

One Writer, Becoming

ON MY SIXTY-SECOND BIRTHDAY, MY FRIEND TOM PRESENTED ME with an envelope of letters I'd written to him when we were both twenty-two years old and aspiring writers. He'd rediscovered them among his old files.

I set the envelope on a corner of my desk, where it sat like a watched clock, ticking.

I didn't know if I wanted to renew my acquaintance with my younger self. I had been, I was pretty sure, annoyingly sure of certain things, and pitifully naïve of others; sometimes I was both opinionated and naïve about the same things. Why embarrass myself at this point in life? Why make myself cringe?

On a rainy day six months later, my curiosity finally asserted itself and I opened the envelope.

THERE WERE FOUR LETTERS, DATED BETWEEN August 2, 1974, and January 5, 1975, the first written by hand, scrunched edge to edge on four legal-pad pages, the others typed on the portable typewriter I'd hauled to Alaska, with its worn ribbon.

Memory is, of course, fickle, adjustable, alterable and altered. We know from brain research that it's not a fixed thing, like something

stored in a lockbox, or—in today’s terms—data in a computer. Memory is a process, and each time we call up a memory the neural connections link up a little differently and amend the memory itself, even as the pathways strengthen.

I’m not surprised, then, to be surprised at some of what I’d written forty years earlier. I’d forgotten much, and, as time passed, misremembered—or rewrote in my mind—what had seemed to matter to me.

But there, captured on the faded pages, lived the fundamental self—the young woman trying to figure out who she was.

Who would care about what lay in the slanted penmanship, the imperfect typing, the struck-out words (changing “maddening” to “pathetic”) of that young woman, the newcomer to Alaska? I was no E. B. White, turning to his 1923 journal in 1961 to compose “The Years of Wonder” about the “wondering and wandering” young man who shipped to Alaska on a steamer, the young essayist descending delightedly through his journey from passenger to saloonsman and then messboy. And I certainly was no Eudora Welty, presenting her literary biography in *One Writer’s Beginnings* at the end of her impressive career.

Just maybe, though, there was something to discover, in the particulars of my fledgling life, about how any of us—perhaps especially those who become writers by intent or happenstance—navigate our early distances. Might not we all, looking back at the dream worlds that drew us toward adventure or home, add to the conversation?

THE YEAR BEFORE MY LETTERS TO TOM, as soon as classes were over in May, my college-boyfriend and I had packed up and moved from Massachusetts to Alaska, choosing a location from a map—a small dot of a town where a road ended at a blue bulge of bay.

I had been fascinated with Alaska since I was a child, when magazine photos showed off the new state’s braided river valleys, fearsome bears, and red-cheeked Eskimos riding dogsleds. Alaska was as alluring as the most attractive places I’d encountered in my family’s set of children’s books—Robinson Crusoe’s island and Heidi’s alpine meadows among them. The difference was that I knew Alaska to truly exist, even if my Alaska was a stereotyped and romanticized version.

I made it there at my first opportunity, with college friends the summer I was nineteen. For several weeks we hiked and climbed and paddled in remote northern wilderness—a heart-throbbing experience that sealed the deal for me. I set in motion plans to return, not as a visitor but to stay; I couldn’t even wait to graduate. Ken and I bought a pick-up truck and launched ourselves toward that coastal town where Ken imagined himself a fisherman and I thrilled at the idea of living with both mountains and sea in my sight.

By the following summer when I wrote to Tom—our more studious classmate and editor of the college newspaper—Ken and I were working multiple jobs, including running a business that sold backpacks, sleeping bags, and Swiss Army knives. That first letter—not the first to Tom but the first of the four he found in his files—was written in the middle of the night from my post at the airport, where I worked weekend nights for the weather service. Most of those nights, while I struggled to stay awake between hourly recordings of temperature, wind, and visibility, I studied Alaska history and Alaska Native cultures by correspondence—in those pre-computer days, mailing assignments to instructors at the university in Fairbanks. It seemed to me that, in my commitment to a new land, I ought to learn everything I could about where I was and what had come before me.

What I would do with my learning was not at all clear to me at the time. I knew that I wanted a *life*, not a career, and that this life would be tied to Alaska. I had known that, for me, place came before all else; somehow I would figure out how to live in my chosen place, what to do with myself. But I confessed to Tom, still on the east coast, that I was struggling to balance my small-town jobs with some greater vision. I wondered if I should return to school—but then I didn’t know what I wanted to study. I wrote, “There’s so much that interests me—archeology, writing, medicine, etc.—that I can’t decide to pursue one thing.”

I see now, as I’d not been able to see at the time or until years later, that in that description of varied and indiscriminate interests I’d written a definition of a writer. Who else gets to follow anything that interests her (or him), to learn broadly across disciplines, to find the beauty in language and look for meaning? To make sense of the world and attempt to share one’s understanding (and opinions) with others?

I had perhaps also defined in that sentence an Alaskan: someone in search of self, welcoming chance, opportunity, the unknown, and the what-might-be. I knew who I *didn't* want to be—ordinary, average, someone who would drift predictably through life. The settled life of the east coast was not for me. The New England I'd come from had felt anything but new; I'd long since noted that even Thoreau had lamented the loss of the eastern forest and its wolves. By my time, the land—and the lives—around me felt “used up,” restricted, contained and constrained. I aligned myself with those who would flee small spaces and their conventions, who would make or remake themselves in a larger, fresher world.

My college years had taught me something about America's history—the Transcendentalists, the westering impulse, Manifest Destiny, the frontier and its closing, the appeal of wilderness. At school I'd read Thoreau, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*. I carried these texts, heavily underlined, to Alaska.

My expressed attraction to archaeology no doubt came from a recent opportunity I'd had and that I described to Tom, with enthusiasm, in that August letter. I'd spent two days at a nearby “dig” where a university summer class was excavating artifacts from an early Eskimo culture, and I'd written freelance articles both for the local weekly paper (a copy of which I enclosed for Tom) and the Anchorage paper's Sunday magazine. (I boasted, perhaps ironically, of my \$25 paycheque.) I'd held in my hands stone labrets worn through the lips of those earlier people, who I could so perfectly imagine living there by the beach with the wild celery and the clams and salmon I could also live by.

The other enthusiasm in my letter was for a book Tom had sent Ken and me—Edward Hoagland's *Notes from the Century Before*. This gift I've always remembered as a farewell present when we left for Alaska, but my letter proves it was mailed to us that next summer. In any case, I know that Tom inscribed it to us both, with the words I remember as “who went before.” That copy disappeared when Ken lent it out, so the one on my shelf today, while equally loved, opens to an unblemished, unhistoried page.

I had only just started reading *Notes*, but I told Tom how impressed I already was with its relevance to Alaska and my own quest. I knew from the flyleaf and first chapter that the book chronicled a journey Hoagland—a writer new to me—made in 1966 to the part of British Columbia upriver from Southeast Alaska. It was “a memoir of a land on the brink of eclipse,” I’d read, an elegy for what had been wild land and the generation of homesteaders and prospectors that peopled it. I quoted lines from that first chapter back to Tom: *The problem everywhere nowadays turns on how we shall decide to live*. I promised to read slowly, to take it all in.

I did read *Notes* with great attention, and it became one more formative text for me, helping me understand something about the importance of place and the passing of an earlier way of life attached to the land. Although the portrayed region was mostly beyond Alaska’s borders, it was close enough—physically, historically, and culturally—to resonate with changes I was seeing around me. I caught a glimpse of what was at stake. It helped that Hoagland himself wrote that his interest was not in Canada but in the continent, the particular standing for the trend. In the hills around my new town, homestead cabins were disintegrating behind overgrowths of fireweed and alders. I loved poking through these, finding a tin cup or an old silver spoon and wondering, with both nostalgia and a chill of foreboding, what had become of their people. Alaska was moving into a new age. That year, 1974, construction of the Alaska oil pipeline had begun. The subsequent tsunami of oil money would soon transform nearly everything.

My reading, then, was about content. I would be slower to fully appreciate the craft of Hoagland’s writing: the great skill applied to relating his travel experiences, descriptions of the land and settlements, portraits of the people he met. I didn’t, I think, quite understand that the strength of the narrative came less from what was told, as information, than from the author’s careful, artful, loving use of language.

When I reread in my letter that Hoagland line about how we shall decide to live, it’s as familiar to me as Thoreau’s line about wildness and the preservation of the world. In the years since I first read it, I made it my own. It is, I think, the central question to which I write.

Hoagland reappears in my next letter to Tom, when, three months later, I praise his essay collection *Walking the Dead Diamond River*.

I'd thought it hilarious to discover his essay about serving on a jury in New York City while I was sitting in my local courthouse with jury duty of my own. (As I recall, we convicted two commercial fishermen of taking undersized crabs, and I was elected foreperson because no one else was willing to deliver the bad news in a town both fond of its fishermen and skeptical of governmental officiousness.)

In the same letter, I write about Rex Beach's *The Iron Trail*, which I'd read as one of the few Alaska-themed books I'd discovered in book racks at my local library and senior citizen centre. I'd sent the paperback copy to Tom because of the railroad connection; he was then writing for a railroad magazine. Although the old-fashioned romantic plot ("smucky," I called it) was fiction, I judged the book a fair history of the Copper River railroad, an impressive engineering feat in the early 1900s to move copper ore across 200 miles of rugged wilderness. I liked the book, too, I wrote, because it captured, way back in 1913, "the conflicting attitudes of conservation vs. development and Alaska for Alaskans vs. for all U.S. people, which are the same things we're still fighting about." I had learned, in my short tenure, that Alaska was still largely a resource colony exploited by outside interests, and that Alaskans themselves typically chose jobs over environment protection. Nearby forests were being stripped of trees for export to Asia, and oil leases had just been sold in the bay where Ken and I caught our first salmon.

Tom, then, was finishing college, and serving on a committee that would enable me to finish my degree with an independent study and final project consisting of personal essays from my Alaskan life. I'd recently read the freshly published *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and above all was driven to emulate Annie Dillard in perception and prose style. I'd been stalking the trickle of water that was our water source, a grove of cottonwood trees, moose prints in mud, and the bones of a young horse scattered in a field, and I rhapsodized about each of these in my earnest prose. The four letters to Tom from this time period never mention *Pilgrim* or Dillard, but I still vividly recall that Tom wrote at about this time words that stung: "You're no Annie Dillard." If I momentarily felt discouraged, I also understood that I'd set myself an impossibly high standard and that, moreover, I would need to find my own way into my subjects and the language for them.

How I would love to see, now, those writings of mine, my faux Annie Dillard, my observations of my new home—however cringe-worthy they might be. Back in those days, I'd been unconcerned about temporal things, possessions, my own history; a friend once said I lived in the present more than anyone he knew. Those early writings exist nowhere today, not even in the archives of my college where, very belatedly, I thought to look. They were, very possibly, without artistic merit or insight. They are, in my memory, love songs to my new land.

IN MY NEXT, MID-NOVEMBER LETTER, I thank Tom for his comments on my school writing. I note that he was the toughest of my three-member committee, but that this was “good for me.” I also reference a “Hoagland piece” I'd written and submitted somewhere, hoping for its publication. I have no memory of this, of ever having written anything related to Hoagland. Whatever my publication hope was—I told Tom I was “aiming high”—it came to nothing. Nothing, that is, in terms of a byline, but surely part of my practice—my apprenticeship with the writers, like Hoagland and Dillard, I so admired.

That same letter thanks Tom for suggesting I read Eudora Welty in relationship to conveying a sense of place. I'd immediately headed to our town library to find the one Welty book that had made it there. I read *Delta Wedding* during a blizzard, partly by candlelight after the electricity went out at the homestead Ken and I were caretaking, and before and after a four-mile ski to use a neighbour's CB radio to check on Ken in town. It had seemed right to read of yellow butterflies and warm breezes—or as I summarized it, “all that hot and sweat”—during a snowstorm. “She's good,” I wrote of Welty. (The hubris of that!—the novice declaring one of the greatest American writers “good!”) But I was catching on to what it meant to evoke a place with the right, carefully chosen words.

Later, when I'd read her essay “Place in Fiction” and more of her books, I'd embrace Welty as another teacher, a model for living a writer's life closely tied to, and fully aware of, her place and culture. Welty affirmed my leanings when she wrote, “Those writers who for their own good reasons push out against their backgrounds nearly always passionately adopt the new one in their work.”

Where Hoagland had been the visitor-observer who, in a memorable passage, compared himself to “a person whose passion is the violin, who haunts all the concerts, yet doesn’t attempt to play himself,” Welty was the rooted one who put to page the deeply felt life of her home place, in all its specificity and complex history.

Again, in that letter to Tom, I wrote out my doubts about having left school early, about not taking advantage of the opportunities. On the other hand, “I could never be writing the way I am there.” But again, “Am I in the right place, doing the right thing? Would I have done better in the long-run if I’d stayed?”

Send more reading suggestions, I begged. I had ordered more Hoagland and some of E. B. White.

BY JANUARY, I WAS CELEBRATING a good Christmas season at our store and answering Tom’s questions about the election of Jay Hammond, our new governor who was a fisherman, bush pilot, and poet. I’d been busy; I hadn’t had a lot of time for reading and writing, but I was planning to write about the first women who’d run the Iditarod dogsled race the previous March.

This I did write, and this, like the “Hoagland piece,” was never published.

BUT I KEPT WRITING, KEPT CONCERNING myself with my place—my home place in particular, my place in the larger world. I did this in the margins of a larger, season-driven Alaskan life—one that soon involved commercial fishing, legislative research, and citizen activism. As the years passed, the writing work added up: an article, an essay, a short story, a book (with a title taken from Welty’s essay on place), a graduate degree, fellowships, more books, the honour of serving as Alaska’s Writer Laureate. I never settled on the *one thing* in which I was most interested—my lament to Tom forty years ago. Instead I found my way across time to the *many things*, in the questions *what do I think? what if? how shall we live?*

Along the way I discovered other writers with whom to have the necessary conversations—writers, past and present, who live in their books, and writers to sit down with over fresh-caught salmon

and blueberry pie. The circles grew wider but have always included Tom, who joined Ken and me in Alaska not long after that fourth letter passed between us and who became a prominent journalist and non-fiction writer. Tom's books, *The Wake of the Unseen Object* and *Pilgrim's Wilderness*, now share my shelves with those of Hoagland and the rest of our early influences, many more met along the way, and an increasing number of our contemporaries.

IN THE END, THEN, I'M NOT SORRY that I opened that envelope. Those ancient letters—written not just to Tom but as a way of explaining myself to myself as I inched into a writer's life—were part of a becoming it seems useful to remember. But there is more than that. What I discovered beyond the self-serious lines of text is the lifeline of a literary friendship. In a time when letters moved slowly by post and Alaska could seem a distant and uncultured land, my friend Tom imagined me not just able to learn from great writing and shared ideas but as someone who might someday use my place in the world to build something meaningful out of words. His birthday gift reminds me of the lifetime gift, and that literary friendships—that essential part of our work and joy—are to be treasured.