sted caves reputed to have
en William Wallace, Robert
time Hawthornden Castle
Drummond, friend of Ben
. In fact over the years the
writers including William
Czeslaw Milsosz, and Helen

go's triggering town to me.
ith the oaks of my child-
with the grains I'd cut on
my window was the river
ing for trout to rise. Here
of my youth, yet I'd never
white pine, couldn't name
and I had never stepped in
unpacking my bags I was
o call this home, but I had
d I wrote the first lines I'd
e wintering rattlesnakes, all

abandoned coal towns of
ly pub in Lasswade weren't
nes, but these were fathers
s, Bluefield and Bland. As I
dlothian, something started
earching for. This foreign
reconstruct myself, and to
had become that town I'd
ave experienced all of this,
ay to understand what was

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DEREK SHEFFIELD

Hugo as Anodyne

Ten years after his death, Richard Hugo saved my life. In the summer of 1992, I was rich in education and poor in wallet. I had recently graduated from the University of Washington with a Bachelor's degree, and while trying to figure out what next, I was living in a creaky old house with three other guys on Queene Anne Hill in Seattle, working two jobs, and trying to write poems. From 5:00 to 11:00 AM, I worked in a warehouse full of medical and legal records. Then, from 3:00 PM to closing, I bussed tables in a restaurant at the base of the hill. I remember well those nights, walking back up the hill, my bones soaked in weariness, my hair and clothes rank with kitchen grease and cigarettes. Worse were the mornings. I would somehow rouse myself through the fog of despair, drive across Seattle, and walk into an enormous concrete bunker of a warehouse where long fluorescent tubes in the high ceiling exuded a dirty yellow light that only made the gray interior grayer. Even the air I breathed was gray with dust. My solitary job was to sort through the thousands of boxes and re-label them with stickers containing barcodes in place of a numerical system. My tools were a barcode reader, a box of stickers, and an electronic lift. It was the most boring thing I'd ever done in my life. But I couldn't quit. I could barely afford a hamburger.

With the help of Hugo's poems, I endured. I had a handheld cassette player that I used to record his poems at my house when no one else was around. With that same player and some headphones, I listened over and over to "West Marginal Way" and "Degrees of Gray in Phillipsburg" and many others. It was strange hearing my own voice that intimately in my head, but Hugo's voice was strong enough to keep my hands moving through those boxes, keep me walking out of there, and coming back, and then out for the last time. In his poems, I heard a spirit that had been as beat and hopeless as mine. The way he made his bottomed-out, poorly managed life art was redemptive. His lines sang the road into being that helped me get the hell out of that warehouse and move closer to what next. I'll never forget. Though I now define myself with titles like husband, father, editor, professor, and poet, like Dick Hugo, "I remain a common laborer, stained by the perpetual dust from loading flour or coal." Amen, Brother.