

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Tom Sheehan

A Celebration for the Night I Drove Freeman Home

I had heard Freeman Frank read his piece, "Anonymous," and was immediately liberated from my own hopes of finding for myself the special touch that I heard from him. Something about him said *Maine*, sharp, to the point, boring straight in, undressed prose that lived, like the directions you get from a side road walker way Downeast. Freeman had come straight at me. It was as if he was saying, *Listen to me, son, this is the way it's done.*

We had come out of the Out Loud Open Mike meeting at Melrose's Beebe Estate into a slick wind and minor patches of ice and snow. Travel, over such a short distance to my car, was vaguely treacherous to the man allied with an aluminum walker... and obvious discomforts I'll never be able to measure. Nor understand what he was tolerating, measuring, or casting aside, all to be out on such a night to hear poets and writers read, musicians and singers to offer up tributes of various sorts, to allow his own voice to brighten the walls, pause, brighten a few hearts, knock me on my butt.

Freeman Frank, Maine born and bred, was such a kind. His marks are here.

Oh, I reveled in the drive to his home in Malden, traversing some known roads coming down from Melrose to get him home, wondering what I'd do if the car failed on such a night, listening to his speech the way it spun out with likely pauses, the way punctuation is known. He could highlight a stressed point with the most deliberate pause, as if the old debating coach techniques for some 40 years of high school teaching were being fully employed. Freeman could make you sit up and wait his next pronouncement; it was like a silent clarion call, that caesura of his, that singular pause, that finger pointed right at your eyes, saying, *Heed me. Truth is here. When you go your way, make sure you bring some of me.*

You're damned right, Freeman.

I helped him from the car, thinking he tolerated my assistance, his arms strong from the body lifting and swinging he was now used to. Over a small slush pile he practically heaved himself, and past my worry of how difficult it would be to get him back on his feet, unfamiliar with his pain, what had driven him to the walker, only knowing a frayed fragment he had uttered about some discomfort. A man of short words, plain words, for sure. "Anonymous" kept coming back to me, as bare as boards in the wind, as clear and as clean as a Downeast lake in a winter wind, sheer as ice, how it later lit up the pages of the *Wolf Moon Press Journal*, (Nov/Dec 2006.)

I tried during that drive to understand someone else's pain and fell far short. For me, I still believe, he hid what was bothering him, letting go only his love for the written word, his love for the spoken word, and how it was his duty to frame such words memorably.

I dared to ask him to write reviews or critiques of two of my books. To this moment I remember putting them into those strong hands, for those

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

keen eyes, hoping for the best. After all, he had army service in the Korean War, as I did; comrades to the core.

I will, he said, *in short order*. He did.

On the way home, after meeting his wife Sally, after his setting himself down in his chair, in his own home, Sally and him alone again with *Time* and *Pain* and utter *Truth*, I tried again to measure things. I realized I am no mathematician, no chronometer, and know only, for real, those pains that I have personally known. But Freeman must have had his own wheelbarrow to lug along what bothered him. He was an oxen, a mule, a dray horse, daily pulling what was inside him, momentarily carried behind him, *for the sake of all others*. He was a hero in my eyes, and I am not alone in that assessment.

Such thoughts, this day after he has left us, pound on me. I will not forget him, or the things he said, or how he said them coming on a task. Somewhere, in Melrose or elsewhere, now moved on, there are students of his who daily remember the impact that he had on their lives. I have known such teachers, like Freeman Frank, and carry them along with me as my own personal baggage, much as I see Freeman pushing or hauling that huge heavy wheelbarrow of his own, his voice halting, measured, finally coming so clear and clean we wonder how he managed to keep together all his pieces, take his pains in order, participate in the magic of the written word, the spoken word.

Or remembered how he said things, for he did say them about the books traded for review: *Tom Sheehan writes stories for us and about us. Epic Cures spans six decades, from Pearl Harbor to the dawn of our new century. It is comic, lyric, democratic; most of all it is insightful. Its pages brim with names, faces, nationalities of both genders and all ages: fisher-folk, carpenters, teachers, servicemen, truck drivers, card sharks, icemen, dairymen, plainclothesmen, cops on the beat, bankers, an undertaker, a child molester, a coalman, a blind man, and more.*

Clearly, Sheehan wants us to be, as he is, well acquainted with them all. Saugus, Massachusetts -- muscled, polyglot, blue-collar -- is Sheehan's Winesburg, Tilbury Town, and Main Street. Populated by few out-and-out heroes, villains, or fools, they are people-people, who avoid extremism in politics and religion. Even their sex is mainstream, sometimes illicit, rarely kinky. The causes they champion are local athletic teams, armed-servicemen and, by God, Saugus itself. Some of them, not all, know days of hard work, nights of carousing. No, they aren't all lovable--but read, and re-read, this little book--they are all well worth knowing. Fun, and deep.

Or his emails, that hang yet, the echoes reaching:

You all help me to keep my mind on who I am, rather than who I am not; what I can do, rather than what I cannot do. The big fear is of what Churchill called "the black dog," despondency. Not the steel or the walker. And, thanks to this whole field in which you people (of the Out Loud Open Mike) are keeping me immersed, 24 hours is just about the happy length of any day for my "am" and my "can do." Sincerely, I can't complain.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

I'll be at your "Hodd's Mountain" story tomorrow with a mind fresher than it is right now.

By the way -- and this has to come under the heading of very good news-- I am 74. I just look 88. I'll be 75 on September 7-- born Labor Day, 1931, in a one-room country school (no electricity or running water), in East Vassalboro, Maine. I suppose the real kicker, apart from the first name they chose for me, is that my dad delivered me. Dr. Hendy refused to come over from Waterville:

"You tell Geneva to go back to sleep; she's not going to have that young'un for another week!"

"Well, godammit, Doctah, she's gonna have it and tonight too, whether you're hee-yah or not!"

Two minutes past midnight September 7, 1931.

The only argument poor Dad ever won, and with a man vastly more educated than he was -- and in that man's highly exalted profession at that.

Dad and Mom had 8 kids. And, though he never let on, I knew I was Dad's favorite, not Mom's.

In 1975 I think I spotted John Updike (a memorable map) in Copley Square. And in 1952 I had a chance to talk to the late Irwin Canham once, at a BU tea of sorts. Oh, my god, yes, in 1951 a young Yale debater by the name of Bill Buckley, very inadvertently, I assure you, snuffed out a Chesterfield by jamming it into my right cheek (of my face not my ass--now that would be kinky). But that's a total other story which I may write another time--regrettably thousands of years and millions of dollars too late. A case with Jim Sokolov written all over it.

Cutting to chase (ha ha), until I met you, those were the nearest to "authors" this Swamp Yankee ever met. So it is not "wonderful" (Jane Austin "take" on that word) that you are influencing me more than perhaps you care to. Not that I'm "borrowing" your style--that would be impossible--but increasingly my reading of you, even a small bit, is followed immediately by inspiration to get back into my own writing. There, dear Mr. Sheehan, is the real reason for my first critique of your work taking the months of June and July to write; and of course it explains the delay with your beautiful A Collection of Friends. You've gotten me to spend much, much of my spare time trying to achieve some modest victories for myself, before the final curtain... deadline.

I'm in my second reading of A Collection--. Do I exaggerate when I say that your second story in, "The Great God Shove," (elements of Hermann Hesse and James Joyce) is among the best short stories I've ever read? I'll have the book reviewed "pretty damned soon"--Maine-speak for "Lay-tah!"

"Last Call for a Loner" --am in 3rd read-through of all of 'em--This one, for whatever reason, touches me most. So far. It's two good ol' boys in the "delicate April," on the much-(and well)-used porch, with their CIB's (Combat Infantryman's Badge), GIQ's (Giant Imperial Quarts), and shared memory of Billy Pigg (P for poignant--I'm serious, so were you), like all of your work, leaves me with a story, ideas, feeling...feeling.

Every guy in our generation, and our dads' before us, (and, gawdam-

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

nit, the kids' after us) has at least one "Billy Pig," keeping in a piece our huge circle. Mine is Callahan, buried in a VFW grave in Mobile.

"And they are not here, and they won't be here, and they won't come back again."

Am enjoying your stories immensely. Doctor's order, to sit outdoor a lot, is easy to take with Epic Cures. You wrote them for us and about us. Suffice to say, you come across as a lyric, comic, democrat (small "d," and probably a large one)-imaginative as hell, for all I know, a genius. But I'm getting too close to writing the promised critique...and shall re-read first.

Someone (a Frenchman?) wrote--"All language is banging iron kettles for bears to dance to. While all the time we yearn to move the stars to pity." John Fredericks Nims is my future project (after I recited for him Nims' "Shot Down at Night" ... the only poem I've ever memorized on my own other than my "John Maciag.")

Warmly: Freeman

From Freeman Frank on Sunday 5/28/06:

Shot down at Night: "A boy I once knew, arms gold as saddle leather, lakeblue eyes, found in foreign sky extravagant death. Dreamy in school, parsed tragic Phaeton, heard of war, arose surprised, gravely shook hands and left us. His name once grey in convent writing, neat on themes, cut like erosion of fire the peaks of heaven. The Arab saw strange flotsam fall, the baseball sounding spring, the summer roadster pennoned with bright hair, the Halloween dance, the skaters' kiss at midnight on the carillons of ice."

"Tom, The English language does not get better than this. It can't."

From Freeman Frank on 5/27/06:

Tom,

I'm not sure I responded to this communiqué of a week ago. I love it. Thanks. My nephew, asks me to make the following inquiry: By the way, does Sheehan's "Vinegar Hill" refer to the 18th Century British Battle or that section of Brooklyn, NY? Or perhaps it is some other reference?

I only had to start, purely at random, one of the stories in Epic Cure to realize you are so good that, by gawd, I'm not going to rush it. The short story is my very favorite form and, as with a good meal, I want to be at a place and time when I can really enjoy-savor two books, which I know all ready are written in a style I love.

Reading is the happy side of the deal I made with you; the daunting downside will be trying to critique writing which I believe is so much better than my own. "But I shall do it! I shall do it in the end. I shall do it sure." (Who said that?)

For a couple of weeks more I shall be awash in work--Great Books Club and a writing class--and then you will hear from me. Am interested in your

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

career at Boston College; I wrote a pretty good story, I think--a slice of life in and around the BC campus just a few years before you were there. Like "Anonymous," it is a two page, 1949, honest-to-God-true tale. In Maine-speak: "Far cry from Hackett's Mills though." Some time I'd like to boot it over to you--but am sure your plate is pretty full. And the good guys are too easily imposed on.

Not a bit, Freeman. Not a bit. Nevermore.

Follows here is Freeman's obituary from the Robinson Funeral home, Melrose, MA:

"Freeman T. Frank of Malden, formerly of Melrose, died Wednesday morning, October 3, 2007 at the Lahey Clinic in Burlington. He was 76 years old.

Mr. Frank was born in East Vassalboro, Maine, September 7, 1931, son of the late Leroy W. Frank and Geneva (Thurston) Frank.

Freeman Thurston Frank, the fourth of eight children, was born in 1931 in a one-room country school and raised in the towns of Minot and Poland, in the State of Maine. He worked his way through high school (Auburn's Edward Little) and Boston University, did a two-year stretch in the US Army during the Korean War and for 37 years (five of them in Medfield, Templeton, and Kingston and 32 in Melrose) taught history and coached debating in Massachusetts secondary schools. He received his Masters degree from Bridgewater State College and was the Head of the History Department at Melrose High School.

Among many summertime jobs, he was a farm-hand, janitor, wood-chopper, dishwasher, waiter, truck driver (bakery, milk, beverage, ice), wallpaperer, house painter, rough carpenter, and briefly (in 1953) a reporter for the Lewiston Evening Journal. Retired since 1992, he and Sally (Wallace), his wife of 50 years, lived in Melrose for 42 years and Malden since 2004 near their two sons, Calvin and Adam and their dear grandchildren: Jeneva, Cameron and Rayna.

In his last years, he wrote essays and short stories, published in the Melrose Mirror and the Wolf Moon Press, each concerning 1950's life in small town Maine and Greater Boston, all true, with some names and places changed for the usual reasons.

He has been President of both the Massachusetts and the New England Speech Drama Debate Associations. A ranked player in the American Checker Federation, he was its District 1, New England Director since 1998. And he much enjoyed his nearly 20 year membership in the Melrose Great Books Club. He took much pride in being descended from a long line of liberals, including great-grandfathers, "boys in blue," during the Civil War. While active in Melrose Democratic Party Politics, he considered himself one the last Abolitionists, whose cause "we have just barely begun to win."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Freeman was the beloved husband of Sally (Wallace) Frank. Devoted father of Calvin W. Frank of Malden and Adam W. Frank of Medford. Loving grandfather of Jeneva Frank, Cameron Frank and Rayna Frank all of Melrose. Dear brother of Joanne Baumgartel, Sally Belisle, both of Lewiston, ME and Royal Frank of Hacketts Mills, ME, the late Hal Frank, Philip Frank, Timothy Frank and Gertrude Frank.