

POET PLAYWRIGHT

FATHER GRANDFATHER

TEACHER CHIEF

JUST WHO IS VIC CHARLO?

by Melissa Mylchreest

Sitting in a corner booth at the Old Timer Cafe in St. Ignatius, Montana, Victor Charlo shares stories between bites of waffle. Outside, cars fly north on Highway 93, passing by the little town. It is late summer here on the Flathead Reservation, the hills yellow and dry, morning sun baking the dust. Just a few miles from where he was born and raised, the 75-year-old man with the white whiskers and sly eyes looks out the window and says, “I stand in middle of who I am. I am an Indian. I tried to change it, tried to be a white person, just one of the guys. Can’t do it. And so I’ve claimed who I am.”

But just who is Vic Charlo, really? Poet, playwright, father, grandfather, teacher, chief. All of these are true, and none are sufficient to describe the man who asks in one of his poems, “Why did I learn how to write? Why did I want to? / Is it worth the loss of your world going away?”

Charlo is the author of the poetry collection *Put Sey*, as well as a playwright who has, in collaboration with Zan Agzigian, written several



Vic Charlo. Photo by Zan Agzgian.

plays about life on the Reservation and the struggles of being Indian in the 21st century. He is a proud father who used to imitate Bill Cosby to make his four children laugh, and he is a spiritual guide for his people, deeply reverent of tradition. He is soft-spoken, and laughs easily.

When Charlo talks about writing, the act of translating the world onto the page, his eyes grow wide with excitement and wonder. He speaks of his own life with a mixture of pride and astonishment, as though he has arrived where he is now through some kind of luck. “To this day,” he says, “I don’t know if I can write or not. But I do my best with what I have.” Perhaps it has all been luck. But perhaps, too, Charlo has spent a lifetime witnessing the world, stepping lightly through its many doors, and asking questions all along the way.

Vic Charlo was born in 1938 on the Flathead Reservation, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes. He is the great-great-grandson of Chief Charlot, negotiator of the 1855 Hellgate Treaty and the ancestral chief of the Bitterroot Salish, who were forced off their homeland in 1891. As such, Charlo is today the traditional Chief of the Salish people, although this is a role about which he is humble. “I do claim it,” he says, “but I don’t ordinarily say that. I don’t even talk about it.” Although his bearing is reserved and

manner self-deprecating, there is a natural sort of quiet leadership in his attentiveness to doing right, both by his people and by his traditions.

Plagued by illness during his earliest years, no one expected the young Charlo to survive. “They dedicated me to the Blessed Virgin,” he says of his parents. He suffered infantile paralysis, and white hospital doctors told his family there was nothing that could be done, sending him home to live out his final days. “My mom was feeling pretty bad, so she took me to this (Salish) guy named Jerome Lumpry. He doctored me one or two times, and all of a sudden, one day, my mom looked over and I was crawling.” This admixture of worlds—the balance between white and Indian, with a vein of spiritualism running through portended the future.

As Charlo thrived and grew stronger, he often went into town—the bustling hub of St. Ignatius—with his parents and siblings. In the store, he found his favorite items: “I used to love the erasers and pads and pencils. I didn’t know how to write, but I loved them!” He covered pages with meticulous scribbles, filling each line, and then buried these missives in tin cans behind the family root cellar. “For all I know,” he says, “it’s all still there! My first writing.”

Charlo struggled with a stutter when he was young, and didn’t fit in at school. He recalls being six years old, when

the teacher called him to the front of the room on the first day of class and asked his name. He didn't answer, and instead cried for fear of stammering. When she sent him home, his dad joked, "Boy, you're really smart! You learned everything in one day!"

Despite early obstacles, he persevered and succeeded, and the desire to write and tell stories grew as he aged. Eventually he began to excel in his classes, even as he was moved from district to district, first in Frenchtown and then in Missoula. He found friends and football, serving as captain of the team and graduating as salutatorian from Loyola Sacred Heart Catholic High School in Missoula. He credits football, oddly enough, with his first forays into poetry: "I'd have to wait for my ride to pick me up after football practice—sometimes they'd forget about me—and I'd think, 'well, I have to do something with my time,' so I'd try to write poetry." He never showed these early works to anyone, but the spark was ignited.

Charlo went on to spend six years in the Jesuit seminary where he learned Latin and was steeped in Catholic culture. He accepts the time he spent there, and doesn't reject the Jesuit teachings that he learned. Yet during those years, as he continued writing, he began to doubt the path that was leading him away from his roots. Growing up he had learned about traditional Salish games, songs, and belief systems, yet the world pushed him towards a Eurocentric way of being. In his poem "St. Francis Xavier Novitiate, Sheridan, Oregon 1957" he writes,

Mirabile dictu. Mirabile visu.

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

Following his years in seminary, he went on to receive a bachelor's degree from the University of Montana and a master's degree from Gonzaga University. He spent time in Missoula, palming around with Richard Hugo and James

Put šey'

Stem' a spu?us?
Stem' tu smim'i??

Sqłqelix^w
Sqłqelix^w

Spqni?
Spqni?
K^wk^wusm'

Q es čtačxenets
Qe ut scnk^wen'

Qe ut scnk^wen'

Ci qelm
Iše qe qe sewne?
Tqe sqpsq^welm

šey' tu qe sx^wlšitum
Iše qe nk^wnk^wnem
Ye t q^welm še qe npiyels

Xest

Put šey'

That is all

What's in your heart?
What's the news?

Indian People
Indian People

Sun
Moon
Stars

Watch over us
We are the chosen
people

We are the chosen
people

We hear
our
Ancient Songs

That is our guide
We sing these songs
And we are happy

Good

Good enough

—Vic Charlo

Welch and other writers, drinking and playing baseball and participating in the anti-war movement of the '60s and '70s. Looking back on his experiences as a teenager and a young man, he wonders at his own actions. "I was an Indian, but I was trying to pretend I was just like everybody else. But I wasn't."

Even as he gained friends and made a home in the white world, he was drawn back to the Reservation. He learned hide-tanning and other traditional skills from an elder named Agnes Vanderburg. He spent summers at her camp, bringing his young children to live in a tipi and pick berries, fish, sweat in sweat lodges, dry meat, and bake the traditional root camas. It is in his poem "Agnes 1979" that those enigmatic lines about writing appear, a window into his inner conflicts about his place and path in the world, and perhaps the place and path of Native people in general:

*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 the 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?*

This duality, this living-in-two-worlds, remains a constant in his life and writing. Poet Roger Dunsmore, Charlo's life-long friend and editor, sees this struggle as endemic to Native America, but feels Vic is someone who understands the nuances and complexities of the position better than most. "It's a common situation for native people to have two minds, one for your own culture, and one for the world. Vic's just an extremely clear example of someone who has traversed that divide with all the difficulties and confusions. He stands in the interface of two worlds, and is honest about both."

What truly makes Charlo remarkable though, is not that he operates between two worlds, but that he operates at the meeting point of so many worlds: White and Indian, Catholic and traditional Salish, past and present, lost and found. Often the cadence of his poems reflects this push-and-pull; the rhythms of his words at times sound unfamiliar so that the reader has to work harder to read them as they are meant to be read. He grapples with the strictures of traditional Salish culture, which dictate what can and cannot be written about, and when certain stories can be told (for example, coyote stories must not be told before first snow). "Sometimes I feel," he says, "that I'm writing about things I'm not supposed to write about, in the traditional sense. So to compensate, I write around those things." He offers nods to other poets as well, and acknowledges that his writing is not like theirs.

Operating between so many ways of being, Charlo's language embodies the discontinuities of our many worlds. And yet he sees and navigates the intricacies of these myriad worlds with grace and wit. He is something of an oracle: Dunsmore speaks of the realities that Charlo lives with, as a Salish person in modern-day America, and recognizes in his



Caption

writing "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."

This idea of continuation, of honoring the past by doing right today, is a pervasive theme throughout Charlo's poetry. People, events and traditions of the past feel like a touchstone that Charlo returns to again and again in his writing, a kind of comfort. They do not feel distant, but ever-present, ancestors and children all occupying space and time together. In his poem "Generations of Need," Charlo speaks to this idea of spirit, tradition, and legacy residing within:

*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 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 our grandfathers
who hold both of us true to cottonwood and stone.*

In this poem Charlo is concerned with rightness and truth, on a very visceral and ancient level. To be held "true to cottonwood and stone" is to be held accountable to the cosmos, and, in turn, to be part and parcel of a place so deeply as to enjoy a reciprocal relationship with the landscape. To be able to send a young boy to the top of Red Mountain, and thereby be assured of wellness for a whole people, is to be in seriously deep alliance with the geography.

Charlo feels that reciprocity still, every day, looking out over the hills of the Mission Valley. "I write about place. And my place is right here. It's what inspires me. I talk about what the land is doing, watching how the storms come in and circle. That's what I see." He mentions that he is not from the land, but he is the land. Dunsmore, speaking out of his 40-year friendship with Charlo, acknowledges the remarkable connection that his friend has with the land-

< JUST WHO IS VIC CHARLO?

scape of western Montana, and the people who have called it home for hundreds of generations. On hearing him sing a traditional Salish song, he says the voice:

"... comes through him every bit as much as comes from him. It fills the auditorium with a sound as old as Red Mountain... 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."

The Salish language, like Salish culture, is deeply rooted in the landscape. It holds within it rules about the right ways to approach the world, how to treat beings and places with respect. Dunsmore talks about the language, which he studied, and its intricacies and rootedness. The complexity, he says, lies in its "relationships to the land, it's in all the colors that go into the beadwork, in the tones that people use between each other."

Salish is a careful and detailed language, and reflects so many of the concerns and levels of spiritual awareness that are the subject of Charlo's poetry. The irony in Vic Charlo's story is that he never learned the Salish language.

Charlo's parents chose not to teach him Salish, a decision that made sense at the time. Having suffered for speaking their native tongue at boarding schools and at the hands of missionaries, his parents believed that teaching their children only English would better their chances for advancement in a rapidly whitening world. "Isn't it too bad?" he says. "I hear [other people] talk about place names, and 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."

What's truly remarkable is that the Salish worldview, a way of knowing and being that is so tightly woven into the language, appears in Charlo's writing and personal philosophy anyway. It's as though the language is sleeping in him, unspoken and yet powerfully present. His daughter, April Charlo, who is a scholar of the Salish language and who has helped translate some of his poems, talks about how her worldview has shifted as she has come to learn the language. "There's no concept of ownership in the Salish language, like there is in English," she says. "Imagine if you pulled that idea out of your language, how much that would change things."

April Charlo says she sees these ideas in her dad's poetry, ideas that she only understood once she learned to speak her ancestral language. A focus on the natural world, an attentiveness to connection and relationships, too. "When we say 'stem a spus?us?' it's our way of saying 'how are you?' And it translates to 'what's in your heart?', but it's more than that. It's asking about your spirit, asking you to share your truth." She laments the inadequacy of translation, though, and wonders if we could do the language a better service by talking about its intentions and position in the world. "Our concepts need a paragraph to translate," she says.

In the title poem of his book, *Put Sey*, Charlo offers a

litany of words that he worked with his daughter to compile from common phrases in Salish. The two versions appear side-by-side, and in English, the poem seems simple, straightforward. But with the complexities of Salish in mind, the questions and observations become more complex, and the reader is prodded to wonder what is lost in translation.

Dunsmore believes that even though Charlo never learned the language, he has carried the tenets of the language with him. "Even if you don't learn it, you're drenched in the tonal atmosphere, which includes the geography, the people. It's a strong and good thing, to know that the old way of being can be in him, even though he's not a speaker, as such."

These traditional thought and beliefs come through potently in so many of Charlo's poems. "Cycles" draws on Native conceptualizations of time, the importance of family, the importance of the natural world, the constant state of flux that encompasses all. (It also contains a line that Hugo made famous, but is reputed to have been Charlo's first):

*We always come back
to where we are. Some say non-Indians think
in straight lines, lines thought, yet Einstein
said parallel lines bend if they go far
enough in space. So maybe there is no
linear thought.*

*What comes to mind when
I think of the future is going home to old
ways. Some think of the old ways as going
back. I don't. We move on the cycle
and we do the same tasks
again and again, only differently each time—
live simply, care for family,
relatives, when life is serious as meat.
To live to hunt to live again,
to live as the people:
blood to bison.*

Charlo's work is pared down and concerned only with essentials—the essence of a place, the essence of a life lived rightly, blood to bison. "He has no pretense," says Sheryl Noethe, artistic director of the Missoula Writing Collaborative, former Montana Poet Laureate, and long-time friend of Charlo. "He's not like the language poets, who refuse to have narrative or make sense. He's honest, he's real, and he has very sacred instincts. He accepts the divine, and isn't trying to impress other poets."

And it's true; Vic Charlo isn't trying to impress other poets. Over breakfast in St. Ignatius, he mentions time and again that he isn't sure if what he writes is even very good. But that's never stopped him. Even in his darkest hours, he found himself writing, and takes that as a sign that he truly is a writer, through and through.

Sitting in his booth at the Old Timer, where many of his plays and poems have been conceived over the decades, he leans in close and shares his parting insight: "You just write." He peers around, to the other patrons, the hills out the window, his eyes twinkling. "Look around you, when you're writing. Is there anybody behind you? Are they listening to what you're saying? Nope. You're on your own. And you do your damndest to write something that means something to you, and hopefully other people will see that. And they do." <HDJ>