

Jenny Browne on Richard Hugo's 31 Letters and 31 Dreams

The first poem I ever wrote was a letter. I was 19 and had left the Midwest to spend a year in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Like any good 19-year-old, I stepped off the plane with all sorts of eager notions about changing a world I had yet to see. Once there, I wrote loads of bad poems about sunsets and sent them across the ocean with a decidedly 18th century understanding of audience, knowing that it would take weeks, even months, for those pale blue tri-folded aerograms to arrive, and that they would surely be read aloud to rooms filled with my aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. I probably should have taken the advice of some even earlier epistles, those of Horace, whose *Letters to Piso* serves to council on the art of poetry itself, suggesting that that we should read widely, strive for precision, find best criticism, and perhaps most importantly, wait at least nine years before showing our poems to anyone.

Eventually there was a coup, and I was evacuated from Africa in a C-130, but that's a story for another day. Sometime that winter, back in Wisconsin, I walked out of a used bookstore clutching a two-buck copy of Richard Hugo's *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*. It had been a strange year, one that left me feeling like parts of my body remained on the other side of the world. At the same time, I felt confused as to whether any of what I remembered experiencing had actually happened. Walking alone through those dark snowy afternoons, I felt both isolated and over-exposed. Something in the weird backlight of Hugo's cover—that x-ray of an open envelope with dead flowers falling out of it—grabbed me. I will admit that I often still buy books by the picture on the front. Wine too. This was all over was twenty years ago, but my most recent book of poems, *Dear Stranger* (University of Tampa 2013) also uses the epistolary mode, and in working on it I found myself returning to Hugo, wondering if the poems would still impact me as they once had.

Glimpsed from our current moment of near constant virtual correspondence, it's difficult to imagine the literal isolation that troubles this book. Hugo's letters narrate both geographic and psychic dislocation, as the speaker seeks to ground himself in relation to people and places, to regret and desire, and even

to poles of sanity and surrender. Many of the letters end with the suggestion of, and devotion to, poetry as our most primal home.

I think that good epistle poems—no, all poems, really—must demonstrate a clear reason for their existence, and one nice thing about letter poems is that they come with a built-in antecedent scenario, namely the performed suggestion that a real or imagined me sitting right here really needs to tell a real or imagined you out there something important. At times, such expressions of earnest, even confessional, sentiment sound as old-fashioned as, well, writing a real letter. Letter poems also imply reciprocity, even if that response remains unheard, and I can't help evoking Yeats' famous "Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry" in suggesting that if epistolary poems are letters to others, maybe dream poems are letters to ourselves.

The last reason I believe we should all read and reread Richard Hugo is for the way his lines remain consistently attentive to both the present and past, to how it feels to live in more than one place at once, tuned to the wild leaps of the subconscious as well the steady imagistic chink of the sensory world.

"Why do I think
of this today? Why, faced with this supermarket parking lot
filled with gleaming new cars, people shopping unaware
a creek runs under them, do I think back thirty some years
to that time all change began, never to stop, not even
to slow down one moment for us to study our loss, to recall
the Japanese farmers bent deep to the soil?"