

A LITERARY SKETCH OF MY LIFE

Roger Skillings

Native of Bath, Maine, on the Kennebec River, b. 1937. Graduate of Bowdoin College, 1960. Lived and wrote in Boston, then Cambridge till spring of '69, when I moved to Provincetown, where I remain, associated with the Fine Arts Work Center.

As a child I was insatiable to be read to, importuned incessantly. Poor my mother one day, amid Kipling's *Just So Stories*, thrust the book at me, said, "Read it yourself."

To my amazement I could, never was read to again.

For some summers I typed policies in maddening triplicate in my father's insurance & real estate office, till I was excused afternoons to write at home, where I hardly put pen to paper, so powerful was the pull of unread authors—Melville, Tolstoy, Dickens, Hemingway, Steinbeck et al.

Moby Dick became my Bible, but where was my white whale? The world had its woes I knew nothing of. A late-born child of only children I grew up, gripped most profoundly it seemed by the rotting wharves of the gone clipper ship, and the old, the doddering doomed, the derelict, the irreconcilable-- and therefore, to my eye, the heroic-- so I began to write of ephemerality, and the solitude of time itself. My first literary effort, an assignment in high school English class, was a poem that starts, "The pilings stand alone and bare..."

A college freshman, in a train kiosk in Rome, I met with *Dubliners*, and climbed down a bit from inescapable fate, began to write of things I knew, things I had personal language for.

My first book, *Alternative Lives*, Ithaca House, 1974, twelve stories set in a town half the size of Bath, is an example of lesser works spawned by the great. Though I worked for years I never could wring the sound and ways of *Dubliners* out of it.

B. H. Friedman, a Trustee of the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, who was to become a dear friend, persuaded Baxter Hathaway to publish it.

In 1972, when Stanley Kunitz gave Michael Casey the Yale Younger Poet's Prize for *Obscenities*--who else would have given that book that prize? Answer: only Alan Dugan-- Michael came to read at the Fine Arts Work Center.

To amuse him I wrote an imitation of his monologues, from the mouths of Stanley's gardener, Richard Kaleh, and a beach house owner:

SPACE

It was this beautiful day. I was on my way to the Fo'c's'le. I can't stand the sun you know and out comes Mr. Nelson. He says, You won't believe what just happened to me. He was all indignant because he found a dead seagull on his beach so he called the Sanitation Dept and told them to come and get it and they said you know Take care of it yourself, everybody has to do his share, but he said you know That's their business. Well get a shovel I said. You can bury it yourself. Oh I don't think I could handle that he said. It isn't heavy I said. The sand isn't hard. Oh I can't handle that he said. So I did it for him and he gave me five dollars. Next day The tide dug it up again. Must've spaced him out.

The next day, Barbara Rushmore said to me, "Did I tell you about my nark?"

... a guy with short hair, porkpie hat and a jalopy with slogans painted on it like MAKE LOVE NOT WAR. He'd stashed his wife in a motel and wanted to spend the night with us. Everybody figured he was a bit weird, he was so jumpy. All of a sudden he says, Why're y'all being so nice to me? and bursts out sobbing about what a rotten guy he is, how he fucks chicks and then busts them and keeps the dope. He got transferred down here from Boston because they sent him to spy on some meeting of college radicals and there was a bottle of Canadian Club there and he fell asleep and got suspended for four months without pay.

... It's after midnight, he keeps saying he's got to go home, he's tossing his keys up and catching them like a little kid and can you imagine? He drops them through a crack in the deck, and of course it's high tide so I say I'll drive you home, and he says Okay if you'll come in and explain to my wife. I said I would not and he wound up sleeping on the couch.

Thereafter hardly a day passed without its hilarity or poignance that I transcribed more or less verbatim. Few needed improvement. I would come home from the bars and write till three.

That was the rambunctious epoch of Piggy's and the Fo'c's'le, the Vietnam furies and anguish, when rentals were cheap and the town was flooded with hectic refugees from rat-race and convention. People caroused it seemed just to have flamboyant calamities to howl over. Writing, always so hard, suddenly was easy in such a world of tall tale tellers who spoke only the inspired truth with devil may care velocity and panache. Under the skin, on their own ground, who is not a poet?

Meanwhile I soldiered on with conventional fiction in little magazines and an Atlantic First, won an NEA in 1977, and a Massachusetts Arts Council grant in 1978.

P-town Stories or the meat-rack, appeared in 1980 thanks to Phil Zuckerman's Apple-wood Press of Cambridge, Massachusetts. It acquired a certain cachet in Provincetown, with the washashore town as author at large, few doubts as to who was who, accurate or not.

For several years people would say, "You should make a play of that."

"Go ahead," I'd say, and get the blank stare. They wanted to act or direct or do costumes, anything but forge a playable night from 144 unrelated monologues. One day Marshall Oglesby, that brilliant man, sent by Lolly Phoenix, accosted me on the street with the common mantra. I yawned acquiescence. "I'll meet you here in a week," said he.

In a week there he was, script in hand. That winter of 1983, in a borrowed apartment, we gathered a cast of ten-- pros and a few who'd never dreamt of acting, like Earl the Pearl and Christine Magriel at age 78-- and come spring Marshall and Stage Manager Phoenix, plus songs by Joe Bones, staged twenty-plus early evenings on Piggy's dance floor to good houses before the pack-jammed dancing began at eight.

Sitting on the floor in a circle actors would jump up to declaim or harangue one another, preen or lament or chortle, choral chiming, rapid-fire, non-stop, play-lets within play-lets, presenting the greatest, free-ist town in world-history and its fond pratfalls—"Did you ever see a man fuck a horse? I did, down in Kentucky. The guy laughed so hard he fell off his oats bucket."

In a Murderous Time, stories of Bath, Boston and early glimpses of Provincetown, came out in 1984, again thanks to Apple-wood.

One of these stories, called "Isaac Babel", homage to Babel's own "Guy de Maupassant", caused Stanley to say, "There's something wrong with this. I've thought and thought a lot about it, and I still don't know what it is, but something's wrong."

Dugan summoned me to Truro. He stood in his door. He said, "It's not about **YOU**," and dismissed me.

It was the great, good luck of my life, through the Fine Arts Work Center-- as it was of so many others-- to have had the friendship of these two great poets as polar polestars.

I mulled unsuccessfully. In time the true fate of Babel became known. He betrayed his wife and lost her, lost everything, was not at all living in revered retirement, but had long since been convicted of espionage for France and Austria, shot and thrown into a pit, the first of sixteen that day.

Unfortunately, Tri Quarterly had already published the story in #83 and anthologized it in #85. Dugan was exactly right, as I'm sure was SK, whatever his unease.

Now larger, deeper in every sense, my new "Babel" seeks redemption as one of twelve stories in a book manuscript called *The Washashores*, six of which first appeared in the Notre Dame Review, which has printed in all 17 of my 90 published stories.

I owe a debt of gratitude, on many counts, to Editor William O'Rourke, a staunch friend and colleague from early days at the Fine Arts Work Center.

I published nothing further but separate stories until 1999. At the behest of FAWC friends Cleopatra Mathis, Cynthia Huntington and Tom Sleight, Phil Pochoda of University Press of New England phoned me and said he wanted to publish a book of mine. I said I had none. "Yes, you do," he said. "No, I don't," I said. "Yes, you do," he said. "I don't," I said.

After a few more rounds of this he said, "You just go look." I said, "I don't, I know I don't."

"Go look," said he. "All right, all right," said I, to be polite. After all neither stranger nor angel had ever demanded to publish a book of mine.

I had no book, none planned, several stories published every year, but they didn't go together, and I had no future in sight. I was about to call him back in triumph that I knew more about me than he did, when I thought to look in the empty bottom drawer of my desk that I never opened except in relief of discomfort.

There I found a pile of pages. I'd sworn never to write another P-town Story, I guess because they cost me so little effort, or because they were so outrageous or raw. But sometimes, when one nonetheless forced itself on me, I simply dropped it from sight and mind. That not-quite-trashed pile proved to be *Where the Time Goes*, in my view a much better book than *P-town Stories*, though I hardly know anyone in town who does not prefer the first.

Eventually I realized they belonged not to me but to the time. I couldn't write one now to save my soul. People don't live, don't talk like that any more. There is no more P-town. I can't say R.I.P. I'd have it back if I could, with all those lively legions of the priced-out originals who did everything their own way and lived to laugh.

In 2001 Phil Pochoda published my only novel, *How Many Die*, said he didn't want to, then read it again and felt he had to. Now that is an editor to cherish and cheer for!

Julian Esmeralda, an incorrigible gay teenager who paints monumental phalluses and lawn fannies, is dropped of by his blase mother in a Provincetown guesthouse amid the burgeoning AIDS epidemic, is taken in hand by kindly elders, there to perfect his unrelenting art and die a virgin among a large cast of the desperate, the doomed and dying.

Fred Leebron, FAWC '93 & Executive Director, '93-'94, inventor of the Summer Workshops and Residencies, that saved our ass in desperate days, when we were dead in the water and sinking fast, plans to reissue the book in Unboxed Books in a year and a half or so.

Also in 2001, Marshall Brooks of Arts End Books of West Dover, Vermont-- via Jane Kogan of the Provincetown Bookshop, herself a '68 FAWC Fellow in Art-- published a novella, *Obsidian*, in which four male washashores, all unknown to town and each other, luck into an idyllic, book-lined hideaway off Provincetown's lush Back Street, rent free, amid the April rains of '72, as the war in Vietnam flickers toward its ignominious end. Their refuge is ruled by the great black cat Obsidian, uncanny icon of the strange days and nights ahead.

Memory for Marisa Rose, poems begun when my daughter was the size of a grain of rice, came out in 2003, also thanks to Marshall Brooks, and especially to his astute wife, Stephanie Greene, who was won by

Always These Days

When I look down
to find your flower face
and steadfast eyes
awaiting mine I'm stunned
by helpless happiness...

In 2014, *Pressed Wafer*, now of Brooklyn, still edited by Bill Corbett, is scheduled to publish a book of stories, *Summer Nights*, written mostly in the seventies, running from Bath, through Boston, Cambridge, Provincetown and Haiti, this thanks to the unsought urging of Jhumpa Lahiri, FAWC '97 and Gail Mazur, long-time Trustee and Chair of the Writing Committee '91 & '92.

In 1966 Bowdoin friend Louis Asekoff, this year (2014) Chair of the FAWC Poetry Jury, had said to me, "I have a room in Provincetown with two beds in it for four months for \$300. If you have \$150 you can have one of the beds." I said, "Where's Provincetown?"

After three summers, I moved here year-round in 1969, and have seldom since gone beyond Wellfleet, for fear of homesickness. For years I wrote poems, a whole book of them called *Only Bones*.

Louis, most delicately, suggested that they might not be poems, but better off as something else. It took me some years to digest this; after all I'd slaved without stint to turn sentences into lines, which they without exception had so relentlessly and successfully resisted.

Curiously, I could work on a poem all day and all night, too, and never be weary nor bored, while two hours of prose prostrated me.

I wonder if that is not the nub of dilettantism. Eventually, I faced it, my lines were god-awful, but so long- and hard-hewn- they had become at least next thing to presentable prose. I suppose there may be method here, madness for sure. Thank you, Louis.

At age seventy-six I have in hand three finished, unpublished manuscripts:

The Washashores, 242 pages, twelve stories of Provincetown in formal prose, all magazine-published, touching upon the years 1963 to 1985, from the King & Kennedy's gun-murders to the closing of the Fo'c's'le.

Each In His Own Way, a novella, 140 pages. A string quartet rehearses for its final performance of the season at the Provincetown Art Association, 1965, featuring Beethoven's Quartet in C-Sharp Minor and the Quartet's sexual embroilments amid P-town's end-of-summer frenzies, 12 chapters all with codas depicting Beethoven's catastrophic search for love and his tyrannical struggle for control of his fatherless nephew, who essays but survives suicide, presaging the titan's own demise.

War, a play in nine scenes. Dorchester, Massachusetts. Six characters. Long-suffering Mother, war-cheering Father, agonized ten-year-old son, and his fifteen year old brother who torments him, two black prostitutes, amid that glorious epoch of roped-together Iranian boys sent into the Iraqi mine fields to blast a path for the Iranian tanks. Four dead by play's end, the child and all three women, of course.

And *Only Bones*, still in progress ,varied stories of various lengths and modes, the first two sentences long, first published in lines by the Silverfish Review, courtesy of Rodger Moody, FAWC '83 & '87:

“A sloop in early days coming through the last elbow in the river saw with delight the long reach ahead. A fiddler went out on the bowsprit to play a tune, when the wind slat the jib, knocked him overboard and he drowned, giving the place in time a gay name.”

Only Bones has some 59 former poems prosed among its 86 titles—but no prose poems.

My thanks to Executive Editor Kathleen J. Canavan of Notre Dame Review for her faithful indulgence since 1997, and of course to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, for a life.

Any publishers?