

Richard Hugo

*Letter to Birch from Deer Lodge*

Dear Michele: Once, according to a native, this town had a choice: state prison or university, and chose the former. They didn't want whatever radical was called in those days students and professors with ideas messing up their town. Now guards in towers, nothing to do, keep tabs on the streets, the teens cruising the streets in cars, and report to parents or police anything amiss. So the town became the pen. They even built a drive-in across the street from the wall. Burger D and fries within the shadow of penance. I think, when I'm here, how silly prisons are, how, if we tore down the grotesque wall and let all but a handful out, life would be no different, and how we imprison people not for crimes but simply because we don't like them, they are unrefined. Crime is our excuse. Some poets equate themselves with criminals. That may be because we share the same desolate loves, the same railroad spur along the swamp ignites some old feeling of self inside and when the sky comes gray late afternoon across the world on Sunday, we know we're friendless and the hounds bay in the distance sniffing for our trail. We are equally cowed by the official, by men who never clown or smile. And we, poet and felon, know how certain times are right for others, wrong for us. We die 4 P.M. on Friday when the fun begins for others. And we are like the teens of Deer Lodge, always under the censorial eye of the tower. We find secret ways to play. No one except poets know what gains we make in isolation. We create our prison and we earn parole each poem. Michele, our cell door's open like the dawn. Let's run and run. The day is windy and alive with fields. Your friend. Dick.

Richard Hugo

*Letter to Oberg from Pony*

Dear Arthur: In a country where a wealthy handful of people tear down anything you could possibly love, break your affectionate connections with yourself by whim for profit, would move, if they could make money moving it, the national capital to Dubuque, have already torn down Walt Whitman's home, tried, damn their souls, to wreck the Pike Place Market, and in their slimy leisure plot to dismantle Miss Liberty and move her one piece at a time to Las Vegas where, reassembled, she will be a giant slot machine (pull the right arm please, the one with the torch), you'd love to pack your things and move here. This is lovely. This is too great for a poem. The only way here is by dream. Call it Xanadu or Shangri-La or Oz. Lovely old homes stand empty because somewhere in this floundering world, the owners toil and plan to come back here to die. I hope I die here. I want to spend my last years on the porch of the blue house next to the charming park the town built and no one uses, picnic tables ringed by willows and the soft creek ringing in the grass. I hope to sit there drinking my past alive and watching seasons take over the park. This is only to assure you, Art, that in a nation that is no longer one but only an amorphous collection of failed dreams, where we have been told too often by contractors, corporations and prudes that our lives don't matter, there still is a place where the soul doesn't recognize laws like gravity, where boys catch trout and that's important, where girls come laughing down the dirt road to the forlorn store for candy. I love Pony like I love maybe fifty poems, the ones I return to again and again knowing my attention can't destroy what's there. Give my best to Barbara and take care. Dick.