

Richard Hugo

LETTER TO SIMIC FROM BOULDER

Dear Charles: And so we meet once in San Francisco and I learn I bombed you long ago in Belgrade when you were five. I remember. We were after a bridge on the Danube hoping to cut the German armies off as they fled north from Greece. We missed. Not unusual, considering I was one of the bombardiers. I couldn't hit my ass if I sat on the Norden or rode a bomb down singing The Star Spangled Banner. I remember Belgrade opened like a rose when we came in. Not much flak. I didn't know about the daily hangings, the 80,000 Slavs who dangled from German ropes in the city, lessons to the rest. I was interested mainly in staying alive, that moment the plane jumped free from the weight of bombs and we went home.

What did you speak then? Serb, I suppose. And what did your mind

do with the terrible howl of bombs? What is Serb for "fear"? It must be the same as in English, one long primitive wail of dying children, one child fixed forever in dead stare. I don't apologize for the war, or what I was. I was willingly confused by the times. I think I even believed in heroics (for others, not for me). I believed the necessity of that suffering world, hoping it would learn not to do it again. But I was young. The world never learns. History has a way of making the past palatable, the dead a dream. Dear Charles, I'm glad you avoided the bombs, that you live with us now and write poems. I must tell you though, I felt funny that day in San Francisco. I kept saying to myself, he was one on the ground that day, the sky eerie mustard and our engines roaring everything out of the way. And the world comes clean in moments like that for survivors. The world comes clean as clouds in summer, the pure puffed white, soft birds careening in and out, our lives with a chance to drift on slow over the world, our bomb bays empty, the target forgotten, the enemy ignored. Nice to meet you finally after all that mindless hate. Next time, if you want to be sure you survive, sit on the bridge I'm trying to hit and wave. I'm coming in on course but nervous and my cross hairs flutter.