with death. Your mother falling in her seventh month, so you did not know your stillborn brother. Your father, who had your name, and never had enough money, is now dark. Later, you learned how love dies, gasping with the best intentions. Never mind the parents of innocence. This is your room. They are gone. What if the moonlight that pierces this window etched you a new name in the shadows, would the lamps go black, and the street become loud as memory? You can sleep alone in a bed in a city where snow piles up on the flat rooftops until the sun's heat pushes it off, but you cannot forget. You can rearrange the books, listen to music, tell yourself a story, but you will remember when she was with you. No one knows you, or cares what you've done. You live in a city where the poor are eating their shadows, and desire has emptied out the air. Somewhere a piano is playing the last long note of sleep, and you remember. Something you said made her angry. She turned and left. You were like a child praying for a way home through the darkness, promising anything.

SOLITUDE

I walk out to the mailbox and, again, find no news from you, pull up my collar as a brisk wind approaches, look across the field, and think of that night we viewed meteor showers spinning brilliant fires above us. It was summer, and we were captivated by the sky as we watched those many flashes swerve along their way. But this afternoon you are gone, and all the houses nearby seem to stand and listen in the slowly changing day. A raccoon scurries toward the path between birch and pine, then disappears. A jay swells and flutters on a high branch. I leave the road to go back, instead turn down an incline, stepping on dried leaves, hard ground and deer tracks. I remember your hands, hear the road's whispers, bend to where a sapling is silently reaching into the cold air.

APPEARANCES

Evening, by the window,
as you begin
to turn and sleep,
you are startled by the quick bloom of tulips.

Near the estuary, under the staghorn
branches of sumac,
I watched the dark head of a cormorant erupt,
plunge, then the body rising,
its insistent, blurring flap
lifting it toward afternoon.

The dead lie beneath such noises,
where dogwood petals slip and fall
like a lover's gown.

FLORIDA

Outside the villa, the sky is overcast,
and the dark, rippling pond is laid out
like an enormous thumbprint. Your touch is
a thousand miles away, and here
below the rustling of birds
hidden in the thick desirous leaves of palm trees,
ducks zig-zag frantically across the lawn,
compelled, like us to be somewhere,
than somewhere else.

Tonight I walk to the harbor, where glowing
shrouds of mist hang over the water like lanterns,
and I think of Po-Chu-i, who included his poems
in conversation with a woman of his village,
to make certain they were understood.

Why is it so often my life returns to art?
If that ancient Chinese poet were here now,
would he call for the peasant woman who knew poetry,
or simply stroke the hem of his wife's silk robe?

CHLOE'S EPISTEMOLOGY

Bored with the world,
my granddaughter grows restless.
Five months old,
already she wants the grass
to define itself,
the clouded sky
to explain the wind, she wants
the neighbor's barking dog
struggling at the end of a chain
to swallow its vocabulary.

I promise her eternal bloom
of yellow columbine and primrose.
I think she is telling me
to name the world
is only part of that story.
For instance,
say the word "divorce."
Notice its syllables,
how they insist
on remaining together.
I know there is half a century
between us,
and an inexplicable, perpetual
distance. Still,
isn't it truth enough
we are here now,
at the edge of this small,
deathless flowering?

FATHER'S SHIRT

I search through the pile of clothes we tossed off a few hours ago, while my lover lies in bed. She seems pleased with her sleep, as if she were quietly drifting past her life. I dress, the fabric of my shirt flowing across my shoulders like a cool river, and remember, as a small child, while my father slept, finding his unwashed shirt from the factory with its odors of oil and grease, the dark stains of what I was told made things work. Back then I could not imagine growing into the uniform that had to be worn in the world of machines and big clocks, where each day men and women assembled the future. I wanted to be my father, determined and certain of what had to be done. I don't know if I knew we were poor, or why sometimes Mother cried, or why when Father fished and we ate, I could taste the river -- its mineral, silt, rock and branch -- even see the place by the stone bridge where he'd been, afternoon light sparkling over the water's rippled surface. I'd plead to go with him next time, and I would. We were a man and his son, sitting on the bank beneath a willow tree, waiting together for the unexpected, and I thought we'd always return there. Years later, the day after Father died, and the river seemed still and empty, I went with Mother to the town's general store, where she helped me select a shirt suitable for him to leave in.

MEDITATION ON MY FIFTIETH BIRTHDAY

The eyes, singing like crickets.
The hands, folding their fingers of death.
The head, with its topography of need.

I remember how, in art class,
they taught us to think of the ear
as a question mark,
and spaces between branches were collected
in beautiful, mysterious designs.

So we had created
something detached, outside ourselves,
and the end of life
seemed far beyond the five points
of our crude stars.

I remember how my ear is our universe,
because it too is silence
filled with sound,
and inside each question
is a tightened fist, an imploding wave,
a syncopated drumming
only you can hear.

I THOUGHT OF THE CLOUDED, MOONLESS NIGHT

I thought about arguments
in the clouded, moonless night,
closed like a fist
around the secret of stars.
I thought about the quivering body,
and the tongue
swelling with reticence,
the eyes aching for sleep.

I thought about summer's end,
of paint that dries
and peels off the side
of an abandoned house.
I thought about my street
that goes into the sea,
and all the fish leaving
the harbor's sick water.

But I am forgetting
my lover, sleepless
and turned
away in our bed, and how
when she leaned toward me
with her white hand,
I was alive
inside her breath.

THE CROWS

An hour ago, it seemed
there was nothing
more important than the rain,
its music surging past
like a dark, vibrating wing,
as if the world
desired loneliness,
but above me now
the nest widens, the sky flares.

I watch the silence
of each wet branch,
and listen
for the leaves and hauled twigs
building the bird's place
over me like so many years,
as you lover, wave and bend
those evenings while I lie
beneath your shadowed body,
which soars, and yet remains.

HOW IT ADDS UP

Sometimes I'm this shoreline,
on the edge of everything, like
when I notice my friend's white beard.
Last night, I stepped out of my house
like a buoy dipping up and down in the fog,
alone with a ship's horn and the gulls' complaint.

But today, the six of us, talking
and drinking, want to believe loneliness
is a choice. Moored here to my kitchen table,
our lives collecting like so many waves,
our stories following each other like fish
in a school, add up to this:

We've been married eight times,
for fifty-nine years, have thirteen children,
three religions, not enough money,
and all live near this ocean.
So what is it we've learned?

Here's another story: A ship sank.
Forty people survived, strewn across the water
like exclamation points, stunned as someone
staggering away from the twisted wreckage
of a near-fatal car crash, who shouts
at the mist and watery road, "Where am I?"

II.

THE SUICIDAL TEENAGER IS INTERVIEWED BY HER PSYCHIATRIST,
AFTER AN ATTEMPT

Actually, sometimes I enjoy being crazy.
Once in awhile, I flip out
and my parents put me in here,
in this hospital, usually just before
one of their trips to Europe.
My mother's a poet.
I wear black, like Rimbaud.
He was a poet. I cut myself
so I can feel alive.
That's why Mother says she writes.
Father gets angry
and tells me I do things
just to remind them
how much I hate them.
I don't hate them.
I just don't believe
what they think.
You understand.
Shrinks always understand,
but you never do anything.
Why does everyone
always want to "help"?
What if I don't want
your fucking help?
I'm only sixteen.
I seem older, right?
That's what that man,
that friend of my father's, thought
the night he came in my bedroom.
Father never found out.
What good would telling him do?
He'd say it was my fault.
Look, death is always
inside us,
it's just that
I like to take it out
and watch it.

THE PATIENT IS ADMITTED TO THE PSYCHIATRIC WARD

Suppose you tell me why I'm here.
Or ask my family.
They'll say I hear voices.
But seriously, how do you imagine
someone talking to you, if no one's there?
That doesn't make sense.
They come through the tv --
the voices, I mean.
It's how I know what not to do,
like go to work or speak with my wife.
But she'll understand once it's been done,
which is something I can't talk about with you!
My children are afraid of me.
Last night,
when I knelt in front of the television
to receive the message,
they screamed and ran away.
That's when my wife
betrayed me and brought me here, to you.
I know what this is about.
You want to give me drugs and make me forget
what I have to do. It won't work.
When it finally happens, those who believe
will be purified. You won't.
There were too many voices in the office,
and all of them evil.
No one there
believed me either. They were the ones
like you, the ones who
would shut off the lights
and murder children in their sleep,
who would put us
in places like this,
who would burn our souls
into a hideous black shadow.
But I'm not afraid. I know
this is only temporary.
When the light
of the perfect truth shatters your dark,
awful world, I know that its voice will be
mine.

THE HEAD TRAUMA PATIENT DOES, AND DOES NOT REMEMBER

I still can't figure out what the hell happened.
The newspaper says someone beat me up,
they don't know who. The bartender said
I was broke, left late and alone.
Can I have a cigarette?
My sister wouldn't talk with no reporters.
Sorry, I always take the filter off.
If my mother was here, she'd want answers.
I've been in this hospital a week.
I just want to go home. Make things right.

When a lady tried to help me up,
I fell on the ice and hit my head.
They found trails of blood and pieces of candy.
I was married once, owned a store.
My wife was a computer programmer.
We were different people.
After I came home and caught her
with that guy from the office, I took my son.
Later, when he set fire to our room,
I understood. Last year he ran away.
I think he's in Florida. Must be thirteen now.
But I still can't figure out what happened.
I think I remember the bartender. All I wanted
was one more drink. I wasn't bothering no one.
Why did they hurt me? I like nurses.
I like you. You've been nice, not like that lady
who dropped me so I hit my head on the ice,
and now I'm here and can't go home.
I like candy, that's why it was there.

Sure, I've been in jail, but I'm not a bad person.
Bad things have happened. That's what makes me cry.
When I was a kid, and my mother was alive,
I used to steal her non-filters.
I rip the filters off my cigarettes,
and it's almost like being with her.

NOTES FROM A HALL OF STRANGERS

From the psych ward bed she writes
each morning's message on a yellow tag
she tapes to the same black sweater:
"Today, we dig up the bones of hate."

What I must do now is "special" her --
the term we use when a patient's
lost control, when someone has to notice.

So I sit with her as she traces
the stitches of her latest slashed wrist --
what we call "attention-seeking."

Walking home, I think it's crazy,
how the lights of the houses
go so quietly out, and traffic
moves along an intended direction,
everything in order, meant to be.

Tomorrow, I'll pass more medication --
a different pill for each thing wrong:
the infant's death, the evil voices
that say "don't let anyone know,"
the house that will burn forever.

AFTER LOSING HIS PATIENT, THE PSYCHIATRIST SPEAKS
WITH A COLLEAGUE

Doctor, I'd like to discuss this.
It's true, the medication may have deepened
his depression, but suicide? No.
None of the interactions we had
indicated psychosis.
I decided to bring up the deaths.
He needed to confront that issue.
Don't we all take risks? Don't you?
This could've happened to any of us,
but I'm the one now with the damaged reputation.
I'll never take a case for a jail again.
Where was prison security? How was he able
to cut his throat inside the cell?
I mean, he did it twenty minutes after
our last session. Twenty minutes!
I've reviewed my notes. There was nothing.
He must've been psychotic. That's it.
A fucking sociopath! You can't treat them.
But they're already talking at the hospital --
nurses questioning my competency -- can you imagine?
And my wife: "You could have done this."

I tell you, Doctor,
I think I chose the wrong career.
I should've been a car salesman. Those bastards
have no conscience. I have a conscience.
Don't laugh. Haven't you ever had a complication
like this occur? At least it wasn't in front of me.
Thank God I didn't become a surgeon.
I suppose they'll understand. I'll just explain
my approach was based on a new therapy.
I mean, here's a guy who murdered two people,
and he's a crack addict! Am I to blame for that?
It's amazing how they all want everything to be our fault,
like the time that woman I admitted became violent
and attacked a worker,
or when the schizophrenic patient I'd been seeing
wandered onto the highway and was run over,
as if we were responsible for sick thoughts.

The man
I saw
and with
each side
first
that
III.
This was
Two of
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The river
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but in
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All these
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THE RIVER

The overcast sky and gray light seem the same.
I had believed that was the reason I moved
and came back only twice before in twenty years,
each time a funeral --
first Father, then Mother.
What I remember of Main Street is gone
or burned away, and I want to declare
"This was never my life."
Two o'clock on Monday afternoon,
the church is locked.

The river running through the town
was always lined with willows,
but in their shade its water settles
murky now, and no one fishes.
The renovation of the school,
erected 1919, is a faith
that some things can go on.

All these years, and I was wrong.
The change I'd hoped for
wasn't light.
It was in the sad and empty faces
of Father and my uncle, that year
the rails re-routed,
and the factory closed.
The early retirement Father took
brought him an early grave.
That's when the dreams began:
doctor, rain, and priest, the river
flooding, ground too soft
to hold his bones.

At the restored and newly painted home
that once was mine, a child is playing
again on the hill by the elm.
I think of cellar dark, attic heat
and, somewhere in the house,
Mother's troubled call
when she wondered where I'd gone.
Father, I swear the boy will stay
near where you both float, light
as evening wind that won't die down.

1948

Everything seemed forever then:
the long, dull day before the bell released
us all from school, the pastor's Sunday sermon,
the high arc of a fly ball, grandmother's gossip,
my father's sucked-in breath when I'd done something wrong,
a tough kid's punch coming straight at me, a car swerving
toward my big, lumbering dog, and how she stumbled
across the road that morning, to die.

I believed those men in gray wool suits,
and women in floppy, wide-brimmed hats
ornamented with artificial fruit and flowers,
who rushed back and forth in the nineteen forties
RKO newsreels, bodies jerking like marionettes,
actually moved that way in "real life,"
and imagined my own adulthood, important enough
to have mysterious places I would hurry to.

And I remember clips of beauty queens, generals,
animals made to do strange and funny things,
a pilot leaping from the plane that failed the test,
earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, explosions,
then walking out to the startling afternoon light,
and the small, drab street that would not change,
confused at first by the town's slow motion.

THE SWIMMERS

My father trusted everyone. The night before he was to swim a long-distance meet at Lake Ontario, he paid a boatman twenty dollars. The next day, no boat at his side, he looked out at the threatening waves, the impossible horizon, like a man walking through a city of windows, a thousand pairs of eyes, all of them his own, blinking back at him.

He dove into the chilled water, determined to go so deeply inside himself fear would not reach him. Perhaps he came to understand loneliness just then as something both sacred and terrible. I only know he returned to shore, trembling with possibility.

Now, many years later and miles away from that event, looking out a window with the eyes my father gave me, at an ocean of gray air, I remember how, at five, I worried the lifeguards by my refusal to surface, choosing instead to float and turn, surrounded by shimmering, translucent blue walls of water, passing through the dark glow of its rooms to a place where small, illuminated planets rose toward the galaxy of breath above me.

LAMENT

after Cesar Vallejo

You are a door.
What an unusual way to be a door.
How you appear,
someone might say you're not.
But really, I know you,
you are a door.

Between night and night,
you cannot hear.
I'll tell you anyway,
life is an entrance,
and you its obstruction.

While the rain shifts,
while the rain drenches,
you have shut
and are a door.
It is when rain seeps in
that you transform yourself,
and so become a leaf
shaken from the tree.
Fatherless, childless.

You are a door.
There is nothing behind you.
Someone might say they walked
through you before.
But really, I know you,
you are all the closed doors
of the life that never happened,
and you are locked.

You are a door,
closed always to itself
and those who would wait
senselessly outside.

RESTORATION

1955. Television interrupted episodes of "The Honeymooners" with shrill warnings. Eisenhower was President. We were all building shelters stocked with clothing, blankets, bottled water, medical supplies, canned food.

But this Thanksgiving, we forgot disaster, came around the antique cherrywood dining room table my father had bargained for at some auction, restored it lovingly with rags, linseed oil, varnish, and faith of a true optimist, the hours of labor giving him a pleasure I wanted.

The burgundy surface gleamed like an impossible sky and we were mythic gods hovering above, all that mattered laid before us: turkey, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, steaming gravy, pumpkin pie, fruit and vegetables from the neighborhood market, an arrangement of blessings to keep us whole. We were not gods. We were man, woman, child. So we folded our hands, looked down, and prayed to the sad, heavy bird that in slow, clumsy flight had lifted itself into sacrifice.

Why, Father, did you curse the bird's resistance under your knife? Uncle's death, the hotel fire, those trains colliding on the tracks -- even then I understood catastrophe, yet did not fear it. What would you say if I could speak with you now that the demons are dreadful, and have finally risen up to destroy who is left?

JACKKNIFE

We sat, legs dangling
over the lip of the shed's tar roof,
that seemed all the world to me,
the whole world as dangerous as
Eddie, the big vicious neighborhood kid,
who pulled open his jackknife, pointed
its blade at my throat, and told me
to jump. I leapt through a cushion of air,
exhilarated by the release of my private descent --
which is what the dying might feel --
until I struck the hard dirt, rolled,
cried, and ran from the shed.

I had not thought of this
until last night's phone call
about a childhood friend's near-fatal
car crash. At the hospital,
they said it took five medics and the jaws-of-life
to free him, and the doctors weren't sure.
I remember the questions of police,
the shock of being alive
that only intense pain or fear brings.
In his room, we looked at each other
like two boys sharing a secret
can look at each other,
and understand their silence.

BASIC TRAINING

She moves from me, sullen as a marriage gone bad,
another argument playing over some distant music
on the radio. 1960, before the War,
Black Benny sang gospel and blues
while we gathered around him, clapping our hands,
and the young, white Navy recruit, only weeks ahead
of us, with no authority to enter the barracks,
broke our circle by screaming the word "boy."
We were startled, collectively mute,
like the silence after a gunshot blast
in the woods, when birds fly into their trees,
and the popeyed animals stiffen.
Isn't rage really the heart's weeping?

We watched the two square off like angry boys
in a schoolyard, then the one who was wrong
suddenly turning toward the door, as I do now,
the quick storm of his life and mine
crashing through the vacant night in a silence
that happens after a plate is thrown and breaks
on a tiled kitchen floor, when one lover says
to the other, finally, their life does not matter.
Standing on the porch, in the warm summer air,
under the harsh light of stars, I remember
the chance he was given -- one I won't get --
how he was sent back in training.
Back to where he started, to get it right.

THE NOTE

How many faces have I seen
the moon wear out?
My own face folds and wrinkles
like a well-travelled envelope.

My lover rises from our bed, and enters
into the daily business of dress and work.
In the city, my daughter
offers a breast to her crying infant.

I understand, also, the rows of trees
in the country that fade yearly
away from the poisoned roadside,
and death, their identical complaint.

IV.

SUNDAY EVENING AT THE STARDUST CAFE

A group of young people smoke cigarettes, drink coffee, flirt. A strip of violet neon tubing thrusts from between the breasts of Marilyn Monroe in a black and white poster on the wall. On the jukebox, Neil Young sings: "Old man, look in my eyes." Maybe I'll join them, promise to be quick and reckless. The young blonde with startling eyes, that seem to reflect everything, will take me to a quiet booth in back, where we'll smoke and talk, as if we're really interested in the bad art hanging next to us. I can explain then why my life's important. I remember Marilyn, her mascaraed, lidded eyes, Presley censored on Sullivan, Lennon in New York that night at the Dakota. Why shouldn't she fall in love?

But I don't want to say too much. For instance, I can't tell her how sad the silver-hooped ring dangling from her nose makes me feel, in spite of my own gold earring. These kids look like Rimbaud, and far as I know, they probably are. Think of it, a dozen reincarnated Rimbauds in a greasy spoon, pale and dressed in black, notebooks open to pages ready to record whatever's wrong.

I remember a film, "Wild in the Streets." The President of the United States, a rock musician, twenty-five and aging fast, whose platform was built on the premise that anyone over twenty-one was suspect, contemplates his life. In the final frame, a ten-year old boy faces the camera and promises a future of bubble-gum and baseball, but like with anything else, there's a catch.

[stanza break]

Back at the Stardust, the waitress,
who is friendly, brings my sandwich.
An old woman mutters, squints at the menu,
and counts her change. Tourists ride
horse-drawn carriages clapping down
the brick streets, or dance on the deck
of a cruise ship entering the harbor.
The kids take their notebooks and leave
for a rock club.

A SIMPLE LIFE

Standing at the refrigerator, pouring cream
into the dark-roasted coffee from Brazil
we bought before last night's party
because we felt, just then, exotic,
this morning I'm spinning like a meteor
toward the universe's black hole,
which I'm as certain exists as
my green bathrobe, the neighbor's
stuttering car, or 8:00 a.m.
on the face of my unwound alarm clock.

Listening to the blues of Robert Johnson
on the stereo, looking out the window
at this street's row of houses,
I think, "It can be a simple life":
the cat curled and purring
by the door, the sound of you coming
up the steps, your arms wrapped
around warm, fresh bread from the corner bakery.

THE PAST
after Robert Pinsky

A single carton of books,
The calendar from a lost year,
A ripped movie poster,
And here, a lover's misplaced jewelry.

Every few years he leaves
From one place for another
As if this were a duty.
A few pictures to hang, some furniture.

Pens, pencils, scraps of paper
(thoughts without reason),
The worn jacket he never
Seems able to throw away,

Glitter of a Chinese brass planter,
Tick of an alarm clock,
Photographs of the woman, of him
(senseless, dark drama and gesture).

And everything reminds him
The past is not over, insistent as rain
Slanting a window. Purpling clouds,
The body shadowed,

Though he could not say
Whether by chance or design,
And illustrated by tears and lighting.
Now he begins.

TRUST

I'm at the doorway
of my empty apartment
like a parachutist
in the open bay
of an airplane,
who feels the unpredictable wind
rushing against his face,
just before he leaps.

The wind is a woman's hair
he must fall through
to be with her.
The world is a fact
they will have to stand together on.

After all these years,
I've decided against loneliness.
Outside, the clouds
are purple and gray,
and the air smells like rain.

THE LOVER

Tonight you come home
from the hospital, tired and cursing
your job, the day, the old woman
who screamed and spit while you knelt,
suppliant as a saint.
I take your feet in my hands.
I do this in memory of snow,
cold winter nights as a child
I came home, my own feet
nearly frozen. And so Mother
would gently rub them,
like a pair of magical lamps
from a story book --
one wish for the future,
the other for innocence --
rub them back to the purpose of feet,
knowing I would leave again
for the snow forts and ice,
then return like an errant lover
to familiar comfort.
You tilt back your head,
close your eyes to the light,
the bed pans and death,
the pills that won't work.
The dark cathedral of my body
lies next to you.
I doze, and for a moment
smell the incense, the elegant wood
of my father's casket, then wake
thinking how our tragic loneliness
is also our magical life.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, BEACON HILL, LATE MAY

My life, everything, is burning behind me.
The bricks are on fire!
Will it matter if I say this?
What about the past, who I thought I was?
A week since we've been together,
and already a frightened creature somewhere inside
wants to step through the flames.
There are tourists everywhere,
taking pictures with disposable cameras.
They don't see my need.
A year ago, if you had said the poor beast
would lie back down in its cool, dark chamber
of trust, I would have laughed
like the cynic I so often pretend to be.
In front of me, the rich girls
of my neighbors walk and hold hands.
One is sixteen. The other is five.
They are both blonde.
I suppose the parents' careers made them
wait so long between children.
Now the sun lights the street with their daughters,
who don't know how beautiful they are.

WEATHER

This is when evening loosens its tie
and stretches out its long gray legs.
I'm here with a cold Rolling Rock
and my predictable weather of feelings.
The storm, as they say, passes quickly,
and sometimes I'm afraid my life will end
before I've loved you enough.
Wind shuffles the hemlock.
I am surrounded by birds! I have a memory
of touch, and another of loss. I am dark
and cool with the hastening breeze
and a hidden life whispering the rain.

MOVIES IN A SMALL TOWN, 1957

In the dimness, we felt our way along the rows of upholstered seats, as a pinpoint of light above us suddenly expanded across the screen like creation. The previews came first, all the best parts of the future. We watched the show until its final scene, when the hero we thought was doomed survived after all, the whole place lit up, and we remembered who we were.

My first job was at that theater, Friday nights, placing programs for the next week's movies under the wipers of the parked cars out back. Once, beneath moonlight and wind flickering through the trees, a boy's curiosity bent me over the bridge toward a catastrophe of swirling leaflets, one of those events that does not seem to be happening to you. But it was happening to me. Helpless, I saw their lost message of adventure and romance drop over the dam and disappear.

Past the closed stores and tired faces of shoppers, I went home, plotting my explanation. I had learned how the world could go out of control, and sometimes we were not what we wanted. I didn't know how this would end. Outside the taverns, children laughed and played on the steps, or sat alone in the shadows and cried. I had no excuse. This was everyone's life.

ROCK AROUND THE CLOCK

I don't want to return to the uncertainty
or confusion about who I was, what I would do,
but I believed in romance and the future
when, for a nickel each time, I could hear
Elvis Presley sing "I'm All Shook Up,"
again and again on the Seaburg jukebox,
then rearrange my pompadour, and practice
his crooked smile in the streaked bathroom mirror,
my collar up and spread like wings
that would take me, forever, into my life.

This was the year I went to the town's only theater,
and saw Bill Haley and The Comets in "Rock Around the Clock."
A slick curlicue of hair hung
over the musician's broad forehead
like an upside down question mark.

What was it I asked myself that afternoon
when the new rhythm of rock-and-roll
drove through me like an engine of joy?
There are days I move slowly as those big band numbers
my parents insisted playing on the hi-fi.
I remember the scene of the dance in the barn,
when an old man's eyes opened wide as a child's
before he sandpapered the soles of his shoes,
and slid across the floor like liquid.

On warm summer evenings, thrilled by girls
beside me in soft, flowered dresses, and fast turns
along the road to the quarry, I spun the car
in quick circles around the gravel
like a planet gone out of orbit,
toward whatever happens next.

REINVENTING THE SELF:
DESPAIR AND TRANSCENDENCE IN THE POETRY
OF RICHARD HUGO

ABSTRACT OF THE CRITICAL THESIS

This critical thesis examines how Richard Hugo cultivated opposite sides of his personality, as a ratification for ways of looking at the self. It explores Hugo's fusion of psyche and landscape, as a means of expressing internal feelings through embodiment.

By drawing examples from Richard Hugo's collected body of work, the paper discusses how, permeated with Jungian concepts of death and rebirth, his poetry locates and identifies the psychic implications of a given place, and in the process discovers the human, the vulnerable. This, in turn, becomes the site of transcendence. By utilizing my own professional experience in the field of mental health, I develop theories on how Hugo's undergoing psychotherapy impacted on his writing. Through mythologizing the self, the poet achieved self-actualization.

Of particular interest is Hugo's use of persona, within the confessional/lyric style, to explore various aspects of self, in relationship to W.H. Auden's idea of momentarily becoming someone else for the duration of the poem. I believe this strategy allowed Hugo a sort of personal healing and resolve, and led him to a unique poetics and a persona he could accept.

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