

Roger Skillings and Jhumpa Lahiri

A PROVINCETOWN CHRONICLE

When Provincetown Arts Press first planned to publish the latest collection of short stories by R. D. Skillings, Summer's End, I knew I needed to find someone exceptional to write an introduction for such an important book. Jhumpa Lahiri, an award-winning author and a former Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center, was the perfect choice. After all, Roger Skillings was the first person to greet her when, in the spring of 1997, Lahiri drove to Provincetown to explore the Work Center, which had just offered her a seven-month residency.

*At the time, she was apprehensive, reluctant, with questions about what sort of place simply trusted the inner compass of the Fellows to produce creative work. Lahiri had pursued a career in academia, earning three master's degrees along with a PhD in English. Her immigrant parents had encouraged the stability of teaching in a university, but Lahiri had begun writing and was accepted as a Fellow on her handful of astute stories, which continued to pour out during her time in Provincetown. This collection of work, later published as *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer Prize—which is rare for a book of short stories.*

Roger Skillings, chair of the FAWC writing committee, took her around the Work Center grounds, showing her the Stanley Kunitz Common Room—a room named for the poet Stanley Kunitz, which had originally been used to store coal, and now would be dedicated, Kunitz had once declared, to a higher form of energy—the imagination. Escorting Lahiri to the quarters where she would stay, Roger led her up the stairs to an area that had once been used as a studio for Robert Motherwell. Writers stayed in their work spaces, and Lahiri would live on the top floor of what is called “the Barn.” She looked inside and said to Roger, “Can I live here?”

— CB

IN JUNE OF 1966, when he was twenty-nine years old, living in Boston, R.D. Skillings fell in love with Provincetown at first sight. After three summers there, he moved to Provincetown year-round in May of 1969 and won one of the first seven Fellowships in writing at the newly established Fine Arts Work Center, then a fledgling organization founded to support visual artists and writers at the early stages of their careers. A native of Bath, Maine, Skillings has lived in P-town year-round ever since.

Located at the extreme tip of Cape Cod, Provincetown is a place both minuscule and vast. It has been home, in the course of its history, to Native Americans, Pilgrims, fishermen, immigrants, outcasts, homosexuals, makers, visionaries. Those who know it know this rich, eclectic broth. They know the insular embrace of Commercial Street, the barren sweep of the dunes, the wildness of the surrounding sea. They know that it is a place whose beauty both beckons and bewilders, a place where creativity thrives.

For forty-five years this town has been Skillings's muse, his mooring, the setting and subject of most of his fiction. He is a writer for whom place is character and vice versa. His steadfast devotion to his landscape and its inhabitants yields depth of vision, shades of variety. Provincetown is the

Copernican sun around which, for this writer, all else revolves.

His work ranges from the very short story to the novel, in addition to poetry. His first collection of stories, *Alternative Lives*, was published in 1974, followed by *P-town Stories (or The Meat-rack)* in 1980, *In a Murderous Time* in 1984, and *Where the Time Goes* in 1999. A novel, *How Many Die*, and a novella, *Obsidian*, appeared in 2001. A collection of poems, *Memory for Marisa Rose*, was published in 2003.

The present collection of stories, his eighth book, maps the journey of the writer's life: childhood and upbringing in Bath, Maine; postcollegiate years spent in Boston; and the discovery and subsequent adoption of Provincetown. As such, it is a portrait in three acts of New England

Summer's End



STORIES BY R.D. Skillings

itself, from its shipyards and summer camps, to its mixed-race urban neighborhoods of the 1960s, to what arguably remains its most unconventional outpost. It is a portrait of the region's evolution, its gentrification and, in certain respects, its decline. It is a polyphonic portrait of rich and poor, WASPs and minorities, men and women, young and old.

The stories set in Maine are layered ruminations on innocence and loss. Skillings's young characters thirst for experience, for elsewhere. They are sensitive, solitary boys, almost always aware of their "small knowledge of life." They pass idyllic summers idle, flattening pennies on train tracks. The young narrator of "The Rights of Salvage" thinks of his parents as ancestors, his home a confining museum.

I chafed to escape to my favorite playground, the old shipyards, where we hopped from piling to piling or with arms outstretched walked the rotted timbers of sagging wharves. . . . Only a faint clangor reached us from the iron works a mile downriver, and I dreamed of far places, the East Indies perhaps or the Cape of Good Hope.

While the young yearn for escape, and for experience, the old, "dazed at the thought of everything vanishing," long to be young again. They revisit the past, estranged by it, still struggling to decipher it. Some, for whom memory falters, dream simply of remembering.

The Boston stories are located in the city's South End. We move from Maine's dark glassy lakes and loon calls to a gritty landscape of nightclubs, STD clinics, and funeral parlors. Many of the protagonists make a conscious choice to live apart from their families, to forge a separate path. They reject what they come from and gravitate toward the unknown. Two of these stories are love stories, unlikely interracial couplings that would have been considered controversial at the time. "The Blue Stone," a moving portrait of the artist as a young man, explores the hard choice and practice of living by and for one's writing.

I set out to paper my room with rejections. The size of a wall, the smallness of a slip—even the most elegant, embossed and tinted—in time dulled the romance of failure, and one glum day, when I got six stories back in the same mail, I forswore the ceremonial bonfire I had planned for them, and dropped them in the trash. That night I caught a glimpse of myself in the window—a rich man's decadent son killing time.

Every artist, at some point, has felt the futility of his or her contribution, and at the same time the necessity of it. Skillings does not flinch from self-examination, devastating as it may be.

In addition to recounting one writer's beginnings, "The Blue Stone," like most of the stories set in Boston, is an affecting exploration of the racial politics that marked the city at the time. Skillings discreetly evokes the bigotry that hangs in the air as the Racial Integration Act of 1965 requires forced busing in Boston, as violence erupts and protests rage. His characters embrace idealism and yet instinctively apprehend its limits. Rick, the protagonist of "What Befell Her," enamored of a black dancer, harbors "a constant, cloudy daydream of them uniting for a better world, but he could never tell her this for fear she would think him naive."

In Provincetown we encounter more aspiring writers, working-class locals, draft-dodgers, Vietnam vets. We find ourselves at an all-night party, in a nursing home, in various bars. One story has as its characters Fellows at the Fine Arts Work Center, which, in addition to his fiction, has been one of Roger Skillings's great contributions to the world. He has been an integral part of its growth, serving as trustee and chair of its writing committee for twenty years. His tireless, boundless faith in young writers has changed the destinies of many, including my own. Those who know Skillings admire his dedication to others. Those who come to this collection as a means of introduction will perceive his dedication to his art.

His fiction reflects a lifetime of brave artistic soldiering, of following no fashion or trend. He honors his literary forebearers without affect. He lives and works from the edges, knowing instinctively that this is the writer's place. As a result his work remains untouched by conventional currents, commonplace themes.

These are ripe, rueful tales, crepuscular in spirit and yet urgent, at times blazing with romance, with desperation. A young man, infatuated with a woman he has just spent the night with but barely knows, wants to buy a red ribbon for her hair. A woman craving sex pulls down her stretch pants in a bar, exposing herself. His technique suggests plein-air painting: a writer in the field, observing, absorbing, and sure-handedly capturing what he sees and hears. He is a master of dialogue, knowing how people speak in bars, in barbershops, at parties. He marries his own voice to those of others, always faithfully. Though elemental and at times

astrigent, his stories are characterized by wit and warmth. He is a writer who delights in humankind and at the same time despairs of it. He understands the plight of those who have no one to call their own.

Death looms in these tales, accidental, intentional, inevitable. Some die alone, dimly recalled. But places also die, leaving us equally bereft. Small towns in Maine turn into shopping malls, the hardscrabble bars of Provincetown are replaced by upscale restaurants and shops. Boston's South End, as it is described in this book, scarcely exists today. Skillings describes the emotional impact of that change, the brutality of it.

Art is what does not shift or erode, what outlives us, what accompanies us from beginning to end. The following line in "The Rights of Salvage," describing the fingerprinting of a group of fifth-grade boys who have been caught stealing iron, perhaps alludes to this idea: "Our unique whorls would follow us through life, and nothing we did wrong would remain unknown or ever be forgotten." Self-expression identifies the artist, tethering him to the world. If all art is a form of doing wrong, a breaking of the rules, then the same could be said of the work of Roger Skillings—unique whorls that mark both these pages and the reader, stories that will not go unknown, or be forgotten. ❏

—Jhumpa Lahiri