

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/1

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A Gathering of Memories, the Writing Kind

Is there any perfection other than what we strive for? Or the words we seek, or ideas from seedlings taking over our whole lives, our very breathing, the way writing does on its way into a book.

Tackling a project on writing runs a wide gamut. It starts with my father's reading Peter B. Kine's *Cappy Ricks and the Green Pea Pirates* to me when I was a little over two years old, on a porch looking over Oxford Street in Somerville, Massachusetts, then watching two older cousins push our Model T Ford to get it started, those young giants. Shortly later it seems, there's my grandfather Johnny Igoe reading "this young upstart Yeats" to me on the porch at night, the unshaded bulb yellow, his tobacco fingers yellow, his voice hanging with the fireflies out in our field. It is there yet.

A few years later I watched my father, the avaricious reader, go off to work in a WW II GE guard tower with a pocketbook in each back pocket. His lunch he might forget but never his books, though I do remember once when I had to thumb down there to the GE plant in Lynn to bring him his next book. When he started to lose his eyesight in earnest around age sixty, from insulin retinitis, I scratched all over hell to find *Cappy Ricks*, to read it to him, but couldn't find it. Settling for my reading as much Horatio Alger Jr.'s stuff that I could find, and which he had read as a boy, we slipped into the light of many dawns. Those were marvelous exercises, those journeys back over once-covered ground.

All of this formed my own voice, the inner ear I'll keep forever, the writing voice. And, of course, it is all part of the framing of this house we call Thomas, and the stones of the cellar, and the rooftop and how I go from one room to another, transitioning from essay to poetry to short stories to the novels that have held me in place in one room for long days at a time, and loving every breath taken no matter the room I'm in. Yet this project has grown on me with the same taste and declaration that a current novel in the works has: Four veteran comrades from the Korean Campaign, now accomplished writers or poets, in their own way have tried to memorialize *all* their comrades. Beat at that task they do as they beat at the enemy. The odds were at times horrendous. In one sudden flare of realization, they know they can't memorialize all of them. What are they to do? In that moment of clarity, they go the other way: find one, one lost or gone comrade, make him the universal, bring him back, make his life sing once again. That novel is underway.

This project, then, might suggest the universal, might demand the universal sweep or an approach to the intangible. For me, in another moment of clarity, it comes down to a specific exercise.

So this essay on writing, the art of writing, the breathing that beats down in me and up out of me, that demands energy and time, that comes in all hours of sleep and wakefulness, has to come from another posture, another stance. It can't be the universal reach, the dream, all writing being memorialized; it has to cast itself upon one specific piece, "making a life sing once again."

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Which is here.

In time much of what we know fades away, moves away, continually moves around us, blinking and scattering, but with a waft of air touches back. It's a face, a name, a childhood haunt in momentary dispose, each waiting to be identified or merely given the solace of place. Though we cannot name it at first, cannot frame it visually clean or bring it to contoured image, we yet strike out for it. Our hometown of Saugus kept touching back at friend John Burns and myself like this. We wanted to hold tight to all that came our way, had come our way. It had already found breath in one of my poems... *because we have all been where we are going, into selves, shadows, odd shining, all those places the mind occupies, or the heart...*

A book was in the offing.

The word then had gone out nationwide: we were looking for articles, vignettes, pictures, graphics, anything that would lend both resonance and nostalgia to a book we had dreamed up, a book on *Things Saugus in the 20th Century*. Out of nowhere Adrienne Linstrom-Young came suddenly into being again. I had not seen her in thirty years or more. Yet John Burns, my co-editor and co-dreamer for this book, a fixture in the Saugus High School scheme of things for more than seventy years, who commands wide respect, had spoken. That word, as much a dictate as could be, was out. Adrienne, like so many others, had heard of John Burns' needs for the book that was to be titled, at his suggestion, *A Gathering of Memories, Saugus 1900-2000*.

She responded quickly, repeatedly, with an affluence of memorable pictures of her father, studies of a man and his time. He was a man obviously revered by his daughter, and remembered in a special collection of photos she said had come from different caches within the family, four places in four states.

Leon Young, her father, had been the sub-master at SHS during all my school years, and was now a sort of beloved specter of the past, a man of many faces, many uniforms, as if he were on stage all the time, playing out again his own life's drama. The pictures, all black and white, are of great contrast, some of them almost revealing the inner man and his wide interests. No longer is he a stern figure decidedly bent on detention, social improvements, and behavioral rudiments.

I remembered him in detention rooms as well as in and about the high school hallways in the bustling and relentless '40s, a time for all times, our football teams doing well, but the world itself going badly even from a poor start. Joe Pace, we were told, was the first of ours to fall in the madness of the early part of the decade; at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese planes from Yamamoto's aircraft carriers dipping in over the fleet that quiet and peaceful Sunday morning none of us should ever forget.

From her innumerable sources she brought forth an exquisite selection of pictures: her father in seafarer's garb; on a fishing trip (inland) with Buzz Harvey, then our high school football coach; in his Arthur Treacher get-up, complete with vest (and spats, we were willing to bet). In cadet uniform he stood on the deck of an unnamed ship, his arms folded in a pose, the world out there beyond his gaze, the horizon promising and

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open. Fifty years later he has another look and is on another plane. Now he graces the pages of our book.

Adrienne Linstrom-Young's infusion into our book was but one of the many pleasantries and minor excitements which had come our way in the two years doggedly spent on this project, from the day in October, 1998 when the idea first burst forth.

That day, coming off a six-mile walk around our town, I paid one of my numerous late-day social calls on an old friend at his school office. It was here where we had generally discussed our past in this town we so dearly love, which has been so good to us. But for that matter, names of people and places often eluded our memories, slipping into some unconfined space of the mind where retrieval was hesitant, unsure.

John once mentioned *Charlie's Pond*. To me it had been "lost" for more than fifty years. In turn I cited *Cinder Path* as a place of endless winter excitement where we steered our old Flexible Flyer sleds down the long and twisting run from the site of the old Stand Pipe on top of Baker Hill. That ride, so clearly impressed on my mind to this day, the wind wild and cold on my face, the careening like electricity running the whole gamut of my body, went clear down to Clifftondale Square. It was an exhilarating and headless ride, now and then under a splash of weekend moonlight or brittle starlight.

He had forgotten the place, it seems, or had not been there. Perhaps those years so memorable to me he had spent in the South Pacific creating different memories.

Other names and places came and then went flitting away in a number of our meetings, like meager and endangered moths caught up in late October. They were like air around us, barely touching, but being known, having names, a place to hold onto, a corner of the mind.

The past we wanted to respect, to remember, was surely slipping away from us. Pieces came and went in the relentless tumble, some of them crying for recognition. Muckles Brown, at length and only after some eventful prodding, came back to life as he was, enormous across the chest, shoulders like Atlas, but faint Anna Parker was just about gone forever, her and the first electric car in town. And *The Pigeon Plucker* and *Hoag's Castle* had also done their dance. The names and faces of memorialized heroes were more surely cemented in place. The Kasabuski brothers (killed within two weeks of each other in the Italian Campaign), for whom our hockey rink is named and where I had spent more than ten years with my sons, are linked forever in my mind. The VFW Post bears the name of a Baker Hill boy, Arthur DeFranzo, who was decorated posthumously with the Medal of Honor for his heroics not long after D-Day. Arthur, of course, is not forgotten. But other names too quickly failed at the tip of the tongue, a host of them from all corners of our town (Lick, Skink, Doggie, Big Syd, Paints Brown, MaryB, Simple Ellie, Ollie and Dolly, Sinagna, Tarzan Doyle, Crazy Albert, Leonard the Blind Man, The Indian).

A face would come back mysteriously in a fleck of light and leap away, on a silent ride into complete darkness. Sometimes a place that *was*, a favorite place of youthful years ... disrupted, dug out, filled in, carried off ... no longer existed. It wasn't a pleasant experience. Doubts, we knew, did

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exist. About ourselves. About our memories. About our ability to muster a true respect for the past. About duty and what it calls for.

That giant of a day finally came. I walked into John's office, my six mile trek behind me, a few faces and a few names remembered in my course about town, down the Turnpike, easterly on Essex Street, through Cliftondale Square, down Central Street past the new Senior Center, to Saugus Center. My quick searches down side streets collected a few names and faces, lost others. I did not find a host of that which was once known.

John, his face as red as mine, his eyes like relays, looked up at me as I walked into his office. He has a way of *smiling* an announcement, perhaps the teacher pleasantly at his work, the corners of his mouth like punctuation. For a moment I saw it, then heard it. On the edge of his chair, as if he had been the long day waiting for me, he said, "Let's write a book." The blue eyes zapped electric again. They went into a further spectrum; his usual excitement and keenness for every day was hyper, and then some.

I nodded.

"Before it's all gone," he added. "Before we forget what we're supposed to remember." He was doing what I had so often done, measuring time. It had crept quite often into my poetry, like a Jersey barrier on the loose in my stream of thought.

John, it was easy to see, was there. And if there's anything in this world that he can lay claim to, it's a sense of justice, a sense of honesty, a sense of duty. And his spirit and energy are compelling. In mere moments, after a minor and unspoken assessment of where such a decision might take us, a kind of nostalgic Limbo possibly being our destination or assignment, we were off and running.

Of course, we knew we could not do it by ourselves. That would have been fatal, would have been incomplete, would have been parochial to our mind-set.

Slowly a committee came into being. And another eventful day came into focus. Early on, a hesitant member of our committee asked, "Where are we going to get the *pros* to write this book?" He seemed serious about it. So were we. Both published and unpublished writers and poets quickly came into the fold. Teachers and historians and artists and cartoonists and illustrators came along with them. Neil Howland, a classmate and teammate of mine, and a lawyer with offices in the town, became our legal man and a valuable contributor. We had also attracted some young blood, to go along with our old blood; we crossed the century in our make-up. Clayton Trefry, who had been through a hundred town campaigns, brought with him his long love for the town, and his memories. A recent SHS graduate, now at Yale, made a contribution. Vicariously we were underway.

The pros, as it turned out, were gracious and many and varied. A former SHS football player and teammate, Donald Junkins, with seventeen books to his credit as well as the UMASS career interception record still in his back pocket, came from the western part of the state with his offerings. An SHS Sports Hall of Famer, Tim Churchard, then currently coaching in

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Division 1 hockey and in the NCAA Frozen Four Finals, who writes poetry and his own music, made a number of contributions.

We found, in our musings and wanderings, that Elizabeth Bishop, Pulitzer Prize poet, (called by some the best American poet in the last half of the last century) had spent her freshman year at SHS, had lived on Sunnyside Avenue in our town. Up from the deep files came old paperwork; we saw her report card, a signal of things to come, and found in her poems places that surely must have been parts of Saugus urging her roots at poetry.

A local and active historian, loving Saugus and trains, brought from his files a host of excellent transportation photos. A cartoonist and an illustrator contributed an exceptional array of material to grace our pages, to line our inner covers. Renowned artist Bill Maloney, once of our Hull Drive, revisited Saugus Center, the Town Hall and the Soldiers Monument with a most nostalgic oil painting, becoming the cover of our book. We found that Saugonians had graced the fields with the likes of Bob Waterfield, Johnny Unitas, and Doug Flutie; that friends had found each other on the sands of South Pacific islands in moments of abject silence, on Kwajalein and Iwo Jima and Okinawa, before they were parted forever. We kept seeing that happiness and loneliness and pain had not left our town untouched, not by a long shot. But it was still Saugus.

We had, it proved, marshaled the pros from our community ... no matter where they were, no matter where this life had taken them, Saugonians moved on: Wilsonville, Oregon; Berwick, Maine; Orlando, Florida; small rural corners of New Hampshire and Vermont, we found them, or they found us. And the material came on.

Anthony Scire, who for years has been studying various parts of Saugus history, who years earlier had already done a major paper on the Saugus Marshes, tipped open his treasure house of collectible histories, spilled his memories, and wet his pen again. We found out he could crank things wide open with his energy.

Bob Wentworth, SHS '48, retired, an old friend, was a volunteer. He was welcomed to the committee with open arms. Then a few days later, his mind playing with ideas, thinking himself short of writing talent, he asked to be relieved of any promise to contribute. John positioned him quickly, and from a minute suggestion Bob Wentworth spent hundreds of hours in the library looking at microfilm. His contribution became a major part of the book as he culled history and politics and town data from the microfilms of old newspapers. And when there appeared to be a breach in the committee structure, Bob volunteered to head the fundraising drive to get the money to print the book. His approach to John Dean, president of the Saugus Co-operative Bank, assured us of the necessary start-up and printing funds. \$60,000 is not peanuts, not on the premise of selling an unwritten book.

On June 12th of the year 2000, somewhat spent from arduous and long hours, our eyes bleary from life in front of new screens, poring over photos and names we once thought might have been gone forever to a lot of people (oh where was Piggery Road and Little Sandy and Pick Hawkins' Swamp and Poo Chak Road and The Old Rezzie and Shipwreck Eddie?),

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we delivered our rough proposal manuscript to the printer's representative. Tom Keeley of Josten's Company had guided us on our way, after being one of our original contacts. In that one moment of deliverance a weight had shifted, ballast moved, other obligations coming back into rightful play.

If we were to forget, we'd make sure others would remember.

Day of days this was, looking forward to Founders' Day, the second Saturday in September when thousands gather in Saugus Center to celebrate who and what we are, as our target date for publication. That is a raucous, joyous day in town. Tables and booths are spread throughout the Center, odors rise rich and pungent from innumerable grills, runners flash by in the annual road race. Old friends are met, relocated Saugonians coming back for the whole day; and lots of handshaking and backslapping welcomes are made, smiles going electric across the crowd as old classmates or teammates are spotted.

There was a major hole, though, in finalizing the book. Final presentation to the printer had to be electronic, in the genre of the new order of things rising about us. Neither John nor I had the computer knowledge or expertise to undertake that massive task. Mine was recently meager with a system gift from my children, John's just coming aboard with a most recent purchase of a computer, as a need for final details of the book, perhaps at insistence from others and myself that he write his memoirs.

But, as always, in some corner of Saugus, there is an energy waiting to be tapped. Eric Brown was that energy. And he had the expertise, the knowledge, to be the final hand in the formation of our book. Eric runs Saugus.net, his local entity. That is his baby. And it is Eric who laid out the book, scanned the hundreds of photographs, rejected some, found second sources with better density or clarity, spent hundreds of hours himself hunched over the machines of the new generation. Like John Burns, he is a man of detail, of uniformity, of clarity. Their imprint sweeps through our pages, letting others' personal traits be known where they count, demanding some traits be corrected or brought into uniformity.

We know there are holes and vacuums in our thoughts, in our pages. That is what brought us to the book in the first place. It is most difficult to let go what is precious, even when it threatens to slide off by itself into a gray and uneventful place, as if something concrete can suddenly dissipate like a summer cloud at a fresh breeze. But everything mentioned, every single person named for one bright moment, becomes representative of each and every part of Saugus, all that which has had its way in helping to form our memories, letting us become what we have become.

On the 6th day of September, the Year of our Lord 2000, skids of book boxes came off the rear end of an 18-wheeler that had crossed half the country from Kansas... and right into my driveway. In print we were, glorious print, 452 fabulous pages, and setting about in our warehousing and packaging and mailing processes. For the shortest time we reveled in he-man Muckles Brown, poet Elizabeth Bishop, warrior Frank Parkinson, the tanker and tiger of Tobruk, footballer Art Spinney out in front of Johnny Unitas in that 1958 game of the century, Sgt. Al de Steuben catching a round in the hedgerows of Europe, old storekeeper Jack Winters

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alone with his man-killer kerosene stove, unforgettable teacher Marleigh Graves, Honest Lawyer Belden Bly. Pictures leaped off our pages, poems gave rhythm, drawn lines etched a history, scored words moved the blood of a whole community.

The work of writing had beckoned.

We had delivered.

Postscript to publication:

Now, nearly daily, I say hello to John Burns and Bob Wentworth here in our Riverside Cemetery, and whisper on the wind to Neil Howland, old teammate and classmate, in the atmosphere we knew so well, for only one of the ROMEOS hangs in at this time (Retired Old Men Eating Out) and toasts them now.