

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 438-003
Interviewee: Roger Dunsmore
Interviewer: Mark Gibbons
Date of Interview: October 7, 2012
Project: Ed Lahey Oral History Project

Mark Gibbons: This is Mark Gibbons. It is October 7, 2012. I am conducting an interview with Roger Dunsmore about Ed Lahey...Okay...Okay Roger, what is most important is that they can hear you.

Roger Dunsmore: Yeah.

MG: So, I'll be a little faint in the background.

RD: Okay.

MG: I mean...I know...Let's just say...What is your first meeting or first encounter...What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about Ed Lahey when you first encountered him?

RD: I think it was like '64, 1964 or something. I don't know, we were both instructors in the English Department, or he was a grad student at that point. I was an instructor. He was moving. His dad was there sitting in a chair watching us move. He was married to Marylor at that time. I remember we were drinking Irish whiskey while we were moving. We were getting fairly drunk. His dad thought that was pretty funny. We began to, you know, like get chair legs caught in doorways and break them off and stuff. It was getting sort of out of hand in terms of the situation. (Laughs) We were busting things up. I don't remember how much. But, that is my earliest memory of Ed.

My early memories back in the '60s are not very strong. I left Montana from '66 to '68. I think that moving one the only one from pre-'66 that I remember. When I came back in '68, Warwick and Bullen were here. They were very powerful figures on the Missoula scene. Ed was quite within their sway.

MG: Paul Warwick and Denny Bullen?

RD: Yeah.

MG: When you say their sway, what do you mean?

RD: Well, they were just really powerful personalities. They were charismatic, intense, bright, and creative. It was the anti-war years. So, they were kind of the lead edge on campus of the anti-war movement at that time. Of course, Ed was always a pacifist in his public life.

What I remember was, maybe, a speech by Warwick and Bullen encouraging people to turn in their draft cards and stuff. I believe that Ed did that, turned in his draft card. Maybe, burned it publically and was freaked out afterwards by that.

I think LSD was a part of that whole matrix in that group of the anti-war movement. I also think that...I never talked to Ed about this, but my sense is that Ed got into LSD a bit. I think it was...I think it increased his imbalance mentally because he did have mental problems. He did four tours of duty in Warm Springs as a mental patient. I even wonder whether or not Denny and Paul didn't feel somewhat responsible in having introduced him, as far as I knew, to LSD which may have caused some of the imbalances that came out of all that time.

Ed did end up in jail in the anti-war movement years, '68...'71 or so. I know he told me later, Ed did. That he had...This might have been earlier than that. This might have been while I was gone. I was off in Europe for a year. Then I taught at a Catholic college in Kentucky for a year.

MG: What years?

RD: 1966-1968. I had been here from 1963 to 1966. Then I came back in 1968 and stayed until 2005 when I moved to Dillon.

At some point in those '60s, he had job teaching English at Montana Tech (Montana Tech of the University of Montana). I believe he was either teaching or playing tapes of Gandhi and Gandhi's non-violent resistance stuff. I don't know what all caused this whether...He thought it was that, the non-violent stuff with Gandhi. The police came to his office, handcuffed him, and led him off campus in shackles. I think that was maybe the point at which he had choice of whether to go Warm Springs or into prison. I think he chose Warm Springs. Now, I may have that a little bit skewed because I wasn't there. It was just my memory of what Ed told me at that time.

Also back there in those early years...Ed and I...We liked each other. We were drawn to each other, but I didn't know him nearly as well in those years until after '91. That is when Ed and I really got close was from '91 until he died. But back in those early years, he had one mental breakdown. They took him up to the...It was the old railroad hospital up there along where the interstate is now. They had him in a room by himself, and he was shackled. Both arms were shackled over his head to metal bedframes. Both legs were shackled. I remember I fed him. I had to. He couldn't feed himself because of these shackles. So, I came. They brought his dinner in, and I fed him with a spoon because his arms were shackled.

MG: What year?

RD: I don't know.

MG: But you're talking about mid to late '60s.

RD: Probably late '60s, yeah. I always felt that in those years, anyway, that came between us. That there was a sense on his part of humiliation and vulnerability, and that I had seen him in this condition of being shackled to a metal bed frame and had to feed him. I felt it was a difficulty between us. It wasn't like, "Oh, it was great that you did that for me." It was like, "You have seen me really in tough shape, and I am not comfortable with that." At least, that was my feeling about it all. Again, he never said that as such.

So, it wasn't really...Those were some early memories. It wasn't really until I came back from China in 1991...I came back at the end of July. I had been gone for six or eight months over in China. I nearly died over there. I had had pneumonia and had been in a Chinese hospital for 25 days. I had fallen in love with a young woman over there that I had to leave behind. When I came back, I was wrecked. I was not myself in many ways.

Dexter called me up, Dexter Roberts. He said, "You better go see Lahey. He is back in the mental ward up there in that old railroad hospital." I went up to see him. He wasn't shackled or anything at that point. He was ambulatory and able to move around in the mental ward. He was really glad to see me. I was glad to see him.

I have written about this in a poem. I felt so desolate. I had such a difficult time re-entering the U.S. society at that point after that time in China and what I had been through there. I was only comfortable on that mental ward with him for a few weeks. So, I would go up. I don't think I went every day. I think I went up three or four times a week. I just hung out with him up there. There was a daughter of another faculty member that I was pretty close to up there who had had a break down. I can remember they had...They always had a bowl of apples at the nurses' station there. Ed and I would go up and each get an apple and sit in a chair near the nurses' station and eat our apples together.

But, it bonded us. I felt like I was safe in the mental ward with him in a way that I didn't feel just out generally. I was not tracking well myself at all.

MG: That's when your—

RD: That bonded us.

MG: —your friendship begun.

RD: Yeah. We were friends before that but not close. From that point on, we were really close.

MG: Before you then move forward into basically your close friendship with Ed until the end of his life—

RD: Yeah.

MG: Let's talk just for a minute about...I'm sorry to feed back—

RD: That's okay.

MG: —about the writing, as far as Ed as a poet, prior to coming back in '90.

RD: Yeah.

MG: If you go backwards in time again. What did you think in terms of Ed as a poet? When did you first encounter that?

RD: I don't know when I first encountered it. But I know that I was skeptical of it. I thought too much was made of it. I didn't get...I didn't get Hugo very well. Hugo was good to me. I liked him, and he liked me. But I didn't get him as a poet. So, Ed was part of that group around Hugo. He was close to Hugo. I was an outsider to that because I really didn't get Hugo that much. So a lot was being made of Ed's poetry as being this incredible find that Hugo had made. I thought, "Well, okay." I read his stuff. I wasn't taken with Ed's poetry. I wasn't taken with Hugo's poetry. I wasn't part of that circle. So, I was ambivalent there.

I liked all those guys. I was glad to be even on periphery of that circle, but it wasn't my circle. My circle was much more...Well, Gary Snyder was my main teacher. I had started reading and actually writing to him in the mid-sixties. He actually taught with us in '71 for six weeks in the Round River thing. Hugo would say things like, "Don't write like Gary Snyder. There is only one Gary Snider, and that's not what you want to do." So that was, you know, explicitly forbidden. That was where my teaching was.

I felt... I guess I felt that people made too much of Ed's poetry at that point. I came to reconsider that later on. I realized how wonderful the early mining poems were. During those early years, I didn't. I didn't have that.

MG: Did you hear him read in the early years?

RD: I don't think I did. I don't think I did hear him read. I stayed away from that. There was kind of a...It was too much of an "in group" around Hugo. I didn't like the suction, and I didn't belong quite. I was trying... In '66, I was just writing my first poems. Hugo had already been a couple years. I didn't feel adequate myself. Ed was one of the prizes in the "in crowd." That was all going on in the early years. Though, we liked each other. I got along with everybody. I felt glad to be around them. I think I learned from them by osmosis. But, I was an outsider.

MG: When is the first time you recall hearing Ed read?

RD: I don't know. I would say, though...I don't recall hearing Ed read until after '91. After '91 not only did I hear him read, I drove him to readings. I occasionally read with him. I introduced him at readings. I mean I was very much involved in his public reading life after '91.

MG: But you came to that through friendship.

RD: Yeah.

MG: As opposed to trying to just go listen to someone read their poetry.

RD: Right, right, right, yeah. I was a pal. We were on the road together.

MG: Just as little side question. One of the things that I found out in Ed's life later on was that he was not aware of the fact that his father was not his father.

RD: Yeah.

MG: He found this out after his father died in 1966, I believe.

RD: Yeah, I don't know what the date is.

MG: 1966 or '67. Something like that. You were probably gone at that time.

RD: Yeah, probably died while I was gone.

MG: Anyway, when did you...Did you hear...Did you know that?

RD: Oh yeah, Ed and I talked about that. But again, this is after '91. I mean...The difference between pre'91 and after '91 was that sense of a real friendship, and a real intimacy came after that.

MG: What did he say about that?

RD: Well, I think it was his mother that told him. He talked about how it happened. Apparently, the mother and his biological father and then his legal father who was married to his mother...Those three in that...I think both did a jip of mining and the bootlegging. You know, his mother and the guy just probably had too much to drink and got it on. Ed was born. They sat down, the three of them, not Ed, but the two men and the mother. They worked it out and talked it over. They stayed friends. It was never a thing that came to some kind of violence, separation, or anything else. They understood each other, and they understood how it had happen.

It was a very human kind of thing to happen. It could happen, I think, to many of us. Maybe not all of us. I always like that about the story. They had sort of worked it out between the three of them. Eddy was born. His dad always took him as his son. That didn't seem to be an issue.

I know later on. Ed...It would be...Both his mother and dad were dead. But, his real dad was still alive. The surrogate father, the outsider father, the real father, the guy whose semen it was. He was still was alive. Ed needed money. Ed didn't have much of anything in those years when I knew him from '91 on. He always lived on a shoe string and close to the edge.

We would talk about this. "Well, how about your real dad?" Well, he had his own children, his own legal, legitimate children. He died in that period after '91. I don't think Ed saw anything from that. I think, again, Ed understood that the guy took care of his own legal kids. I also think he felt that...He felt that exclusion, you know. I don't remember what he said about it. I knew that he felt bad about that. He may have even gone and...I don't know if he ever said anything to that guy or not. But, he did hope. I know he hoped that something would come to him from that. It didn't.

MG: Right

RD: Yeah...So...

MG: One of the times that Ed had a pretty good breakdown or mental sort of coming apart at the seams, I was informed by Rick and some people that the time that he found that out, he, you know, he lost it.

RD: He had a big mental breakdown, yeah.

MG: A big break. I wondered if maybe that didn't contribute to some regard to problems that he had further down the line.

RD: Could be. When he introduced that issue to me, I don't remember what the context was. But I remember...I think he said it like, "You know I am a bastard." And I said, "No. What you mean you're a bastard?" "Well, you know, my father is not my father. My mother told me this."

That always impressed me about that story was that the three of them, those three adults worked that out seemingly pretty well and pretty congenially. They were partners. They stayed partners. They didn't have a big brew-ha-ha, as far as I could tell around it.

MG: Right. And the story was kept secret to protect Ed—

RD: Yup.

MG: —more than anything.

RD: Yup.

MG: I would imagine.

RD: Yup, yup, yup. Ed was...For me...one of the things, I think, happened to me after '91 was that I was not....Up until '91, I had a couple books of poetry out. That was pretty much it. I saw myself more as a teacher. I was very insecure and felt inadequate in myself as a poet.

I knew Ed was this legendary poet figure in Montana. One of things that happened in my relationship with him was that he valued my poetry. He really helped me gain confidence as a writer. Sometimes he would chastise me when I would have a reading that only three people showed up at. I kind of limped through the reading. He would give me hell. He would say, "God damn you. You do the same best reading as if there are a hundred people. Just because three people showed up...That one person that needs to be there is probably there." He taught me those kinds of things.

I was always surprised that he valued my work as a poet because I undervalued it and was insecure. I think in terms of friendship that might be the most important thing that happened for me in the friendship. My confidence in myself as writer was nurtured by him. He nurtured that. I don't even know if he was consciously aware of trying to do that. But he did.

MG: I would guess that he recognized the value in your work. One of the things...When you say confidence, one of things that came to my mind is that Ed had an incredible amount of confidence—

RD: Yeah.

MG: —about poetry. About that passion and that confidence for what he was into. He was...For a man who was as, you know.

RD: He was gifted. I think that was recognized early on. I think that he knew that. Even though it meant things like when he won the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and went off to Madison, Wisconsin on one of those. It was...I am not sure what all the details were. He didn't manage to follow through on that. He had to leave and come back to Montana. But, I also think that he ...I think he was a runner up in the Rhode Scholar applications. He had confidence coming out of Missoula. He knew that he was gifted intellectually and creatively.

You know, one of the stories that he told that I have always loved was that...I don't know if it was his first time in Warm Springs State Mental Hospital or the second or third time. It was probably not the fourth time. Leslie Fiedler, who had been his mentor here for years, and who really saw Ed's power as a writer and a thinker, wrote to the head psychiatrist at Warm Springs. Ed was very proud of this. He had said to the head psychiatrist, "Now you let Ed Lahey have whatever thoughts he wants to have or needs to have. Don't you mess with him. Let him have free reign in terms of his mind." I have always thought that was a...Ed was proud of that and loved Leslie for it. I always thought it was great of Fiedler to do that and give that recognition. Yup.

MG: I think of the first part of that short story.

RD: "Queen Wilhelmina's"? Yeah.

MG: Where him and the psychiatrist are at the interview.

RD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MG: That is an incredible piece of writing.

RD: Yeah. That needs to—

MG: Clarity and—

RD: Yeah. That whole piece needs to have more visibility. I don't know how we will do that. But, we will. He was also supportive of me. I have not been a very successful person in terms of marriages. My present wife, Jenny Fallene, and I got together at the end of '95, the last week in '95. We struggled quite a bit our first few years. Two things happened that separated Ed and I. Between '91 and the end of '95, Ed and I were like...I wouldn't say married. But, we were like—

MG: Brothers?

RD: Yeah, brothers. We saw each other all the time. We did all kinds of stuff together. We would go out to Frenchtown Pond and go swimming together. He loved to swim. We would go up to Lolo Hot Springs and swim. What was amazing about Ed in those kinds of instances was that there were no lines of separation between him and particularly females. They all loved him. God, before I would know it, he would have some gal up Lolo Hot Springs that he was seeing and going up there without me. I would feel a little funny.

When Jenny came on to the picture with me that meant Ed and I spent quite a bit less time together. It happened pretty quickly, you know. I think both he and I felt that loss, although, I was caught up in a new romance. So, it probably didn't affect me as much as it did him.

When Jenny and I would struggle and I would be bereft, upset, confused, or just pissed, you know whatever you get, I would go talk to him about it. What was great about that was he was a tremendous counselor. He never sided with me against her. He always supported that relationship. He really liked her. He wouldn't let me just draw him in joining up with me to be real critical toward her. He wouldn't do that. That was great.

I could go there when I was a mess. I could go there when I depressed, confused, fucked up, and angry. He would listen and support the relationship. He would help me. He liked her. I think he was a major catalyst for her and me staying together in the early years when we were bouncing off each other pretty hard at times. I always valued that even though it cost him. He was the one who lost the daily kind of time with me once that happened. I don't know if she and I would have made it through those first couple years if I hadn't had that kind of a counselor. Yeah, a really good friend. I could go there when I didn't want anyone else to see me because I was a mess. I could always go to see Ed. I did it. I availed myself of that probably more than is fair (Laughs).

MG: (Laughs) When you have seen someone shackled to a bed frame—

RD: Yeah. Oh, Christ.

MG: —you feel comfortable to air your worst nightmares.

RD: Yeah.

MG: I have a couple of things that I want to ask before I forget about them.

RD: Yeah.

MG: Well two stories. One being Ed, we know, in later years developed what was a tremor. I (unintelligible) false Parkinson's. Could you elaborate on what you know about that whole business with Ed's—

RD: Yeah. The tremor stuff. One thing I would say about it is it really added to his readings. He would have this great big, fat guy up there shaking and sweating just looking like death warmed over.

MG: Yeah, (unintelligible)! (Laughs)

RD: Out of him was coming this incredible Irish voice that was the best reading voice that you would hear. The contrast between the voice and the shaking, the sweating, and stuff was stunning. So, I think it really did add to it. But, it got so bad that he couldn't type. It got so bad that he couldn't write anymore because his hands were shaking too much. Nobody could figure out what it was.

I don't know which doctor, or how he figured it out. He did sit down with one doctor who said to him after Ed described his symptoms, "I have never known a person with your symptoms who didn't work around manganese. Did you ever work around manganese?" Well, yeah. He had unloaded gondola cars with manganese. The way he had done it...He had been probably sixteen or seventeen. He had been pretty young. They would take these gondola cars, and they would dump them. I guess they had a device where it would turn them right over and dump them. Or maybe, the bottom would open up, and they would dump them. He would crawl up inside after they were dumped with this big sledge hammer, a five or ten pound sledge, and beat on the walls of those gondola cars to knock all the dust out. You know, there was no safety stuff. There were no masks, breathers, or anything else. So, he was breathing in that manganese dust. He was getting, I don't know, ten dollars a day and thinking it was big wages, and he was the king of the hill. It came in.

That manganese poisoning got into his central nervous system. This guy started giving him beta blockers. I don't know quite what they are. The beta blockers did allow him to...I don't think the tremors ever went away. They certainly were reduced and managed to the point where he could write. He could use a typewriter. He could hold a pen. I think...I know they never did go away because they were still quite useful in readings. (Laughs) I don't know if he kind of would slip back into a little extra tremor to jazz his audience or not. He still...I noticed them most when he read after that even though he could still write.

MG: The other question I wanted to ask is about... I know you guys went swimming a lot. He loved to going to Lolo Hot Springs. He loved the hot springs because he was in pain. He had a car accident, he told me. Could you add anything about that?

RD: No, I don't know about the car accident. I know he had a lot of aches and pains. The hot springs made him feel better. We also went to the one outside Butte. It begins with an F. I want to call it Fair Haven—

MG: Fairmont.

RD: Fairmont, yeah. We would go to Fairmont. Fairmont was a little too developed and too fancy. It was more fun to go up to Lolo Hot Springs. Somewhere in the mid-'90s there, he had his own little pickup truck. He would go up there by himself quite a bit too. He actually had one girlfriend that lived in a cabin up there. God, that was always amazing.

One of my favorite times coming back from Lolo Hot Springs with him was we would stop...There was a little ma and pa grocery store down the road ten miles. We would stop in there and bought a six pack of beer, cans of beer. We both drank one. He threw his out the window after he was down drinking it. I was an environmentalist. I helped found the wilderness program and all that jazz. It kind of startled me. I figured he was environmentally conscious too.

So, we each drank a second one. He threw the second one out the window like the first one. I said, "Oh, Christ, Lahey! What are you throwing those empty cans out the window for? That's littering and stuff."

He said, "Well, we got to get rid of the evidence." (Laughs)

I went (unintelligible). By God, I started throwing mine out the window too. (Laughs) You got to get rid of those open containers. I never thought I would be throwing beer cans... (Laughs).

MG: Spoken like a moonshiner's son. (Laughs)

RD: (Laughs) Yeah. I never thought I would be throwing empty beer cans out the window to get rid of the evidence. But, yeah. I loved that about him. I mean he would...He was coming from such a different place. I felt like I learned a lot from that. We had this little what you're supposed to and not supposed to. He had a whole other set of rules that came from somewhere else. Some of them were pretty good.

He also saw...I think he was pretty astute with people's character. One of the troubles that Jenny and I had was she hates being mothered. He said, "Well, Christ, Dunsmore, you know you are fatherly motherly. You got to get over being fatherly motherly." He often called me fatherly motherly. "When you going to stop being fatherly motherly?" I think that was true. I think it helped me sort of toughen up in my relationship with my wife and not to be so fatherly motherly. I still have great deal of affection for that phrase. I think he did see clearly that yeah. (Laughs) Too fatherly motherly. (Laughs)

MG: Yeah. Well, do you want to take a quick break here?

RD: Yeah. Let's take a quick break.

MG: All right. We are back.

RD: A couple of my more intimate times with him were...Well, God, there were several. Some are positive and some are negative. I don't mean any disrespect because some of these stories do paint him in not the greatest light. They are real stories. They are stories of closeness.

I was with him when he sold his house in Butte. This was the house that he had owned with his second wife, Kay, I think her name was. It was a two story house. I think it was mostly stone. He had worked on it for years, you know, patching it up, carpentry work, and painting. He had also bought all kinds of things at the second hand store to furnish it.

They had broken up. I think at the time he was living in Anaconda. He had been in Missoula for a little while, and then he went back to Anaconda for a while. Then he did move back to Missoula. It wasn't easy for him to leave that Butte / Anaconda area. He finally did settle here.

He decided to sell the house. He sold it to Kay's family. I remember we went in. I don't know if...Well, I was in the house with him. Then we went down to the lawyer's office. He sold his house which was pretty nice Butte house for 7,500 dollars. They were saying, "Now, you sure?"

He was saying, "Yes."

So, I took him aside and said, "Now Ed, you know, this is very low price for this house that is a two-story house. You put a lot of years into it. You sure?" "Yeah."

I don't know how he got the price for that house in mind. I wondered about them, you know. I mean like I wonder why they didn't say, "Oh, we need to pay you at least twice that. We need to pay you at least 15,000 dollars or something." That would have been a steal. I didn't try to talk him out of it. I have never been that kind of person. I questioned him about it.

MG: What year?

RD: It would have been early '90s, probably '92 or '93, right in there. Then come to find out that the house had all his mother's paintings in it. So, Kay had those paintings. He didn't have his own mother's paintings. She had been quite a good painter her whole life. At some point, he asked if I would go back and get the paintings for him. I went back and talked to Kay. I had a little pickup truck. I picked up, I don't know, maybe a dozen paintings.

She was nice. I liked Kay. She was a good person. I didn't think her family was bad. I just thought that was odd. It didn't seem right. But, he wanted to do it, and he wanted to do it for that. I felt glad to be with him during that period of time to at least question it and then able to do the pick up on the paintings.

The painting that he had of hers, his mom, that he seemed...I think he liked the best, but maybe it was just I liked it the best. I don't know. It was that laughing Christ. It was this kind of wild laughing Christ he always had on the wall. Christ was looking like a gypsy or something. It was a good strong laugh and energy. That seemed to be...Ed had that spirit.

Another time that we were close...this was probably...who knows if I should even tell this story. We were up at Jack...We went up to Jack Waller's place. I think Ed was maybe going to give a reading that night in Philipsburg. This was before Jack moved to Virginia City. Jack had this cabin outside of Philipsburg. One of Ed's old girlfriends showed up, an old lover showed up. The three of us were sitting on the bed. We were drinking a fifth of whiskey. We all got pretty drunk. It really did look like we were going to have a threesome there which I have never had in my life.

It was just one...We were drifting towards that, you know. Waller came in! Oh, was he surprised! Here the three of us were on his big queen sized bed, half drunk. I think we all still had our clothes on. But, I don't know what would have happened if...

MG: Not in your mind.

RD: Yeah. (Laughs) Not in our minds. I don't know what would have happened if Waller would have not came in. Now that's...I think, "Well, God! What will people think? What will my wife think? What will his daughters think? Should I even tell stories like that?" But some of my fondest memories of him are like that. You know?

MG: Yeah.

RD: Maybe the most fondest was after Jenny and I were together. He was living in that whatever it was. Down there at the corner of Orange and Front Street, it was for old people on the river.

MG: Clark Fork.

RD: Clark Fork Manor or whatever it was. He was beginning to get more slovenly. Though, I suppose he always was a little slovenly. I went over. I think it was his birthday which is...July what? Sixth?

MG: Eighth?

RD: Eighth, yeah. I went over to take him to breakfast for his birthday. I don't remember if he met me at the VFW Club. Is that the bar just down that...Yeah, he met there or we walked over from his apartment. But, he hadn't changed his shirt in a month. It was crusted. It had a half inch of dried crust like an apron from the neck down, shoulder width all the way to the belt line. I remember feeling self-conscious in the bar. I mean what were people going to think of me sitting with this guy who had this shirt on that had a breast plate that was totally crusted food on it.

Again, I don't mean any disrespect to him for this. But, I was concerned about him. But, I was also concerned about what people would think. Who the hell was this that I was with? I said to him, "Ed." We were going to go across the street to eat at the Shack. I said, "How long have you had that shirt on?"

"Oh, I don't know. A month maybe," he said.

I said, "Well, you know, don't you think we ought to...for your birthday... before we go over to the Shack. Do you want to go up and get a clean shirt on?"

"Nah." There was no need, you know. So, we went across the street and ate with it.

There is something about that that's...I don't feel critical of him for that. There is something touching about that for me. That's not quite the right word. An extension of it was that I drove him to Butte. He had...Bertinoli [means Dr. Bartolletti] is the dentist in Butte. I don't know if that is the right name or not. There is an Italian family whose runs dentistry in Butte. That guy did Ed's teeth pro bono, you know, for free for years. The teeth were in terrible shape. I mean he was gluing them in and taking them out, carving on them. He never charged him anything. He took good care of Ed for many, many years.

So, I would drive Ed over. We would go to the dentist. Then we would always go and eat in the Chinese place up on Broadway or Park.

MG: Pekin?

RD: It wasn't the Pekin. Because...what was interesting...I think Ed was right on this. This other place didn't have the longevity of the Pekin. It didn't have the Chinese. The cook in other Chinese place was Mexican. But, he was a really good Chinese cook. (Laughs) He was Mexican. It was better food than the Pekin. So, we would always eat together there.

We were going over one time to...Well, God, a couple things. Drink. Jesus! We would stop in Drummond. He would go in, and he would buy a pint of vodka. We would get back in the car. He would just chug just straight down. Not all of it, about two thirds of it. He said that he was getting ready for the dentist. (Laughs) Then when we would come out of the dentist, he would chug the last third. It was lapped just straight down. Just chug it! I never seen anybody drink like that. I know people do drink like that. I never quite drink like that. It was really amazing. Then we would go up and eat at this other Chinese restaurant which is out of business now. I can't remember the name of it.

One time we were going over there to the dentist. He had another one these shirts that had this whole like body armor of crusted food on it. I said to Ed, "You are going over to Butte. You are going to the dentist. It would probably be good if, you know, you didn't walk in there with that quarter inch of dried food all over the front of your shirt. Would you mind if we stop in Deer Lodge, and I scrap that off and clean you up?"

"Oh. That would be great," he said. "Sure. Go ahead."

So, we pulled into a gas station there. I think I took the scrapper from the windshield. I scrapped his shirt off. Then I had a rag of some kind in the car. I got water from the windshield washer at the gas pumps. I wiped his shirt down. It was summer time. It wasn't winter or anything. I cleaned it up fairly well, actually.

For me, that was not an intimidating time with him. That was really close. I value that kind of time with him. It was like I felt like I could do something for...I felt like he accepted that from me. He knew I didn't judge him, but I did want him to be a little more cleaned up before he went into a public place like a dentist's office. I guess for me, as much as anything, that scrapping that dried food off of his shirt front on the way to Butte, I have great affection for that memory. That is a metaphor for the way we felt about each other.

MG: Yeah. This is kind of a leading question.

RD: Yeah.

MG: Would you...I am sure you would. Would you say that his poetry reflected that sort of change in him as...You talked about your relationship with him early on and the power of his poetry coming out of the Hugo workshops and out of his first book award in '79. He's the next greatest thing—

RD: Yeah, to Hugo.

MG: —in Montana poetry. Then we see the later years, the 1990s. *The Apples Rolling on the Lawn* was '99 almost. I think the end of the 1990s was when that little chap book finally came out. There was a long period of time there with nothing.

RD: Yeah.

MG: The difference in those poems and the difference in your relationship or at least the more intimate—

RD: Yeah, the poems are more intimate. It's not like...I love "Gimp O'Leary's Iron Works." I include it every anthology I make for students. It's a great poem. It is a great poem about poetry. But, it's great poem about poetry that honors the ordinary artistry of a mining welder. It never...It makes that as a metaphor for poetry without ever undermining the real, gritty, nitty work.

MG: What I always loved about that poem is that it seems to elevate the poetry, the artistry of poetry to that of there.

RD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MG: You know?

RD: Yeah, yup, yup.

MG: The heart.

RD: Yeah. It's a terrific poem. But, the later poems have a different feel. The one from Mary Lauren in the Safeway where the bird is in the store gets caught in the fan and is reduced to a bunch of feathers down around his feet. You feel Ed's acknowledgment of his own just being a bird shredded by the fan of life. Yet, he loves his grandchild. He loves his estranged wife almost as much as he hates her, or whatever the line is. I think some of the other poems in those later works too...That torn orange that he takes out of the street and puts it on a blue saucer and takes home. Oh man, that's a...I love that poem. It is one of my favorite ones.

I will say this about that anthology. Not anthology. That chap book comes out in the nineties. Maybe it is in late nineties. Ed had not published anything since the first Montana book award, *The Blind Horses*. I don't think he would have. But, the guy who did that was named Waldrop, Hal Waldrop. Hal Waldrop was an old, old friend of Ed's from way back. He worked as an aid out at the mental institution. He just felt bad that Ed did not have any poems out there after *Blind Horses*. So, he did that. He actually did the physical labor to it. He paid for it out of his pocket. He is the one who reopened Ed's publishing from that point on.

I think that gets forgotten. Everybody looks at Russell Chatham's book, or the one the University book store did that has Jenny's drawing on the cover, the horses leaping out of the typewriter. It was Hal Waldrop who deserves the credit for the reopening. That was really important.

I remember...I took some photos of Ed. I don't know if it was for that one or the horses leaping out of the type writer. Ed and I would walk along the river there in Missoula, the Clark Fork. We would walk along both sides. There was a lot of great graffiti down under the bridges. Of course, all the politically correct assholes have gone and covered it up with naval gun boat paint, grey and stuff. They don't understand the artistry in the graffiti. I remember taking a photo of Ed standing next to a face. It was a graffiti face on one of those bridges under

the...under the bridges there along the river. The face must have been five or six feet tall, and Ed stood next to it. I think it was about as tall as he was. I think we used it in one of those books. He understood the underground. He understood graffiti art. He understood what was under the bridges real well.

MG: He understood art, I think.

RD: Yeah. I love that story about him. I think I tell this in that article for Montana Poets. So maybe we shouldn't with it. He was at a powwow in Deer Lodge. The Indians had taken a buffalo into a butcher. Should I even bother to tell that one?

MG: Go ahead. No, go ahead.

RD: The butcher...The agreement was that he was going to do it free for them, but then he took half of it to pay himself without negotiating with them about that. When Ed heard this story...it was just like Ed. He went right to that butcher and told him that he was a disgrace to his own race, and he needed to give that half of bison to those Indians, which he did. He shamed this guy into that. That's when the Indians then gave him that nickname of "Silver Tongue," which was sort of a tongue in cheek, double edged name. I think it is a very revealing story.

He told stories of when he was jail for his anti-war stuff having guys in the prison...talk about...I think he was in either the shower or the pisser. Some guy started in on him. A little, tiny Mexican told the other guy to step back and leave Ed alone right now. The guy that was bothering him did. How much he felt he owed to guys like that, little Mexican guys he met in jail who stood up for him just because he didn't like what was going on. So, he had that kind of that basic sense of justice that's at that level, you know, the level of guys in jail. People did take care of him. He said Warm Springs back in the, I don't know it was '60s or '70s, it was way overcrowded. [It had] twice as many people as it was built to hold. The halls were just filled with seriously psychotic and schizophrenic people that were scary as hell. He was terrified. You had to watch your back. I don't remember any particular stories of anybody standing up for him. I am sure that went in there too, you know, people taking care of each other.

MG: That's the Irish in him, I think.

RD: Yeah.

MG: A lot of that comes from that background. Well, I'm thinking here.

RD: I have got that poem about...You know, he flew. His mother flew. That is widely known that she was one of the earliest women pilots, maybe the earliest in the state. Then she dropped the fixings for the moonshine they were making so the revenueurs couldn't follow her up the draws and stuff.

There is a little spring outside of Anaconda as you are going up towards Georgetown Lake. There is a really nice little spring along the highway that just pull off there. Ed always...He always wanted to stop there whenever we took that back road over to Anaconda or back road to Butte. We would fill up a jug of water at that spring. I remember there was guy parked there

when we came down one time with his wife and had a couple of kids in the car. For some reason...I don't know how this story came out. Maybe, I just put these together in a poem. Ed was telling me about a time he saw a crop duster crash. I think you have seen this poem of mine, although, it may have not been published. I didn't—

MG: What's the title?

RD: I'll be damned if I know what the title is.

MG: Oh, I'm sorry.

RD: It's okay. He said, "Yeah, I..." It was this guy in this car down this spring outside of Anaconda that somehow reminded us of this crop dusting story. He said that he saw a crop duster. He had snagged...When he came in to crop dust, he snagged his wheels on a telephone line. Instead of going down, he gunned it. He gunned the motors. I remember Ed going "(Makes motor noises.*)" You know, gunning those motors. The guy was started pulling wire. He must have been hauling like a thousand foot of wire before it got him. He crashed and burned.

Ed talked about how he knew the guy had kids. I don't know what all he knew about him or anything. That was a moving story particularly coming from someone who talked about his own difficulties flying, and the number of people that get killed in flying in Montana for various reasons.

So, when I came to write that poem, I wrote it about that guy at the spring where we were getting water being that guy in the car with his wife and his kids. That was a story around which I made a poem, but around which he had a great story. He had that Epicurus (?) poem. He has all those stories about his mom flying too.

MG: One of the things, I guess, is so...When you are talking about someone who is a masterful story teller, and Ed was a masterful story teller, one of the things that strikes me...I realize sometimes in communications talking about that person who has told me the stories—

RD: Yeah, yeah.

MG: —is that maybe some of these actually didn't happen.

RD: Yeah!

MG: He really thinks that they did because of the possibility...We all have that kind of...Sometimes we take on other people's stories and think we were actually there after a length of time. Then of course, Ed had some mental issues. Some of that may have been hallucination or invention.

RD: Yeah, yeah.

MG: Do you have any? Does anything come to mind?

RD: Oh sure.

MG: A special one?

RD: Well, I even wondered...He would talk about Leslie Fiedler would go into the bars in a Woody Street and Indian wrestle on the floor with guys. I have repeated that story. It got in the newspaper actually. Then I got to thinking, "Well, I don't know if that is really a Leslie Fiedler story or if that's just an Ed Lahey story, you know."

Couple that I really know...We were up in Butte at some kind of reading. Ed was primary poet figure. We all went to this Mexican, I mean Chinese restaurant with the Mexican cook that was better than the Pekin. (Laughs) Waller was with us. We were sitting around the table. Ed started saying that he had been up at the court house. It was heavily guarded. The judge had called him up. They were going to have a seminar on his poetry. And...God, it went on for a while. I don't remember it all. It was obviously...He had been with him. It was out there. I think...What did it mean? Probably, he would have loved to have a seminar on his poetry. Maybe, that was what we were having around that table in that Chinese restaurant.

MG: And if you didn't know the difference you could have possibly believed it.

RD: Yeah!

MG: I mean that's what I found.

RD: Yeah!

MG: I mean some of those stories, they were just so rational.

RD: Jack Waller. Jack Waller had come to Missoula, he said, to visit him. But, he wasn't sure he wanted to see him because Waller was running a car stealing ring. (Laughs) He had seen Waller and his side kick picked off, I don't know, a pink Cadillac or something that had been parked by the court house. They were going drive back to Anaconda and sell it and stuff. Jesus! At first, you think, "Jesus, I wonder if Waller is..." Then, "Nah."

MG: It would make a good movie or novel.

RD: Yeah. Yeah. He had that side to him, and you didn't know. You got taken in by it usually for a while anyway or to some extent.

MG: Yeah. He could tell a story.

RD: Yeah. It was like it was real. It probably was real for him.

MG: Well, anything else that you can think of that you want to say or say anything in kind of conclusion for this thing? Then we can always do another one at another time if we think we want to.

RD: Yeah, yeah. Well, no, not much...I guess the main thing I would say about him is that I owe him a great debt just because of his help to me in terms of making me believe in myself or helping me believe in myself, and his help to me in teaching to throw empty beer cans out the

window so I didn't get caught with evidence. (Laughs) Thirdly, I think my marriage. I think he really helped me to survive the early years of marriage, the marriage I am in now. I needed somebody. I think he help survive when I came back from China that first time when I just...I had nearly died, and I left behind a young half Muslim Chinese woman that I didn't want to leave. So I just hung out with him the mental ward where I was safe. He was a good friend.

The other thing I would say about Ed is he was a...regardless of what flaws he had or how well he was able to follow through, say in his family on what his deepest insights were, he was Buddhist. He was a Buddhist. He read the Buddhist literature. He took the Buddhist journals monthly. He was very serious and thoughtful about that.

I remember when he got the Governor's Award. We were standing in the capitol building in Helena in the rotunda. The governor got up and said, "Blah, blah." It was all this presentation stuff. When Ed got up, he was shaking pretty good then. He was also was walking with a cane at that point. The governor, kind of this sort of phony smile on his face, kind of enjoying in a condescending kind of way was the way it seemed to me as an outsider. But Ed stood up there at the podium. The first thing he did was condemn capital punishment. The second thing he did was condemn the war in Iraq. I was really moved by his willingness to do those two things in that very political place in front those people and to use whatever award he got to make that kind of statement. I really—

MG: Moral statement.

RD: Yeah, very moral. He added that moral thing. I am sure the people who had to live with him and maybe see him at his worst would see the contradictions between the public moral statement and some of the interior of the life. But nevertheless, we have all got our contradictions. As an old man at that point and somewhat shaky, he never flinched or even blinked.

MG: Give him the chance to say something.

RD: Yeah. He didn't flinch. So, those are just a few other things.

MG: Yeah, all right. I think...If we want to do another one of these at some point, we can. If I can think of something that we didn't cover...I mean, you know, a lot of the stories that come to my mind, they have already been chronicled in other writing and in poems. You have letters with Ed too that I am sure sooner or later you will probably donate to the archives.

RD: I should figure that out. Yeah.

MG: If you have letters from Ed in Ed's hand—those kinds of things.

RD: I should have them.

MG: But anyway, thank you.

RD: Yeah. Yeah. No, my pleasure. I don't have anything else at the top of my head right now, but I am sure stuff will come to me, you know. Yeah. Thank you for asking me.

MG: Yeah. Oh sure! (Laughs)

RD: He really—

MG: Go ahead. I'm sorry.

RD: He really taught me a lot of stuff. I often didn't understand when he first said...one of the things he said to me was, "I am not a part of any church and that includes the church of poetry." You know?

MG: Yeah.

RD: It took me awhile to figure out what the hell he was talking about. I think that would go for the church of Buddhism too. I mean he was a person for whom poetry and Buddhism were very, very important. But he understood...he kept his...he didn't want to be institutionalized even though he had been in Warm Springs four times. Maybe that's why. He understood the need for kind of independence from joining the group and becoming a person that was labeled in a certain way. I think...that comes to me often. The church of poetry. I mean I see people join the church of poetry every fucking day. You know? I just saw it this weekend, the church of poetry over there. He was larger than that. He was larger than that.

The other thing that comes to mind is the last time I saw him about 12 hours before he choked to death at the end the a hall behind a lock door. I came in and said, "How are you doing at night?"

He said, "Not too bad." We went on and talked about a few other things for not too long, about 15 minutes. Then I left. I hear that phrase. Every time I hear that phrase "Not too bad," I go right back to that moment of 12 hours before he choked to death. Every time I say it. I'll say it sometime. It is just like one of those phrases now that is just set in flesh. Burnt into the flesh. So...yeah...not too bad.

He was not ready to die, and he was not going to die. He was...Even though he had been laid up in a bed for a couple of years, at least by that point; he would have gone on some more. He would have been able to go on some more. The quality of life was slipping. It had gone pretty far down. He wasn't at death's door when he died. That was unfortunate that they had him alone in a room at the end of a hall behind a locked door.

MG: Yeah.

RD: He wasn't doing too bad. "Not too bad," he said. You know?

MG: Yeah.

RD: Anyhow...So, those are a couple other things.

MG: Good.

RD: Yeah.

MG: I am going to stop—

[End of Interview]