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Oral History Number: 438-001

Interviewee: Dexter Roberts

Interviewer: Mark Gibbons

Date of Interview: September 3, 2012

Project: Ed Lahey Oral History Project

Mark Gibbons: This is Mark Gibbons. I'm interviewing Dexter Roberts in regard to Ed Lahey. It's September 3, 2012, Labor Day. Dexter, what's your first recollection of Ed? Your first memory? Where did you first meet? Do you remember what that was like the first time you encountered him?

Dexter Roberts: Yeah, in the '60s, here in Missoula at the university. He was an activist under the influence of a couple of guys from Students for a Democratic Society, Paul Warwick and Denny Blouin, who didn't do Ed any good. They got him doing risky things that he might not have done by his own volition. It went on and on and he ended up turning back his draft card, which people did...that was the early '70s. That's five years later. Throwing your draft card into a hat and have it carted away so you were no longer an object of interest to Selective Service, the military.

MG: Do you remember some kind of major demonstration on campus? Were you there at that time? When they occupied ROTC building or something?

DR: Yeah, I was there for that when we occupied ROTC.

MG: Ed was involved in that?

DR: I think so. I didn't have...I was in direct touch with some student friends of mine. We didn't know exactly who else was involved. I'll bet he was. The very first one was the result of the realtor downtown putting out a photograph of Martin Luther King and known communists—a touched up photograph.

This Denny Blouin fellow...first what did he do? He nailed to the door of the administration building demands of every known kind for student power, then led a bunch of people down to this realty office and occupied that office; went right inside and sat down and wouldn't get up. I was a weary participant in that group and made sure I didn't get arrested the way several people were put in jail overnight. But I was there giving my support, and Ed was. That was a side of him: a very fiery Irish spirit. He was really Irish. If there ever was anyone who was Irish, it was Ed Lahey.

MG: Did he go to jail? Was Ed put in jail for that? He was, wasn't he?

DR: I don't know.

MG: I think he was one of the people that went to jail in that.

DR: Probably. I'd say probably. I don't know exactly who ended up in jail, but 25-30 people. A notable thing, and more important thing in a way, was his voice, the way he read poetry. I never heard anybody read poetry any better and that includes the famous ones from around here like Dick Hugo and so forth. God, could he read poetry.

MG: Almost everybody that I've ever heard make a comment about it and said the same thing. They've never heard anybody read poetry any better including Dylan Thomas. (laughter)

DR: Ah, Dylan.

MG: That's a compliment, I guess.

DR: Dylan, what's that wonderful thing he did? "A Child's Christmas in Wales" was a wonderful, long narrative. Dylan Thomas was so self-destructive.

MG: Of course, that was a bit of a part of Ed's personality, too, from what I can gather.

DR: Often in the...

MG: Did you witness any of that?

DR: ...in the poet. Yeah, but not when I knew him early. He was very jolly and loved to read his poetry, which he did extremely well. He went out and took some kind of teaching job in Minnesota for a while. That was for about a year. Then, interestingly, I think a woman came back here with him. Women loved him. That was a fact about Ed: women loved him. Some certain guys...they're just attracted to certain guys. Ed was one of those. Then...what did he do?

MG: One question that I was going to ask was, were you aware of any of the issues or struggles that Ed had with mental illness. How early on were you aware of any of that?

DR: Of what?

MG: Of Ed's struggles with mental illness.

DR: The demons. Yeah, he would...more than once he ended up in...not Deer Lodge...

MG: Warm Springs.

DR: The mental...what is it called?

MG: Warm Springs.

DR: Warm Springs Mental Institution. Several times. Ed would, then, in his strange enthusiasm, go crazy for a while, which he did. Then he'd get better and then he'd get out. His actions would...normal type people would think, "Oh, that guy's really weird." They were kind of afraid of him.

MG: Yeah, I think he figured that that was one of the reasons why the university system wouldn't ever touch him again after a few of those trips to Warm Springs.

DR: Right.

MG: They wouldn't ever take a chance.

DR: He was, in fact, a harmless human being, but strange according to the standards of normalcy. It went along...

MG: Were you a fan of his poetry?

DR: Was I?

MG: Yeah...of his poetry.

DR: No, I just recognized it as really good; he was best probably around. No fan. What else...Butte. He worked there in the mines for a while when he was a younger guy.

MG: His family owned a mine up at Corbin. I know he worked that off and on for several years.

DR: That was ingrained in him: being a miner, which he was. The whole damn city of Butte, Montana, which is a mining town if there ever was one...

MG: You never worked together as teachers at any stretch or were never around each other in the classroom?

DR: Yeah, more...we used to always have a coffee klatch or whatever in that room at the end of the hall. All of us would sit down there, including Ed, including me, and talk and b.s. about teaching and so forth.

MG: What years was that?

DR: That was in the '70s, I do believe. I came here in '62. I don't know what year he came.

MG: I think in the mid-60s: '64, '65, somewhere like that.

DR: The place really blew up in '67 and '68. I was very much involved myself in the revolution. I decided we should form...we would meet in Liberal Arts 11—that room downstairs there. I decided that we should take a name, the group, and I said, "It should be the Committee for Intelligent Action: the CIA." (laughter) So we were the CIA.

MG: Was Ed a part of that?

DR: He must have been. I don't remember exactly what he was doing: reading his poetry, some very good readings; keeping the women at bay. Women, as I said, were very much attracted to Ed, as they are to such a guy.

MG: I remember Ed telling me a story about him and...he was at a party after a reading that Robert Bly gave.

DR: Yes.

MG: Were you there?

DR: Yes.

MG: At that reading?

DR: Yes.

MG: Could you describe what you remember happening at that party?

DR: Robert Bly, he was an interesting character, kind of a nutcase. Typically of many academically related activities, it was bizarre and I don't remember what the hell happened—what Bly did. What did Bly do? Did Ed ever say to you?

MG: Yeah, he and Hugo got into a...it began as sort of a discussion about war. Bly's position was a pretty strong anti-war position and Hugo, of course...

DR: The ex-bombardier.

MG:...the ex-bombardier, the World War II veteran, I'm sure maintained the position that there were certain necessary...that war was a necessary reaction in certain situations, maybe, or something along those lines. Maybe even put it to Hugo...Hugo may have put it to Bly that, since he was not involved, how could he take that position or something.

DR: Right.

MG: They were bantering back and forth and provoking each other. Bly took one of Hugo's coveted jazz records and threw it against the wall and broke it and stormed out of the room.

DR: Who did that? Bly?

MG: Bly did that and left. Ed told me that he followed him, that his anti-war ethic was so strong at that point. I'm guessing here, but we're all human beings. Bly was a hot commodity in the poetry world and a name, and I think that Ed was interested. He told me he was interested in getting to know Bly. I think he kind of saw it as an opportunity, too, to follow Bly and really get a chance to talk to him.

DR: What happened? Did he say?

MG: He said he walked him. They walked around campus for a while. Ed tried to explain Hugo's position and Bly was not having a lot of it, I think, is the way Ed put it, but appreciated the company of Ed walking with him. I think Bly was pissed off. Ed didn't seem to recall anything truly significant other than the fact that he was able to take a walk with Robert Bly and talk to him a little bit.

DR: There was a Hugo cult here, which was a pain in the ass because Dick was one strange poet. He couldn't quite make sense. He didn't have enough reason, which even a poet needs. Striking lines from a very sad setting there on the coast where everything was dying off: logging was dying and the fishing was dying because we've been raping the land for so long. It was just a shit house over there on the coast; a place restored to its true dignity by David James Duncan, *The River Why*. That's a good book. He's a local now, too. Duncan's a local. I don't know where he lives, probably up the Rattlesnake.

MG: I don't know where he lives exactly. You mentioned earlier that you thought that Ed's poetry, even though you weren't necessarily a fan, but you thought that it was some of the best poetry that was being written at the time. In regard to that comment that you felt like Hugo's poems didn't...they weren't quite together...I don't want to paraphrase you, but do you think that Ed's were?

DR: I think they were, yeah.

MG: Do you think they made sense in a way that maybe Hugo's poems didn't?

DR: Yeah, I'm sure they did. They came out of a tradition of miners, those working men, and a place, Butte, Montana, which is a place I would hate to live in. There it is.

MG: That was part of the popularity of Hugo for people like Ed and Jim Welch and other people who had grown up in this state in working class, lower middle class environments. They were attracted to Hugo because he did write from that white center, lower middle class, working class mentality.

DR: True.

MG: I agree with you in that I think that he was much more of a "poet," in terms of the language in Hugo's poems. It would sometimes become convoluted to the point of mystery, to where it really wasn't holding. The center wasn't holding. I don't think Ed ever lost me that way.

DR: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer." Ed, then he went along and what...he taught, he wrote poetry, he had several different women in his life.

MG: Did you know any of the women in his life?

DR: I know what's her name now...she's helped us out a lot.

MG: Marylor.

DR: Mary.

MG: Marylor...or Laurie she went by.

DR: Laurie, I knew her very well. They lived in a brick house across from the *Missoulian* there. That's where they were living at that time. She knew my wife quite well. What did she do...? She was a secretary at the law school for a while. She deserved better than what we gave her, this culture of poets.

MG: Were you around for the end of their marriage? Did you know anything about how any of that developed?

DR: I didn't see it in any that indicated a narrative that I knew much about, no. It happened.

MG: I have a question for you. Were you ever aware of the fact that...sometimes there are sort of secrets that exist in people's lives. One of the ones that I've stumbled upon here in meeting friends and family of Ed's is that Ed's father was not his father.

DR: No, I didn't know that.

MG: Did you not know that?

DR: No.

MG: I wondered if maybe you did or you didn't. I know that it was one of those things that...Ed could keep a secret. He could keep certain information very close. He was guarded in a lot of ways.

DR: In what sense was he not his father? He was an adopter?

MG: No, Ed's mother became pregnant by another guy: another guy from Butte, a friend of the family, another one of the bootlegging gang, a part of the "Thin Air Gang," which is the fictional name of the bootleggers that the Laheys and the Chutes and the...I don't remember what the other family name was. A guy by the name of Earl McCarthy was actually Ed's father, but it was just kept secret. Ed never knew his entire life until after his father died. He was in Missoula, in school in Missoula, in the mid-60s, probably '66, '67. When his father died, that's when his mother told him.

DR: When his real father died?

MG: When Ed Lahey Sr., who he thought was his father, when he died, then Ed's mother, Francis, told Ed that Ed Sr., who had just passed away, wasn't Eddy's father, that Eddy's father was actually a guy named Earl McCarthy. At first, Ed didn't know what to make of it, just absolutely shocked. You're 30 years old and your father dies and your mother tells you that...he did go to Butte, I guess, to confirm that. Earl McCarthy confirmed that that was the truth and

that it was just a family secret that was kept from Ed and most other people, although there were people that knew. I was just curious if you might have been someone who found out about that at some time or knew about that.

DR: No. Part of all the junk that goes with being human as Snyder said.

MG: Exactly. Yeah, surprise.

DR: The junk. Think of this: here's what really happened. No shit. Awful, awful. Not awful, but just run-of-the-mill, every day. One mistake after another. Ed...I was really surprised and happy to read his novel because it's a good novel. He was a writer. Everything he did...he wrote poetry; then he wrote a novel. I guess there's another one he's got or had before he died. I don't know what's going to happen to that one.

MG: Hopefully it will see the light of day. Did you know anything about Ed's relationship with Leslie Fiedler? Did you know Fiedler well?

DR: With Fiedler? I knew Fiedler quite well, and Ed was an admirer of and a friend of Leslie Fiedler. He continued a correspondence with him—it would be interesting to find those letters—when Fiedler went to Buffalo. Ed, he saw in Fiedler the genius that was there. Fiedler was the 50 minute man: you give him 50 minutes and he'd give you the history of English literature. He was an amazing lecturer and a real cocksucker. He was always after everybody else's wife. That kind of guy. I knew Leslie quite well and taught with him in that department in the humanities program for several years. His wife and his kids. His wife occasionally comes around Missoula still. She's alive and an old hag by now. Strange character. A very brilliant woman, really, his wife.

MG: You mentioned that Ed was popular with the ladies.

DR: Yes.

MG: Other people have told me that too. I heard a story here not too long ago...did you know anything about a...

Unidentified Female Speaker: Hi.

[Break in audio]

MG: Let's get this thing started again. There we go. Were you aware of the fact that Ed had...he was married to Marylor and he was having an affair with Lee Nye's wife, I believe, or ex-wife?

DR: No, I didn't know that he was having an affair with her. I know her. She's still alive. She lives down in Lolo; taught in Lolo I think.

MG: This is his wife before...you're referring to Jean down in Lolo?

DR: Yeah.

MG: This was a woman that Lee Nye was married to before Jean.

DR: I guess I don't even know if I knew her.

MG: It's interesting...that whole...it's not necessarily a generational thing, but Hugo was famous for that. Many of his female students...he was surrounded by all of these male protégés and what not, but a lot of his female students commented on his behavior.

DR: What did he do? He couldn't resist patting a little butt now and then? Terrific. What are you supposed to do? It's up to the women. They've got to figure it out. I'm sure they're quite aware to what extent their charms get us going. That's true about...Ed was very close to Leslie Fiedler and wrote him. They had a correspondence going after he [Fiedler] left and went to Buffalo. That late.

MG: I found some envelopes. I found one letter; more than one envelope, but not more than one letter. By the time that Ed had moved into the Village Health Care facility, where you didn't take really anything with you...everybody had to get rid of all of his belongings and stuff. He had moved...I remember at one point him telling me that he had lost more poems than he had ever collected because he just moved and lost stuff and misplaced stuff.

DR: Then he went to Village Health Care. That's a good place. They look after people quite well and looked after him. Although, he had it too easy and then he got fatter and fatter when he was over there. He got really fat. He just would lay in bed all the damn time. No good, very bad for him. I don't think...he wasn't writing shit there at the end.

MG: No, not to speak of. We talked about Ed in terms of war and what not. How about...what do you know about Ed's religious background. I know that you were both into the Buddhist tradition to an extent and I don't know how much or how in depth that was.

DR: All the way for me. I've practiced Buddhism and studied Buddhism from 1972. I still do it today. Ed was not a religious man. He was the man of the beauty of words. That was somehow his religion, I think. Everybody claims some connection to Zen. (laughter) Bullshit. People don't have the least idea. I go sit for seven days and don't move a muscle and look at the wall and see what happens then. Boy, is it scary.

MG: As far as you know, Ed never practiced any of that long term...

DR: As far as I know, but he had his secrets of what he was doing at another level away from society and so forth. I don't know. I just kind of doubt it. I think he's too strongly out...he needs people. He needed people so badly...

MG: It was interesting that toward the end of his life, or just before he went into the Village Health Care...the reason he went to the Village Health Care was he really was unable to take care of himself at that point. He needed some assistance. Mainly mental health issues was the reason for that. He became very interested in Catholicism for about six months prior to moving into the Village Health Care.

DR: I didn't know that. I wonder if he went to Mass or to see Hogan there at the university Catholic Church.

MG: I don't know if he did at some point in the past. I know a Catholic nun by the name of Sister Kathleen used to come and visit him. I think they brought Mass to him a couple of times. I don't know if it was Father Hogan who came. It may not have been by that time.

DR: Hogan's retired now, but he's a hell of a good guy. Good man. You saw Ed's apartment after he left us.

MG: Yeah. I cleaned it up; moved it.

DR: You cleaned it?

MG: Yeah.

DR: I had never seen such a mess in my life. Absolute mess. He hadn't touched anything to clean it in months. It was comic. Jesus Christ, what a place. Unbelievable. The worst looking living quarters I had ever seen in my life.

MG: I don't think he ever threw anything away other than maybe an empty can that he opened up to eat something out of. That wound up in the garbage, but sometimes those were sitting around the room too.

DR: Yes. It was wonderful.

MG: You'd go to visit him and he'd be sitting there in his boxer shorts in the recliner. Somebody would come and he'd get up to answer the door...

DR: Yeah, I remember that. I can't forget that.

MG: He usually just wore a shirt until it almost became solid.

DR: A shirt? He'd wear one?

MG: The food and stuff would fall and collect. It would make kind of a hard bib on the front of it.

DR: Ah, the poet. What was he? A poet is what he was. More than anything else, he was a poet. He wrote some very good ones. They're thinking maybe there are others around. Where the hell are they?

MG: I don't know. I think we'll find some as time goes on and they appear from other people that were sent in letters maybe that Ed might have wrote over the years to somebody and included a poem. A few will turn up like that. I found in just the piles that I cleaned up about 40.

DR: Forty poems?

MG: That had never been published, yeah.

DR: Where were they? The piles...papers...

MG: I had just, like you said, taken handfuls of papers and stuff and put them in boxes and finally got around to going through the boxes and sorting through things. We're just discovering these poems. I kept setting them aside. I kept checking back, thinking I've never seen or heard of that. I'd go back to the books and go through and no recollection of that ever appearing anywhere. Some of them were probably...didn't ever appear because he didn't think they were his best work. Some of them maybe didn't appear because maybe he was too close to them or he thought that maybe they would expose his life or his family in ways that he maybe didn't want to.

DR: There's Ed. There he is.

MG: There he is. Anything else...?

DR: Ed is gone.

MG: Ed is gone.

DR: We have this memory of him and he has a place in the poets' hall of fame for Missoula.

MG: He certainly does. I can't think of anything else that...If anything else comes to mind...Any one sort of gathering or party or time that you were around Ed somewhere that something happened that just kind of stuck in your mind and it's stuck with you? When you think of him, if you do, that stands out?

DR: Yeah, when I go back through it, not really. Not one...there were so many eccentrics in the English department. Ed even stood out in peoples' memory.

MG: Okay.

DR: No, I don't remember.

MG: All right. That's probably good. I appreciate it.

DR: That's about what we've got. I don't know as much about him as...who might know more? Who should be talked to?

MG: We're going to talk to a lot of people I think.

DR: Rick DeMarinis is a great friend.

MG: Right. I've got a collection of letters that Rick sent to me that Ed had wrote to him. I put those in the archives. They're very revealing in the way that you say things, especially in a letter because a letter is an art form in and of itself. The way that you speak to one of your closest friends in a letter is a wonderful, honest monologue.

DR: Did you say, "had wrote"?

MG: Did I say, "had wrote"?

DR: You said, "had wrote".

MG: Yeah, probably.

DR: That's an interesting colloquialism.

MG: (laughter) Yeah, get me talking for a while. All right I'm going to stop this goddamn thing.

[End of Interview]