

DEGREES OF GRAY  
IN PHILIPSBURG

by richard f. hugo

You might come here Sunday on a whim.  
Say your life broke down. The last good kiss  
you had was years ago. You walk these streets  
laid out by the insane, past hotels  
that didn't last, bars that did, the tortured try  
of local drivers to accelerate their lives.  
Only churches are kept up. The jail  
turned 70 this year. The only prisoner  
is always in, not knowing what he's done.

The principal supporting business now  
is rage. Hatred of the various grays  
the mountain sends, hatred of the mill,  
The Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls  
who leave each year for Butte. One good  
restaurant and bars can't wipe the boredom out.  
The 1907 boom, eight going silver mines,  
a dance floor built on springs—  
all memory resolves itself in gaze,  
in panoramic green you know the cattle eat  
or two stacks high above the town,  
two dead kilns, the huge mill in collapse  
for fifty years that won't fall finally down.

Isn't this your life? That ancient kiss  
still burning out your eyes? Isn't this defeat  
so accurate, the church bell simply seems  
a pure announcement: ring and no one comes?  
Don't empty houses ring? Are magnesium  
and scorn sufficient to support a town,  
not just Philipsburg, but towns  
of towering blondes, good jazz and booze  
the world will never let you have  
until the town you came from dies inside?

Say no to yourself. The old man, twenty  
when the jail was built, still laughs  
although his lips collapse. Someday soon,  
he says, I'll go to sleep and not wake up.  
You tell him no. You're talking to yourself.  
The car that brought you here still runs.  
The money you buy lunch with,  
no matter where it's mined, is silver  
and the girl who serves your food  
is slender and her red hair lights the wall.

