

## *All My Stories Are Here: Four Montana Poets*

*Ed Lahey, Vic Charlo, Mark Gibbons, and Dave Thomas*

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### **Preface**

There are many strong poets writing in Montana, John Haines being the master among them. There are far fewer *Montana* poets writing here, people in whom the place itself resides at a level of deep necessity. Montana is a place where the continent collides with itself, dry plains meeting the uplift mountains, rivers flowing to the three oceans (Atlantic, Pacific, Arctic). Salmon. Bison. Great Bears. Gold and silver, copper. Weather like you've never seen: eighty-below chill-factor winds that blow locomotives off the tracks. Primordial flyways for birds going from the Arctic to the tropics to Antarctica—and back again. Glaciers, the ancient shorelines of glacial lakes. And First Peoples living here tens of thousands of years—Salish, Cree, Kootenai, Blackfeet, Métis, Assiniboine, Sioux, Crow, Northern Cheyenne, Chippewa, Gros Ventre. You can still hear half a dozen different languages spoken in a sweat lodge in the state prison in Deer Lodge, still feel that we are living close to something here in Montana, to our history, but also to our geology, to the aurora borealis, to mountains and rivers as a place of refuge.

Four poets, Ed Lahey, Vic Charlo, Mark Gibbons, and Dave Thomas, all have been here for three generations or more (a thousand generations, at least, in Charlo's case), and been here in elemental ways. Their identities are not separate from the place. In Mark Gibbons' words, he has "worked most of the physical labor jobs available to 'blue collar descendants' determined to stay

in Montana 'at all costs'" (back cover, *Circling Home*, 2000). These are not people who came to Montana to teach or to study writing or to write or have a Montana "experience." One can imagine a poet like Dave Thomas somewhere else, say, in North Beach, but he would always be a Montana poet there. There are many other strong Montana poets, to be sure (John Holbrook, Tami Haaland, Lowell Jaeger, Sheryl Noethe, and Patrick Todd come to mind), but these four seem to me to be the strongest who have not yet received as much attention as, say, that erudite barbarian, Rick Newby, or the late Blackfeet, Gros Ventre poet James Welch, who went on to write a handful of highly acclaimed novels, or that environmental-cowboy-clown-curmudgeon, Wally McRae, or Sandra Alcosser, that widely regarded poet of many places, now honored as Montana's first Poet Laureate. And there are poets who have come into the state as outsiders and embraced it rapidly at such a deep level as to become adopted in a decade or two. Paul Zarzyski is a prime example. So is Melissa Kwasny with her primal "entwinements" to native plants and Native people. I have left out that Emperor of "Goofy Gas," Greg Keeler who, of course, is in a league all by himself, and no doubt others who deserve attention.

But these four, Lahey, Charlo, Gibbons, Thomas, each individually, give expression to this place in ways that are unmistakable, necessary, and earned. Reading their poetry, we discover who they are as we learn what it is to live here, economically as well as emotionally. It would be, however, a mistake to consider them to be merely regional poets, unless by "regional" one means those who have found in the particulars of their own place and history the wherewithal to speak to/for us all.

Albert White Hat, Sr., in his book, *Reading and Writing the*

*Lakota Language*, describes the concerns Lakota tribal elders voiced before a written form of the Lakota language could be pursued. Given the long-term, significant and continuing presence of indigenous cultures in the life of this state, White Hat's perspective on language creates a useful context for examining these four poets. "First, elders reminded us that the language is *wakan*, 'very powerful.' . . . We talk to the *wamakaskan*, 'living beings of the earth' through spiritual communications. Language must be taught with this in mind. Second, when teaching the language to younger people, both its good and evil powers must be taught. If you teach only the good, children will be ruined when they become adults. They need to understand that language contains . . . the power to give life or to take it away. As a result, it must be used respectfully" (4). And, "Whether listening to Lakota or English speakers, you can tell when they effectively use their language because you can feel their feelings . . . when we teach a language to a student, we should develop in that student another heart and another mind. . . . Every word must be felt and understood so that when we speak, true emotions are expressed" (6–7). "I have to demonstrate Lakota values and morals in my own life so that students learning Lakota words will see examples of what I am teaching. . . . Our language was invaded, just as our lands were. We need to bring back our language with the strength of its spiritual values and the power of its moral force, just as we fight to reclaim the Black Hills and the other sacred sites within our domain. Our language is *wakan*. It is our bloodline" (10–11).

I have quoted Albert White Hat, Sr., on reclaiming the Lakota tongue because the power and importance of language expressed by him is what these four poets (and perhaps all

poets, though they might not put it quite this way) are trying to accomplish: to restore and maintain the qualities of feeling, spiritual reality, respect, and morality that are the life blood of their-our-any language.

### Ed Lahey

On more than one occasion, and in print, I have called Ed Lahey the Defacto Poet Laureate of Montana, the place, not the state, apparently offending a gabble of other writers here. Even Richard Hugo's poetry, as fine as that can be, sometimes has a "touristy" feel to it in comparison to Lahey's gritty poems about mining and his painful/lovely family and aging poems. A main reason Ed's grandfather was hired by the railroads was that he got along with the Indians so well. Ed continues that gift. There is the story of him as a young man attending a powwow near Deer Lodge. The Indians complained about the local butcher, how he had cheated them by taking half the buffalo he butchered for them, after offering to do it for free. Hearing this, Lahey went straight to the butcher shop and shamed the man by calling him a disgrace to his own kind and demanding the return of the half buffalo meat he had confiscated. Which he did. The Indians gave Lahey the name "silvertongue" for his effort on their behalf, teasing, too, about this whiteman's ability to effect change with his tongue. But it was an auspicious name, for Lahey is the hands-down best reader of poetry I have ever heard, his rich Irish voice resonant and trembling both at once, the words made more real in the grip of his sweaty face. I think of him as the Jack Dempsey of Montana poets. Lahey's elemental sense of justice, for which he was jailed during the Vietnam War protest years, comes also from his family's close

association with one of the last of a handful of Chinese herbal doctors who served the substantial Chinese community in Butte. This is especially important given the virulent forms of racism Chinese people in Butte and all over the American West were subjected to.

Ed's mother was the first (second?) woman pilot in Montana, as was necessary during Prohibition when she would air-drop all the ingredients for the family moonshine operations into the ravines outside Butte or Helena, with little chance of being discovered. Ed himself flew from an early age, and his experience of being lost over the mountains with night coming on and the gas running low, and finally landing at the airport in Butte in the blaze of car lights from friends and family in the fifties before there were landing lights there, is not far beneath the surface of these lines from the poem "Icarus Plans to Land Tonight".

....

What I will do for the sake of fashion  
is simply set fire to my wax wings  
then land and blow away the smoke

and carefully brush the ashes  
from my legs which I keep for walking  
on such occasions.

(*Birds of a Feather*, 34)

As a result of the family history of mining, his own years spent in that work, and his first book, *The Blind Horses*, which won the first-ever Montana Arts Council First Book Award in 1979,

Lahey's poems have been closely associated with Butte and with mining. But his poems go well beyond narrating the dark/light of the miner's world. They skillfully use that world to speak about the life many of us might struggle with. He makes explicit that a poem he wrote to honor his miner father is also a poet's statement about the difficulties and values necessary to carry on the work of writing.

### **Gimp O'Leary's Iron Works**

(for Big Ed)

You hear a lot of lies about O'Leary  
but he could seal a crack in steel  
no matter what the size.  
His arc welder would strike  
white fire and a bead  
of blue-black rod would slide  
along between cherry streaks,  
and acrid smoke would curl away  
to leave clean married steel,  
not too frail, or buttered up  
but straight and strong,  
hard as mill forged rail.  
Of course you might say,  
"don't use that example  
as a metaphor for poetry.  
Welding is a matter of utility."  
And you'd be right. Still,  
I remember the look on his face  
when he'd lift his great helmet  
and sneak up on the finished

job with unprotected eyes.  
It was always between him  
and the piece of steel—  
a struggle of molecules and will.

Often others would say to him,  
“Damn good job,” or some such thing.

If it was, he'd grin, and look again,  
as if he thought the natural light  
would show a flaw, or bridge  
that didn't fuse—convinced, I guess,  
that in his struggle with the steel  
he could seldom really win.  
He knew perfection could  
conceal the wound  
beneath the arc of his art.  
I liked him for that.

(full poem, *Birds*, 32–33)

The honoring of muscular but also delicate artistic work,  
and the attitude toward what one might accomplish, knowing  
the tricks one plays on oneself in order to maintain the illusion of  
wholeness or competence, knowing that men's lives depended on  
the soundness of the weld, and the poet's affection for O'Leary's  
humble, clear mastery and acceptance of the limits of his craft,  
make this a powerful and necessary poem on the craft of poetry.  
And the metaphor for poetry contained in it never violates,

abandons, or sacrifices the sheer reality of O'Leary. Seeing in the  
work associated with mining the dignity and worth of ordinary  
men who find in ordinary work something extraordinary in  
themselves (and in the work) gives to this poem and others like it  
their range and ring. This poem for Gimp O'Leary is made even  
more powerful when we learn, two poems more on into the book,  
that O'Leary is dead, buried in a cave-in in the Minnie Jane:

We will uncover the mucker's bones,  
dig them up for Mary.  
And the company will pay us big money.  
Goddamn it. Come on. Let's dig up O'Leary.

(*Birds*, 35)

I would also call readers' attention especially to “The Orphan  
Girl Prospect,” “In My Three Act Dream,” and “Contributor's  
Note” as other fine examples of Lahey's mining poems (*Birds*, 1,  
19–20, 46).

Lahey has suffered from an increasingly intense case of the  
shakes since he was a young man. They became so extreme that he  
could not hold his hands still enough to write, to hold a pen or use  
a typewriter. At readings he would joke about his shaking hands  
as butterflies that some day would simply flutter off away from  
him. After months of being unable to do the thing that mattered  
most, writing, he sought out a new neurologist. The good doctor  
asked if he had ever worked around manganese. Yes, as a teenager  
he had been paid ten dollars a day for several months to crawl up  
into “empty” manganese gondola cars with a five-pound sledge and

hammer on their sides until all the dusty manganese residue came loose and slid. “I have never seen a patient with your symptoms who hadn’t worked around manganese,” the doctor told him, and prescribed a beta blocker that reduced the shaking enough that he could return to his writing. This is the kind of legacy carried when one is the Butte mining poet of Montana, a part of the dues paid.

But it has been a mistake to see Lahey’s work primarily in terms of Butte and his mining poems, fine as they are. Especially in his later work, Lahey expresses an emotional capacity in poems about his grandchildren, a meeting with his ex-wife, his dying mother, a cold pony in a field outside his apartment, a torn orange in the street, the chewing power of beavers, that balances the tough reality of the mining poems.

#### **A Blue Saucer**

It has been cold, and I  
have been ill,  
forced at the same time  
to pull my own tooth.  
. . . .

I had the urge  
while out walking  
to rescue a torn orange  
open to the sun  
lying in the snow,

to take it in  
wash it in cool water

keep it on a blue saucer.

I know the sad side of the street  
to look for the value  
the taste of true winter.

(*Birds*, 141)

This poem has about it a Japanese, zen-like quality of pure emotion, the sadness of aloneness, aging, illness, but also the insight, child-like, reaching out to the torn orange, to rescue it, the hopelessness and rightness of that urge. One is left with the feeling of the colors, orange on blue, the cool warmth of a tenor sax, the bite of true winter accepted, brought home, honored. There is nothing intervening between the poet’s feelings, simple actions, and the words on the page. As Albert White Hat, Sr., writes, “Every word must be felt and understood so that when we speak, true emotions are expressed.” The poems of family, friends, and the inwardness of his more recent work continue the emotional honesty and direct experience of his mining poems. They come from such things as a decades-long study of Buddhism, and four tours in the state mental hospital at Warm Springs.

Of course this latter item is unmentionable, something to speak of in whispers beyond the hearing of the poet. And yet poetry and madness have a long and distinguished career together. One thinks of Christopher Smart’s consideration of his cat Jeoffry, written while Smart was confined for insanity in eighteenth-century England, or of Ezra Pound and Theodore Roethke in the last century, to name just a few. If poetry is a form of madness, what does

that mean? Clearly that is not to be romanticized. To know these terrifying trips, one only has to listen to Lahey recount his fears during months spent in the over-crowded Montana State Mental Hospital trying to avoid seriously psychotic inmates.

I have always considered poetry a form of sanity, perhaps the only form of it I am comfortable with. How can it be both a form of madness and a form of sanity? Its sanity is the sanity one can craft or discover out of the chaos of a life, something to cling to, something that one is lucky enough to find to do in this life, something with a reality beyond dollar-power. If one does not belong to the Church of Commerce, then one had better have something besides drugs, alcohol, sex, Jesus, patriotism, or workism to hang onto. All poets are not madmen (or madwomen) and all madmen are not poets, but the connection between the two is an indication of the real-life risks many artists take, not because they are more courageous than the rest of us, but because they have to, because they cannot help it. I want to honor rather than hide Lahey's struggle with what has come to be called "mental illness," because I believe it informs the sensitivity, the risk, the deep necessity out of which his poetry is written. It is part of the price he has paid in the process of earning his poetry, part of the price of creating a poetry that is as real Montana as the mines, the magpies, or the Salish. And it is part of our sanity, like Blake's "higher innocence" beyond the chaos of experience. One thinks of Leslie Fiedler's (an important mentor for Lahey) comments on "the Western" and the West in his essay "The Higher Sentimentality":

[I]t seems clear that in it [*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*] for the first time the New West was

clearly defined: the West of Here and Now, rather than There and Then—the West of Madness. . . . It is only a step from thinking of the West as madness to regarding madness as the true West . . . but only in Leonard Cohen . . . and in Kesey is the final identification made, and in Kesey at last combined with the archetype of the love that binds the lonely white man to his Indian comrade—to his *mad* Indian comrade, perhaps even to the *madness* of his Indian comrade. . . . After all, the West remains always in some sense true to itself, as long as the Indian, no matter how subdued, penned off, or costumed for the tourist trade, survives. . . . If a myth of America is to exist in the future, it is incumbent on our writers, no matter how square and scared they may be in their deepest hearts, to conduct with the mad just such a dialogue as their predecessors learned long ago to conduct with the aboriginal dwellers in the Western Wilderness." (*A New Fiedler Reader*, 254–56)

Although I would dispute Fiedler's claim that our "predecessors" conducted an exemplary "dialogue" with the "aboriginal dwellers in the Western Wilderness," some of Lahey's poetry can be seen as a beginning of such a dialogue with madness that Fiedler calls for.

**Birds of a Feather**

(for Marylor)

A woman I love, my ex-wife  
with our infant granddaughter  
rounded an aisle  
in the new Safeway  
where we were shopping.

“There’s a sparrow flying overhead,”

she said, when she saw me.  
We both looked upwards.  
I wanted so badly  
to tell her something  
she could cherish, so she  
would know

that I love her, like her even,  
more than I hate her, but all  
I could think of was a bird  
I once saw shredded  
by an exhaust fan.

Feathers floating willy nilly.

She looked so fey  
upon hearing my story, shyly,  
so shyly, walking away,

pushing the stroller down  
another aisle.

Leaving me again, again,  
dead feathers gathering  
about my feet.

(*Birds*, 145–46)

When I came back from my first teaching stint in China, in July 1991, Ed was up in the mental ward on Three North. I visited him often, feeling desperate too, having nearly died of pneumonia in a Chinese hospital and falling in love with a Chinese woman whom I had to leave behind and who was much too young for me. Then one day he wasn’t there. The nurses said he had been released and was living downtown on Pine Street. I was worried. I did not think he was ready to leave the hospital, did not know how he would manage with himself. But he surprised me. He immediately began revising a novel he’d been working on for a few years, about a group of people at war with the mining company setting up a bootlegging operation during Prohibition. During the next year or so I witnessed the strongest act of self-healing through the creative process I ever expect to see. Ed literally brought himself back, through the work of finishing that novel. Just now as I write this piece, this novel, *The Thin Air Gang*, has found a publisher in Russell Chatham of Clark City Press. Clark City also has published a “dignified, well thought out,” hardbound, elegant, collected edition of Ed’s poems, *Birds of a Feather*, 2005. Thanks to Russell Chatham, these two volumes will confirm Ed Lahey’s reputation as Montana’s Deep Poet of voice, spirit, and place.

**Victor A. Charlo**

When Buffalo Tiger, Tribal Council Chairman of the Miccosukee Indians of Florida, told a U.S. Senate subcommittee on the education of Indian children, in 1967, that the Miccosukees taught their children to have “two minds,” he made it sound easy:

We try to teach our Indian children, do not be ashamed, even though you are Indians. You are Indians, therefore you should realize you are Indians, nothing else but Indians. Think like Indians, be like Indians, but learn English, learn how to write, be educated. You are Indian, you have other ideas. Be educated. You have somebody else’s mind. You have two minds and you can work with both. You can have three languages, if you want, or two. . . .

*(I Have Spoken, 156)*

Vic Charlo’s poetry is testimony to the difficulties many native people, even “successful” ones, have living with two minds, one for navigating in the so-called “dominant” culture, and one for the continuance of traditional tribal culture. Victor is the Great-great grandson of Charlot, the holdout chief who was finally forced to lead the last Salish people out of their ancestral homeland in the beautiful Bitterroot Valley in western Montana in 1891. Vic expressed the ongoing pain of that removal in remarks he made to the Twenty-second Annual Wilderness Lecture Series at the University of Montana in 2001, “. . . even though the Bitterroot is *really* a part of us, a lot of us never grew up there.” He also spoke about removal from the language,

My name is *Chetlel Skyeeme*, that means Three Eagles. . . I hope. After all these Salish speakers. . . I’m not a Salish speaker. My folks, when they grew up, they experienced a lot of problems going to school, just knowing their native languages. . . . So when we were growing up, one of the things that they made sure was going to happen in our family was that nobody was going to learn the language. And isn’t that too bad. . . just to listen to Louie Adams talk about those place names, it makes me really sad that I don’t know those names also. But that’s the way it is. You make the best of it.

*(Proceedings: 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Wilderness Issues Lecture Series, 72)*

And make the best of it he did, graduating as the salutatorian of Sacred Heart Catholic High School in Missoula, and as co-captain of the football team, going six years to a Jesuit seminary, then graduating from the University of Montana and becoming the principal of the Two Eagle River School up at the old Dixon Agency. But his poetry tells of the trickiness and difficulty of such living in two worlds. It contains a rhythm that is different, odd even, that does not lay on the ear the way most of the poetry I read does. I have to reach further than I normally would in order to hear it for and as *itself*. There is something fractured in these rhythms, something that inhabits a space in between the unrealized memory of the Salish his parents purposely chose not to teach him, and the English of the reservation and the white school, and the Latin of the Church and the Jesuit seminary where he spent those six

years. It is just this space in between, this need to do well in the world that has come to them, while at the same time remembering, honoring, and *continuing* the older world of the ancestors and spirits here, that gives to his voice its fractured courage. His exclusion from *The Last Best Place* is ironic, given the significance of his voice and the importance of First Peoples to Montana.

A poem from his early experience of the white world and how every gain in it entailed a loss of something else, something from the world of his ancestors, makes clear this difficulty of living with Buffalo Tiger's "two minds."

### **Last Leave of Loyola**

For twenty years this poem hangs like these  
last leaves and twenty years this need to write.

I was afraid to write, to fall, to face  
the fact that talking to Sacred Heart  
girls in fantasy was not the same as me.

Leaves are falling like they sing in song  
yet my song doesn't sing. This school strange  
and I need friends and places that have heart.  
I'm caught by priest and parent who want me here.

I want to quit this football, this lie,  
and lonely wind should blow me from this tree.

(full poem, unpublished manuscript)

This poem expresses the loneliness of facing the lie of, what is it? His identity as a white person? The lie that nothing will be at stake or lost in taking up with white culture?

I realize now if you  
sing Gregorian chant,  
you forget the stickgame songs.

(from the poem, "St. Francis Xavier Novitiate, Sheridan,  
Oregon 1957," unpublished manuscript)

It is in his family, in other elders, in the lives of his children, and of his students that Charlo is able to discover and foster a continuity between past and future that allows him to recover from the trauma of this life lived in-between the cultures. That recovery probably never will be total or complete in a person of his honesty and courage, but more and more the poems express an acceptance and an understanding, a net gain in the ability to live with the trickiness of being in-between, and to do this with some grace.

### **Moving In**

(fast wind)

Three times now I have read white stories  
where folks take old houses or towns in disrepair  
and build them back to what they were, and better.  
The thought makes me feel whole.

The first time in fourth grade reader a family

moves into an old abandoned farm house,  
and they fix everything up, get things  
going the way they want them. I  
remember in awe when the young boy  
gets the dynamo started and  
they have electricity. We had kerosene lamps then.

I have new house that is half-assed put together,  
half-assed moved into and half-assed lived in.  
I'm trying to get my second wind after eleven  
years of rapid experience, yet after four years  
here, it's hard to find my winter wind.

Children, goats, pony, winter wood, coyote song  
and trail of grizzly at our front door are  
richer than all need since we touch ancestors living here  
and I must live perfect fantasy and find fast wind.

(full poem, unpublished manuscript)

The old rhythms and cycles of life, the ancestors, right at the  
front door are “richer than all need,” even though the place is “half-  
assed.” Even so, at times, the lessons and presence of a respected,  
beloved elder, the process of renewal of the old ways, ironically,  
deepens the sense of in-between existence:

**Agnes, 1979**

We hide tan here at Agency Creek

and at Valley Creek. Hard work  
that lets your mind go as you wait  
for the rest of your life. Soft hide,  
so soft wind blows like cloth.  
Hair white with hide.

She, Agnes, watches and lets us know in old  
Salish tongue. Word for scraper that I  
remember now. So hard. So to the point.

Why did I learn how to write? Why did I want to?  
Is it worth the loss of your world going away?

(full poem, unpublished manuscript)

That last stanza is worth pondering. These questions coming  
in the midst of tanning hides at Agnes Vanderburg's camp up  
Valley Creek, “as you wait for the rest of your life.” This dilemma  
is what it means to be the Great-great Grandson of the holdout  
chief, Charlot, right here where we newcomers live now too. (Once,  
after both of us had had a couple of drinks, I remember Vic saying  
to me, “You're all just a bunch of damned carpetbaggers anyway.”)

Part of what accentuates the whole in-between situation  
for Victor is his role as the son and grandson, the Great-great  
Grandson, of chiefs. Being in a position of leadership during a time  
of rapid, confusing, forced change has to be radically unsettling.  
What does it mean to be a leader of the Bitterroot Salish people  
in western Montana today? Vic turns to his father in poems that  
honor his capacities as a gambler and that suggest the gambling

skill itself as a metaphor for the luck, risk-taking, and ability to lose without becoming lost that he embodied, as a form of leadership.

### **The Chief**

The Chief, my dad, was a gambler at nine.  
He was the “Montana Kid” in Arlee rodeo.

With a nickel or dime he would win a fortune,  
then travel in style to Missoula by free train  
to stay in the best hotels and buy right clothes  
for his young bride, then stay ‘till they were broke.  
They were rich.

Once he won a pool hall gambling with a dime,  
then drank his hard pool hall cider with friends. Next  
morning, when he remembered he owned the pool hall,  
he gathered friends over for candy. The pool hall  
owner’s wife chased them off. He laughs now  
at his loss and he could lose in those days, and still,  
he is Chief gathering right bitterroot  
for us all.

(full poem, unpublished manuscript)

This ability to lose big, to laugh at that, to go on leading the people in traditional ways amidst the loss, this form of richness is his responsibility to continue in his own generation, and hand on to his children.

In the following early love poem we hear the desperation of

love-loss opening onto all the other losses they have sustained, and the struggle not to be swallowed up by them, a certain “hard core” of survival that contains anger and tinges of self-pity:

### **Poem**

Listen, Ann Marie, the grizzly sleeps with snow  
and we are bound for Canada or Mexico depending  
on where little blue might go. I think of you  
asleep and keep fire to warm tribal stories.  
The night is cold and I should hibernate soon  
yet I hear Great Northern pull, a short whistle  
and I have a need that listens for no one.

Again, I feel great plain call yet I’m not there  
to ride to buffalo yet who will brave the storm?  
These roads are Indian trails glorified for tourists.  
Let them eat four lanes while I carry bittersweet lodge  
pole or swallow the loss. This could be a love  
poem if I could only forget the loss. We are safe  
yet could I invite you to tipi without that need  
to know if cowboy rides the range at the Dew  
Drop Inn? Listen, I am the hard core who will leave  
you laughing at the door. We need a guide  
to follow the middle fork or ask salmon to run  
or let fear carry us to that place we need  
to be. Hold tight. Did you see those cliffs along  
the road? How dark is dark? Blizzard is white.  
You can go to Buffalo that is home and me,

I'll roam the great plain looking for enemy sky.

(full poem, unpublished manuscript)

There is a different feel to this poem; it is less accessible, strange but enticing. The “loss” of this poem, love-loss, pulls with it all the other losses they have sustained. How dark *is* dark? Dark as a blizzard is white? The depth of desperation in this poem seems less controlled than in others, closer to that self-questioning at the end of “Agnes, 1979.” But there is always the gamble to make, the risky hope for luck, the taking on of one’s place in the life of the people, and the Chief, one’s father, winning as well as losing, and knowing what to do with it.

Children, his own four children and all the children of the Bitterroot Salish, are the other side of the continuance he seeks and expresses in his written work as well as in his life. When Vic looks at his son’s face he sees the faces of all the old chiefs in him. He says about a poem written from this experience, “. . . when he was small I used to look at him. And those days I used to think about the old folks, my grandparents. And all those old people, and used to wonder what it would have been like if they journaled. . . . And so I wrote this poem. . . . And I dedicate it to my son, ‘for Martin Antoine Victor Paul Charlo. . . .’ What I did, what I realized is I named my son after all the chiefs, all my grandparents. And I call it ‘Generations of Need’”:

Generations find focus in my little boy’s face  
when thoughts of old times and old folks creep  
into that need to delve deep into who

we are. He is the little chief without saying.

I read worry of Moiese who states that we  
have too much schooling, and now we think  
more than we should. He says the people  
used to send a young boy to the top of Red

Mountain for the good of all of our people  
and we were well. I follow DeSmet’s dream  
as I try to freeze a focus on unfamiliar  
feelings except that we do belong to mountains

and my boy is the face of all of our grandfathers  
who hold both of us true to cottonwood and stone.

(full poem, *Proceedings*, 74)

The need for continuity, for old ones to keep coming back to them in the children, to recognize and honor the gift of that stream of old/new life flowing through them, carrying them, the presence of *that* read in his child’s face, this Martin, Antoine, Victor, Paul, Charlo who has come back to them and who at the same time is new. “[W]e do belong to mountains // and my boy is the face of all of our grandfathers / who hold both of us true to cottonwood and stone.”

Charlo’s 1987 trip to Churchill, upper Manitoba, in the sub-Arctic with renowned polar bear expert, Dr. Charles “Chuck” Jonkel, was a turning point for him. His poems take on a new confidence and expansiveness. He asks in his great Arctic poem, “Churchill Bear Jail,” “What about all of us who know jail for

bear / is truly bizarre, do we know that spirit is on trial. . . ?” It is a decisive question and expresses a departure from the earlier trouble at living between the two cultures. Of course it is rhetorical, for the evidence of “spirit on trial” is the history of every empire for the last eight thousand years. He leads us with a new sureness in his identification with the imprisoned bears:

. . . .

But what is bear’s offense? That he can smell  
food for twenty miles? That a town is built on ancient

rendezvous ground that was his so long that genes  
are imprinted with a map where every stone is turned?  
That he can be trapped because there is ring seal  
meat in bear trap and he is hungry before the hunt?

Is this justice? You can’t help but think of all native  
people in the same fix. You hear odd story about  
a three, four time, many time loser bear who would  
stretch his neck and close his eyes waiting for the dart.

What do bears dream of when they are all tranked  
up? Dreaming of ancient ice to cover Hudson’s Bay?  
Can they be let out when ice does come before

their thirty, sixty days are up? What about incorrigibles?

. . . .

(*Swift Current Time*, 10–11)

That last question is a dead giveaway, for Charlo himself is the incorrigible, as was his father before him. Their genes are imprinted with maps of old gambling songs that allow them to win with a dime, to lose big, and not to get lost. Being incorrigible, in fact, is a survival necessity, just watch out for the bear traps. And know how and when to come in under the radar.

True memory is more than a remembering of something past. True memory is the capacity to *presence* what has been experienced before, and must be experienced again, to call up into the present older states of mind, being, spirit that one must never relinquish, but always renew. This occurs most clearly in Charlo’s work when, during a reading and before the “Walking Bear Song” poem, he closes his eyes and sings an old Salish song, the voice coming through him every bit as much as coming from him. It fills the auditorium with a sound as old as Red Mountain. Vic’s face, too, changes as the song pours from him, changes to look like the face on a Mayan stone carving. Listening, we know we have witnessed something ancient called up into this time, something that can be made present as long as there is someone who can sing it with the sort of connection coming through much more than their voice, coming through everything that they are, through everything that the Salish people here have lived and dreamed. It is the kinship with mountains and bears being sung out. It is geologic memory.

In two short poems Charlo expresses a sureness about continuance and direction and life that were not easy to come by, and that have been earned through living the fracture-lines of his life with an incorrigibility that is as necessary as rain:

**Dixon Direction**

Directions are simple here.  
 Geese know where to go  
 and eagles fly. Yet sometimes  
 you get lost on wrong roads.

Then

when you come to school,  
 you seek from this high window  
 and find living river, red willow,  
 white aspen, old juniper and pine.

This is you.

And bright, clay cliffs fix the stars.

And:

**Flathead River Creations**

You say  
 old days fold into one another  
 and new days seem the same.  
 Yet each moment shifts with the sun,  
 nothing will be the same as this:

when wind breathes the Flathead alive,  
 you are the center this instant  
 for all, you are the creation

of the universe one more time.

(both full poems, *Dancing on the Rim of the World*, 27)

Victor A. Charlo is our holdout poet, holding out for imprisoned polar bears, for the mountains so close they are relatives, for the generations who find focus in his son's face, for the holy incorrigibles of any time. He has hidden the black bone in the East in this gambling game called life, has found the old songs that are the "scratches on glacier polished granite," as true as Indian mint. His poems honor the pain and "deep joy in smooth hard stone," flowing water, and "the bitter root that sings them food, serious as meat." *They* are the creation of the universe, one more time.

**Note:**

The creation of a theatrical group, The Open To All Possibilities Players Native American Acting Troupe, in 1991, in full collaboration with Zan Agzigian of Spokane, Washington, has been another aspect of Victor's writing. *Trickster at Dirty Corner* and *Moon Over Mission Dam*, the first two plays co-authored by Charlo and Agzigian, premiered at the Met, in Spokane, 1996. A second group of four short plays, *Bitterroot*, *Berkeley*, *Belfast*, *Beta*, also co-authored by them, form a dramatic unit called "The Beta Cycle," and premiered at Evergreen State College, in Olympia, Washington, in April of 2001.

### Mark Gibbons

Western Montana has changed rapidly in recent years: four lane highways in place or on the drawing boards from Whitefish to Darby, population growth in the Bitterroot Valley, 44 percent in the last ten years, real estate booming, trophy homes smearing the ridge lines, fights over access to stream-beds, tourism and the influx of strip malls, box stores, and fun hogs everywhere with their various toys of recreation, the exponential growth of *Cowboys & Indians* magazine on both coasts. Elk hunting, fly fishing, wilderness: the commodification of these is only outdone by the making of American Indian spiritual life into the ultimate commodity. It's called "progress," or Cowboy Chic. A recent buyer of a Montana trophy home was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, "We aren't doing the grunge part of the Western experience. We're getting the best of the culture, without the worst of the culture. We don't have to get our hands dirty." A slick magazine like *Big Sky Journal* has an "advertiser index" on its final pages containing seventy-two items: expensive ranch and recreational properties, "visions of the West" art galleries, and hot pools from heaven. Fortunately, a smart editor has placed Ed Lahey's "A Note From the Third World" in a strategic location. But the question remains as to how the older, more rural, less populated, small town Montana survives in the midst of all this marketing of the "Montana experience." And how might an artist who knows it, who has grown up in it, who still inhabits it, how might such a person continue it in his life and work?

Mark Gibbons' people came into Montana nearly a century ago with other Irish, Slavic, and Finlander immigrants in search of "a fair living." They found a vestige of it in industrial labor, on the

railroads, in logging and mining, in sheepherding and in Butte. His grandmother Delia Joyce's brother Tommy was killed, along with 165 other miners, in the infamous Speculator Mine disaster, June 8, 1917, the worst mining accident in the history of this country. His grandfather would have died there too, but was too sick with the flu to pull his shift that night. Mark's father, Vincent, was born a month after that disaster, and six weeks before the half-Cherokee, Wobbly organizer Frank Little was dragged through the streets of Butte behind a car, bludgeoned, and hung by his heels from a wooden trestle on August 17. But it took Delia two years to talk her husband into quitting the mines and moving to Dillon, where they lived in the Cabbage Patch, a section of log cabin shacks that housed a few black families, the Chinese, and shanty Irish.

Grandpa Martin couldn't get the "striking it rich dream" out of his bones, kept digging for silver and gold like a "fucking badger." Ironically, he ended up digging most of the sewer system of Dillon too. Mark's father found work in Alberton, a job with the railroad, where he traveled the section between Deer Lodge and Avery, Idaho. The librarian claimed he read every book in the Deer Lodge Public Library. The towns were small, the distances far, the family didn't own a car until the 1950s, and Mark's mother took the train into Missoula once a month to shop. Relationships were close in the small towns, even if you didn't like each other. There was a sense of interdependence. The land and weather demanded it, the population spread sparsely over a rugged, northern landscape. And there was a savvy sense of self-deprecation, the glue of how communities hung together. Mark's poem, "Spoiled Rotten," from *Something Inside Us*, 1995, gives it to us, growing up along the tracks, and celebrates every gritty bit of it:

**Spoiled Rotten**

I was a rich kid in Alberton, pampered inside  
 an old two-shack, ship-lapped, slapped-together house  
 right beside the Milwaukee Railroad. Creosote ties  
 footed faded linoleum floors—they supported us like trains  
 to the splintered end. Barren beaver board walls

Bled frost and our dreams. . . .

. . . we were spoiled most long summer days  
 tormenting rattlers and climbing castle rocks, skinny  
 dipping and fishing up Petty Creek from the narrows

To the old goat farm. We swam the Clark Fork like beaver,  
 circled and slapped, threw hoots and full cannon balls.  
 We gorged ourselves daily like Romans or kings  
 eating filthy-rich feasts, everything in season: green apples,  
 ripe plums, wild onions, and garden-raided dirt-sweet carrots.

We discovered the neighbor's basement, ate jars  
 of silver salmon and gagged smelling limburger cheese.  
 We sipped on sour dandelion wine, felt our way up the  
 dizzy stairs.  
 Through a door left ajar, fully framed in a mirror, we saw  
 nipples  
 round as our mouths—secrets—only told to our dogs.

We lazed under lilacs, read clouds going by, never denied  
 we were flat spoiled rotten and ruined for good like Huck

Finn,  
 our hero back then. We, too, would have settled for a raft  
 and Jim,  
 but we damn sure didn't want to run away. Those days are  
 still  
 a toy chest so filled—that the lid can never be closed.

for Burt Cole

(*Something Inside Us*, 14–15)

Mark's poems are filled with what Paul Zarzyski has aptly called "blue-collar light." Mark paid the late Richard Hugo the highest compliment when he said that Hugo had made him realize that lives like his, ordinary working people's lives, "common and marginal," were worthy of being written about, were worthy of poetry. That awareness alone is a major source of the power of Hugo's legacy here, and Gibbons is a direct descendant of that legacy. One aspect of Gibbons' "blue-collar light" is the depth of anger felt and expressed in his earlier poems. It is anger at the way these "common and marginal" people who do the hand work of this society are ignored, looked down upon, devalued. It is an anger that has piled up for three, four generations, until there is someone who can express it other than through alcohol or violence. In an interview with James Jay at the back of his latest book, *Connemara Moonshine*, he tells a revealing story about that anger:

. . . my wife worked with a baker, a German baker  
 who survived the Holocaust. They both worked

at Safeway, and he was just a fuckin' workaholic. He and his wife had survived the Holocaust, were separated for 12 years after the war, and they ran into each other in Canada and got back together. They came to Missoula, settled down and had children. He got laid off by Safeway, hired by Eddies, which was mass produced shit bread. This guy was a baker! He did pumpernickels and shit everyday. Well, he got laid off then by Eddies making that industrial bread. He got laid off there. They found him 6, 8 weeks later. He killed himself in his car. He committed suicide. This guy was 50 some years old. He'd survived the Holocaust, and he wound up committing suicide because he was laid off and he couldn't work. So I wrote this poem that was indicting American Industrial Fucking Whole System. I was just so fucking angry.

(*Connemara Moonshine*, 132)

For years Gibbons has worked as a mover, moving other people's furniture. In this poem for a hammered-out old moving van we get his whole knowledge of those "physical labor jobs available to blue-collar descendants determined to stay in Montana at all costs" (*Circling Home*, back cover). We see the aesthetic control and sophistication brought to bear on that earlier anger, and without the loss of the energy it contained. And we see his enormous capacity for affection:

### Mayflower

The loading address was a cul-de-sac  
along the seventh fairway.  
I parked her, my Mayflower forty-five  
foot drop frame trailer. Her air cushioned  
ride, lopsided & bleeding; wiring,  
soft and dry as crumbling mud-dust, won't conduct  
legal signals anymore, but her slivered  
wood-plank walkboard hangs on,  
provides a bridge to her open doors,  
begs oversized Baldwin uprights  
and one-piece slate pool tables.  
They're a rehab pair. Started over  
the road together in sixty-four,  
they'll hold or go down together.

This bed-bugger van's no beauty anymore.  
Rattling the phlegm in her lungs, she leans  
unsteadily, shuffles, dips off-balance.  
Her jagged breathing shudders  
to a coughing fit, chokes off,  
then wheezes air. Opening her robe to foster  
the plunder most shippers call their lives,  
she accepts all burdens—the passage  
of transient soles. Her splintered floor  
gives & creaks from frost boil miles,  
salted streets. It's only a matter of time.

This old girl's delivered her goods,

never rat-holed a dime on maintenance  
to restore her failing health. Each trip, a gentle  
pulling in, followed by the letting go.  
She fills her hollow loss with another  
load. Her wheel wells & rivets rubbed raw,  
scabbed brown as the barked knuckles of furniture  
lumpers she watched die in motel rooms  
from easing too-many awkward, all-there  
hide-a-beds up narrow nightmare stairways.

Next time she loses her bearings  
they'll put her out in the bone yard behind  
the warehouse at the end of the railroad spur,  
use her to shelter work gear and supplies  
till she dissolves on the oily ground. If left  
alone, scars fade away. Promises  
like recaps & gratitude are short term,  
but rust lasts forever in the garden of bones  
eating half-buried axles, spindles, and leaf  
springs, broken and twisted as weathered wardrobes  
barely standing, aslant, on the verge of collapse  
into the awful brittle silence of weeds.

(full poem, *Connemara Moonshine*, 90)

The “light” of this poem comes from the unsentimental,  
sad affection for and identification with this old van which has  
seen the worst that a life of hauling furniture can bring, and will  
go on hauling until *she* “dissolves on the oily ground,” “into the

awful brittle silence of weeds.” It is the worker’s closeness to his  
tools and machines, those with whom he shares the life of labor.  
It is the knowledge of what the conditions of that labor over the  
long haul do to machines and to men and women. The anger at  
“American Industrial Fucking Whole System” is subdued here,  
into affectionate sadness, but also into a respect, celebrating the  
endurance of the “old girl,” the ironic toughness of this May flower  
and the immigrant sons who’ve sailed her.

The rough love of “Weeds,” for those men asleep on the lawn  
along the tracks, speaks the same affection for human dissolution  
too, echoing the used-up moving van. The “blue-collar light” mixed  
with the knowledge of blue-collar dark in the oily ground. (Mark’s  
comment, “These are the lives worthy of poetry: uncorrupted by  
power or money.”)

### Weeds

That was no bum sleeping on your lawn,  
bottle tucked under his arm.  
Didn’t you recognize his Red Ball tennis shoes,  
remember the fish stories he told  
with his hands, the toothless smile, that time  
he danced a jig at Chadwick & Boyd’s Tavern  
clowning for rowdy plaid-clad loggers?  
A gandy dancer turned choke setter,  
he became a Zen cat skinner  
before he retired to booze,  
had a home but never claimed it,  
one of those tarpaper shacks on Rose Hill.  
He had to stop eating at the Silver Grill,

shook so bad he had to drink beer through a straw.

You thought he'd been dead for years  
like Gabby Hollow, Indian Rock and Cherry Springs,  
all lost in the flood of sixty-four  
or the interstate highway construction.  
Don't be afraid to wake him, the sleeper,  
deaf-mute and drunk. We are all  
sleepers whether we like it or not.  
And isn't this your dream, the old man's  
polio knees bent back the wrong way,  
the rusty shotgun in the corner  
of the sheepherder's shack—skull  
fragments like egg shells scattered  
on the floor? He sips the pint  
of Mad Dog 20/20, watches a cross  
burn Hell-fire on the Catholic church steps  
as sheeted shadows fade into trees.

He nurses his leprosy, the jug,  
acceptance of what is, the caked dirt  
he doesn't try to wash off.  
You'll take his unshaven face to the grave.  
Name him Kelly, Cookie, Blackie Marquette,  
Jimmy de Banda, Orie Sizemore.  
You know this sleeper could be Nine Mile Bill  
or Freddie Lavois. Still, you must wake him  
before sunrise, rouse him from the weeds,  
serve him sourdough pancakes, bacon & eggs.

Listen for the signs, the wind in your blood,  
swim the deep, night-black in the bottom  
of his eyes, and slip him a five  
dollar bill before he goes. You know  
this dream, this ghost can save you.

(full poem, *Connemara Moonshine*, 22)

Poems such as this one, filled with pain and darkness, save us from the too-easy view of only the light in blue-collar life. The poet not only has no barriers between himself and this kind of on-the-skids everyman, he is saved from his own comfort, security, his own "sleeping," by attending to the darkened lives around him.

The affection and loyalty in these poems is as deep as a well, and as reassuring. It is in the blood. The next poem, by that title, gives us an exact sense of connection, relationship, identity here, not as something that *can* be understood, but as something that flows through the fibers of the brain, body, and bowels like a steady mountain breeze.

### **In the Blood**

I.

Waving beside the mullein, spindly  
scarecrows of the barrow pit & shale  
cut slopes, cattails beckon me like fingers  
to settle with red wing blackbirds  
rocking on stalks green from rain. Billowing  
clouds hang low, white, black & gray,

curling twispy as an old man's beard,  
perhaps my father's—gone now seven  
years. Have these shadowed blue  
mountains put a spell on me?

All I know I don't understand:  
the cottonwood grove on the Nine Mile ox bow;  
a coyote pausing at the edge of the road  
& smiling before padding up the draw;  
these nesting swallows that pop from the clay cutbank.

Somehow this ground inhabits me.  
For no reason, I refuse to leave  
like the Ponderosa snapped off at its trunk.  
No wind, no storm can drive me away  
from this place I call my journey.

My grandfather crossed an ocean,  
a continent to settle this land  
of rattlesnakes, sagebrush & snow.  
What was it that drew them & snuffed wanderlust  
in one generation? Maybe the endless fields  
freckled by sweet wildflowers,  
low ceilings of sky, abundance of water.  
Could it have been the blackness  
of moonless nights, a reflection of their immigrant souls?

For some time I have told myself  
I am comfortable with these mysteries:

the lion on my porch, raccoons in my yard  
& decapitated house cats littering the alley.  
All my stories are here. Why do I think  
if I left, I would leave them behind,  
as if I could lose dirt & memory like luggage.  
When I'm alone I hear voices whisper.  
I'm afraid of losing my grip.

II.

Right now I float the Clark Fork,  
climb Plateau in my mind, follow the game  
trail that leads me up Gobbler's Knob  
& back to the pact I made with the deer:  
my hands covered with his blood, slippery  
& hot, I worked the knife inside his chest,  
cut free the entrails and claimed his bones.  
Before I was through his agate-black eye  
faded milky gray-blue. I cannot  
shake it, my pledge to a dead deer,  
like my dad's ashes I poured into this ground.  
I need this story to haunt my dreams,  
to explain in words what I can't—  
my attachments to dirt & blood & ghosts.

The buttercups & arrow leaf balsam root,  
dewy on the rocky hillside; wood  
smoke hovering in a stand of lodgepole pine;  
cold creek water gulped and swallowed,

slaking an August afternoon thirst;  
distant gunshots up Fahley Basin;  
the squeaking crunch of snow under my  
boot sole, followed by silence only broken  
by blood ringing in my ears.

The ospreys have returned to their nest.  
Even they would move on if the river ran dry.  
Have I become the blood of the deer?  
Tied to a rhythm I cannot name?

Stay, stay the course, the buck whispers,  
We are waiting in the river,  
your father and me. We are  
shimmering in the aspen leaves.  
Listen to our voices, the water and the wind.  
Close your eyes and you will see.

(full poem, *Connemara Moonshine*, 42)

This poem, more than any other, serves as a credo for what I want to say with this whole piece: that in these four poets there is a fusion of identity, poetry, and place that few poets achieve. “All I know I don’t understand: . . . Somehow this ground inhabits me./ For no reason, I refuse to leave/ like the Ponderosa snapped off at its trunk./ No wind, no storm can drive me away/ from this place I call my journey./ . . . When I’m alone I hear voices whisper./ I’m afraid of losing my grip.” When Gibbons says he hears voices and is afraid he is losing his grip, he is not posturing. His imagination

works directly with his experience to lend it a transcendence of the ordinary and real world. But a transcendence that carries within it every bit of the “work, dust, weather, and family” necessary to life here near the “backbone of the world,” as the Blackfeet refer to the mountains along the divide. It is clear that the mutual ties of affection he carries are a communal thing. Beyond families, communities, and work, he is bound to the natural elements of this place—to “all our relations.”

Leaving behind the life of working and drinking, becoming a high school English teacher for nine years, having two sons born, the deaths of four people that were very close to him, these events of the late 80s–early 90s changed Gibbons, brought a maturity to his work, gave him perspective on his deeper themes. Of course it isn’t all about the gritty life of Irish immigrants and growing up along the tracks, working as a furniture mover. There is the wonderfully funny poem of early eroticism, “Swinging For the Fences.” And that tremendous reach into the darkness of the French-Irish, Modoc writer Michael Dorris’s suicide in “Suicide Note.” There is the honesty of confessed lust amidst the warmth of a strong marriage in “Smothered In Ash,” and the great poem at the birth of his son, “A Letter To My First Born Son,” among others. There is the astonishingly deep affection for his sister, suffering from Parkinson’s Disease, but giving him music as basic as clean water in “Music My Sister Gave Me.” And there is the gallows humor and love of “Pissed At Potter’s Funeral,” or the love/hate relationship to a brother expressed through the death of their dog in “Still Waters,” all poems I regret not having the space to present in this piece. But the backbone on which all this richness of spirit in poetry is hung is that great-

heartedness and blue-collar light which he wears so well. I breathe a little easier knowing that Mark Gibbons is there, writing his honest poems into the teeth of those trophy houses and hot pools from heaven searing the Montana landscape. Irish Catholic immigrant blood and whiskey coursing through his veins, this English teacher, mover of furniture, descendant of miners, shepherders, back alley brawlers and railroaders brings us blue-collar light, blue-collar dark, in poem after poem that reveals the continuance, the real Montana. (Note: A new collection of Gibbons' poems from Camphorweed Press, *blue horizon*, is forthcoming this year, 2006.)

### David E. Thomas

Dave Thomas is, like his close friend, the late ceramist and printmaker Jay Rummel, a Montana original. This means that the place is etched so deeply into him that it moved the novelist James Crumley, in his "forward" to Dave's book, *Buck's Last Wreck*, to call him:

the national treasure of our small, but extended nation, a nation founded on those sixties ideals of a love of language, a respect for hard work, friendships closer than blood, and a refusal to live by the bankrupt middle-class economic standards of greed and prejudice that had clearly destroyed America. With his poems and through his life Dave Thomas has been our saint. . . . has created a body of poetry that marks him as the last and best of the hippie, working class, street smart poets.

Dave Thomas was born on the Hi-Line in Havre in north-central Montana. His father was the district judge in Chinook, in the shadow of the Bears Paw Mountains where Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce had been forced to surrender to the U.S. Army just miles from the Medicine Line, aka the Canadian border, in 1877. Dave came down to the University of Montana in 1965 as an enthusiastic ROTC cadet and won an Army scholarship for his junior and senior years. But the Vietnam War pricked his conscience and his classes in political science raised questions about both the morality and the rationality of the war. His unpublished prose piece from 1987, "The Walker," gives a retrospective account of the events in Seattle leading to his watershed decision to leave the path of the military for the psychedelic movement on the streets of San Francisco.

In a shabby studio below the Pike Street Market he saw paint stroked on canvas to create something both behind the eye and in front of it. His dreams had a different flavor now. Jack Kerouac made more sense than the Officer's Manual. . . .

After his return James Earl Ray shot Martin Luther King. There was a spontaneous demonstration in which he figured prominently and the next Monday he was summoned before the major, his class advisor, who informed him to either get with the program or get out. He got out. . . .

. . . and remembered years ago three days of continuous walking, his only food oatmeal, rice and raisins, climbing past lakes jumping with trout

in weather like this day so clear and full of color  
 pursued by mosquitoes, deer flies and horse flies.  
 He spent a night with a porcupine and when he  
 got back to town he knew he'd been somewhere.

“I remember that moment up there when  
 a clump of cumulus in the northeast formed itself  
 into three crosses then quickly became cloud again.  
 No, I've never been to war but I've been some  
 other places.”

Hard work has been one of those “other places,” work on  
 railroad gangs or big construction projects like Libby Dam, but also  
 picking cherries on Flathead Lake, painting houses in Missoula,  
 and odd jobs out of the Labor Hall, wheeling endless barrows of  
 concrete. In his most famous poem “The Ten Thousand Things”  
 (read by Garrison Keillor on his National Public Radio show, *The  
 Writer's Almanac*), a poem which purports to be a list of all the things  
 a common laborer on the Libby Dam must move amongst, sort out,  
 keep track of, the poet-worker's attitude is fundamentally Taoist.

....

There's times when I wander

about picking up

and sorting bolts

there's times when a chance glance

at a star

trying to outshine

the lamps

is all the rest I get. . . .

Oh damn! I forgot nails! 16 common

16 duplex 8's the same

roofing nails and blue

heads

There's just no end to it

Sorting bolts on the edge

of artificial light

the tune of an engine

the shadow of the dam.

(*Buck's Last Wreck*, 26)

A gandy dancer poem from eighteen years later celebrates the feeling for heavy work going on into middle age, no white-collar position for this poet, and few regrets either.

### Close To Halloween

....  
 bone chilly  
     as we stretch  
 our muscles  
 hoisting railroad  
     ties  
 to flatbed truck  
     we've  
 loaded fifty when  
 a Rail Link foreman  
     tells us  
 —wrong ones these  
                     are oak  
 still good wood  
     the ones  
 you want are out  
 by De Smet—  
 our boss the contractor  
 says—I thought  
     these were awful  
                     heavy—  
 hardwood ties  
 used on curves  
 up in the mountains

years ago  
 I recall my first  
     gandy dancer  
     spring  
 sliding down river bank  
     mud  
 trying to hold tie high  
 enough for the diesel  
     machine

the “scarfire” to pull  
     beneath the rail  
 now the weight  
 no longer a surprise  
 middle aged  
 muscles and joints  
     creak  
 in crisp air  
 the heavy breathing  
 of being still alive.

*(Hellgate Wind, 140)*

All of Dave's work wasn't in Missoula or on the railroad or some big construction job. There are a number of poems from his work up in Glacier National Park, digging holes for outhouses or working for the carpenters at McDonald Lake Lodge and Sperry Chalet. The mountain sense in them is strong as only a person of “prairie blood” can muster. The most well known of these is:

**Face To Face On Apgar**

a nameless  
terror grabs  
me as I stand  
with more  
before my eyes  
than I can  
stand to see  
a closeness  
that threatens  
my civilized  
mind so used  
to four walls  
now this huge  
circle  
beyond my possible  
self  
a sky so blue  
my name  
is lost  
peaks so jagged  
I have no mind  
I want  
to escape  
this voidness  
the beauty  
it holds  
is more  
than any word

The Ground  
Squirrel Buddha  
of this place  
keeps an eye  
on us all  
I am nervous  
from last night's  
beer breakfast  
coffee sex thoughts  
beside the point  
this wind  
this wind!  
keeps us  
all alive  
like a broken  
down medicine  
man I can hardly  
stand  
I must bow  
to the Four Directions  
and love  
the wind  
  
What?  
this radio  
antenna?  
this lookout  
shack?  
the repeater

station with its  
tower? These  
things? Parkside  
communication: Mount  
St. Nicholas  
talks  
to Mt. Brown  
in cloud  
language  
the sun listens  
like chlorophyll  
coursing leafy veins  
in a huckleberry  
patch grizzly shit  
on the switchback  
trail. 8 June 1980

(full poem, *Wreck*, 68)

This poem actually does begin to “ef” the ineffable. The line-breaks and overall structure are such it is as if the pressure of overwhelming feeling and power and immensity squeezes the language into a tight wall of terror, thought, and devotion, dense in the sense of its own limits in the presence of the seemingly limitless mountains, sky, sun. After the overwhelming experience of the voidness and beauty of these mountains, this wind, which takes him beyond his own name, mind, beyond language itself, a ground squirrel brings him back, hardly able to stand but able to enact the simple ritual of honoring the Four Directions in a bow.

The key word in this last section is, strangely enough, “chlorophyll,” from the Greek words for “green” and “leaf.” Chlorophyll, the mother of photosynthesis, the quiet ability of plants to take hold of all this terrifying-beyond-voidness of beauty, wind, sky, mountains, unnameable light, and to earth it, make the food that makes the shit of the Great Bear, or the Ground Squirrel Buddha, or the poet. There is an intensity of engagement with the mountains here so deep as to represent an indigenous, populist Buddhist experience. And few white poets could get away with the “medicine man” self-reference, but Dave does it perfectly, partly by virtue of his deep Montana roots which of necessity include all sorts of life with Indian people, but also his poet’s savvy in the line breaks here: this wind/this wind!/keeps us/all alive/like a broken/down medicine/man I can hardly/stand/I must bow/to the Four Directions/and love/the wind(.) This wind keeps us all alive. Like a broken down medicine. Man, I can hardly stand. I must bow to the Four Directions and love.

An aspect of Dave’s life and poems that bespeaks the old north-south movement on the continent are the winters he traveled in Mexico, and Central and South America. The best-known poems from these journeys are “Santos Going Fishing,” “At the Ruinas,” “Mexico City The World Map,” “The National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico,” “Quito,” “Reading Aime Cesaire In Quito,” and “The Way Home.” These poems move between the discovery of the whole ancient, magical, volcanic, tortured world south of our border and visions of home back up in Montana working on the dam or hearing the Bitterroot Mountains singing “a fire of rocks . . . grandmother of sweat lodges/ tempting me to die/ tempting me to live”(.)

**Right At Home In Cuenca**

sad streets weary with people  
     paved with hard-eyed sympathy  
     quarried from a hot moment  
 this burden of old rags breathes shit  
     and envies dogs  
 a haughty student flashes red stars  
     from eyeballs  
     of socialist fancy  
 this burden of old rags teems lice  
     and begs volcanos to erupt  
     sad streets paved with cripples  
         a squashed avocado  
     slick seed in the gutter  
         growing groves  
     of empty cigarette papers  
         old eyes blank  
         with wrinkles  
     stories of pain etcht  
         in outstretchd palms  
 it is too bad whole streets of people  
     are born without newspapers  
         taking note  
 that hordes live and die anonymous  
     like mosquitos in a snap frost  
 what is this human crying for alms?  
     moaning chant of old women  
     besieging cafes with their sagging  
 flesh

a rattling of small coins starts a riot  
 of hungry eyes  
     insulation of money belts  
     sensitive fat of good leather  
     on sad pavements made dangerous  
 by a barricade of eyes  
     inarticulate termites gnaw  
         huge rolls of newsprint to dust  
     cities of the famished are built  
         from discarded corn flakes  
 a fierce telepathy of howling drums  
     paints a slogan on starving walls  
     everyone hears it pulls  
 in their heart a beat of pure space avenging  
 delusions of skyscrapers  
     and freeways  
 there is a fast council of beggars and buses  
 to decide a treaty  
     with the wind  
 dark clouds move to adjourn  
     but no vote is taken  
 there is a damp hand on my sleeve  
     and a wide-eyed kid  
         wants to see a movie

(full poem, *Fossil Fuel*, 27–28)

The compassionate sadness of these observations of the grinding poverty of this Latin American city, and the title's

connection of that to the poverty in the inner cities of the north, the wide-eyed vulnerability of the kid who “wants to see a movie,” make this one of Dave’s most heart-breakingly realistic poems.

Dave Thomas’s life, work, and poems have taken him outside the box of conventional American culture. He writes truly about old Indian hippies like “Grandpa Adam Gardipe,” the demolition of the Orange Street Bridge, Eddie’s Club, the legendary Missoula bar of the 1960s and 1970s, now Charley B’s, the burning down of the Roxy theater, the “Rough Morning” of a wicked hangover, the deep friendship of “Designing A Hole” with Jay Rummel, or a poem like “Industrial Meditation,” “sprouting / new feathers / of life and death.” His poem on the abandoned lumber mill yard just off the Orange Street Bridge contains a certain affection for what is passing, has passed, for an older Montana, but also a sense of what continues. His clarity about money-driven changes here is tempered by acceptance, but his pain and anger come through too.

### **The Intermountain**

The corpse  
     of this old mill  
 sits quiet  
     but the days  
     when it breathed  
     smoke  
 around the clock  
 are an easy reach  
     for my memory  
 the log yard  
 piled full

of fallen trees  
     waiting  
     the whine  
     of the saws  
 the clank  
 and rattle of the green  
     chain  
 a crow’s caw  
     breaks  
 the dull roar  
 of traffic around  
     town  
 a hint of sun  
 atop Lolo Peak  
 stark as the bare  
     river trees  
 this gray December  
     nothing  
     but wood  
     chips  
 turning to mulch  
     and yellowed  
     weeds  
 populate  
 this graveyard  
 of machinery  
 fresh tire tracks  
     a prowler car  
     maybe

the “No Trespassing” signs  
 lie face down  
 by the railroad bridge  
     I can hear  
 the Clark Fork’s faint  
     whisper  
 beneath the drone  
 of a single engine plane  
 trees grow slow  
 in this climate  
 and money moves  
 fast as smoke.

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(full poem, *Wind*, 42)

When James Crumley says that “with his poems and through his life Dave Thomas has been our saint,” “the national treasure of our small but extended nation,” I think he means there is a quality to Dave’s writing that goes beyond literature, that contains the reality, the gratitude, and the coyote-devotion of a person who has found something worth doing in this buzzing, puzzling life. And the dues paid are in every word. (Dave’s final note to my manuscript: “But I’ve learned time and again that I don’t live in complete isolation from the aspects of this society I most despise. More like I live in a kind of dirty symbiosis with it all and finally I’ve got to eat, do laundry, and have someplace warm to sleep like everybody else—keeping that in mind, thanks for the kind words—Dave”).

## Conclusion

Albert White Hat, Sr., working from within the effort to restore and maintain the Lakota language, has given us several new/old ways to consider our own language too. He reminds us that language is *wakan*, very powerful, that we [should] use it to communicate with “the living beings of the earth,” that both its power for good and its power to destroy must be taught, that it must be used respectfully, that learning it should develop another heart and another mind in us. He reminds us that our language has been invaded, just as our lands, and that it is our “bloodline.” His remarks are pertinent to anyone concerned for the fate of their own language, especially in these times of “doublespeak” by politicians and advertisers. Poets are those especially responsible for the language itself, they are its most important “keepers.” The echo of the old phrase, “In the beginning was the word,” is in them. They are condemned to it. These four poets of Montana, this place of continental collision and embattled refuge, Lahey, Charlo, Gibbons, and Thomas, are the poets of HERE, past, present, and future. None of them speaks from within the secure confines of the major institutions or recognitions of this culture, which is perhaps as it should be. They may be mad, impoverished, Indian, alcoholic, laborers, or they may be saints, teachers, chiefs, creators, sane, or all of these things together. Mostly they have been found by language, by the mute/muse, that dark/light daimon lady that sucks their throats and quickens their brains. They are the unlucky/lucky ones who cannot help themselves. They know the mines, the dams, the lumber mills and moving vans, as well as the mountains and old ones, the coyotes, Chinese herb doctors, butchers, and cold rivers. They know the Cabbage Patch and the railroads too, and cold

and heat and fast money and northern lights. They are the gandy dancers of the throat. The coyote skins of the fence. The booze bottles of Buddhism. The lookouts of deaf. They keep the stories in the mind in the belly. Come join us, they say. Leave your fiberglass sailboats and moose antler chandeliers. Yes, you will have to get your hands, even your pretty souls, dirty, bloody, or perhaps broken (like Dave Thomas's broken hand swollen up like a softball when a compacter slammed it against a ditch wall when they were too rushed on a job with a green crew) if you are to experience the best of the culture here. The innocence of the notion that we should or can separate the best from the worst is disastrous. Mountain blood, plains blood, mixed blood, Frank Little's blood, Nez Perce blood, buffalo blood flowing like rivers on the steel rails, Black Irish blood soaked into copper ore, snow geese poisoned in the bloody Berkeley pit, blood on the moon, the stars, the snow—the real Montana, lovely and fierce way out beyond the myth of the old or new West or the last best *anything*—this is the bloodline these four poets continue to follow.

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