Interview with Feature Writer/Poet Tom Sheehan

Tom Sheehan's work first appeared in Tryst, Issue III: "Falling Down Jack, a Study," "Thomas, Thomas" and "Sign on the Wall"--a short story and two poems, respectively. Tom's stories and poetry take me to places that invite me to explore relationships, meaning, memories and the beauty of the human spirit. The experiences linger long after I have finished reading the stories and I catch myself searching for these characters in my own life. That is effective story telling. Of course, there is still craft to consider, "How does he do it?" My rebuttal to such inane questions is this: if you must ask the magician for the secret to his magic, then it is no longer magic. But, careful analysis of his work must be noted. For one, Tom's attention to detail is rich and near flawless so the reader is able to visualize the scenes unfold before his eyes without having to "fill in" the gaps. His character development is impeccable, fleshed out so dynamically that they become very real, believable. His command of language is one to be admired; the narration is smooth and the element of suspense is subtle but strong enough to pull it through to a satisfying end. Never one to embellish or exaggerate the grotesque, Tom puts his characters under a very warm human light and every reader can find something of himself or herself reflected in these characters. Whether the main character's name is Jack Winters, Skink Hanscombe, Hugh "Wingsy" Menzies, or John R. Slack, Leonard the blind man, the author treats them all equally with compassion, empathy and dignity through the eyes of an omniscient narrator.

Tom's own bio in which he revealed, "In 2001 [he] met four comrades he has not seen since 1951 in Korea" piqued my interest. First of all, I liked the fact that Tom shared something personal about himself; that he wasn't such a self-absorbed writer that he couldn't reach out; rather, he struck me as a person who was very caring, warm and approachable. Then, there is my own personal history of having been born in North Korea and twice orphaned; something struck a chord in me to seek out Tom's own accounts and experiences in the country I was born. In the story, "John R. Slack, Comrade" the narrator is searching for a long-lost comrade. I saw parallels to my own life in which I had sought my family's roots in vain. With Jack Winters and Skink Hanscombe, two social misfits living on the fringes of society, I saw irony in which I had spent much of my life as a recluse and a self-proclaimed exile. These stories disturbed me to no end. I will commend, that is the power of story telling at its best. With all foresaid, I am proud and honored to present Tryst's Feature Writer/Poet, Tom Sheehan.

Mia: Tom, I know that you have lived most, if not, all your life in Massachusetts and your grandfather, John Igoe, encouraged and inspired you to read. For the benefit of our readers, would you recount the story about your grandfather and tell us a little about your family's background. I'm thinking Sheehan is an Irish name?

Tom: John Igoe came here at ten years of age, alone, the family's first sailor, because hunger and death were on the loose in Ireland. He was a survivor and roustabout worker and reader until his family started. He was perceptive of all of his children and grandchildren, giving my brother Jim math problems (Jim became a GE plant manager, then had other plants) and he read poetry to me, (the "voice" being asserted inside). I can hear him yet, in this very room where my computer is now housed, or hear my own voice saying, "I've lost you so many times, let you/Slip into the bare consciousness/Of February or September days, my skin/More at reading than eyes, forgetting/The phenomenon of your voyage –/Ten, alone, family-sanctioned/To be the first of its Irish sailors,/Cast out by rude vegetables,

economy;/You must have pained at the coming,/A scout ahead of the horde./Here you sank a pick in hardpan,/Poured your brow into great red/Neckerchiefs, laid a railroad, a canal,/Built someone's empire in Manhattan,/Thrust nine children into Massachusetts./A thousand times I've walked the ground/You walked on, trod your rounds,/Your aspirations, found your dreams/Brick-hard at intersections, side roads,/Left you marginally, my own feet tinkered."

Mia: Had your grandfather not been such a big influence in directing you towards literature, do you think you would have gone in that direction anyway and ultimately become a writer?

Tom: Of course, the genes were in place, something calling on me across a distance, or across a thin line of pleasure. It would have been another voice, a poem where the hair stood up on the back of my neck, a story come alive on the page. One of them would have kicked the can open.

Mia: When writing fiction and poetry what are the key differences to each genre do you feel takes place in the process? For instance, do feel that one requires more of the analytical side of the brain as opposed to the creative side?

Tom: When an idea "happens" it finds its own way. I am convinced of that. And that way makes certain demands on me. I don't have names for them, but they work on me. I used to have five old typewriters kicking around (in the cellar, in the garage, in the den, etc.) and when I walked away from one I'd leave a typed line on an otherwise blank page, knowing it was working in me, waiting for my return. Sometimes the results were pleasant.

Mia: Which genre do you prefer to write?

Tom: I think it's as simple as the "room" I'm in at the time, the room of the house that I call Tom's. It has a number of rooms and a number of voices. It's still a mystery. I hope it stays that way. I'm just a tenant here.

Mia: In your interview with 3AM's editor, Guillaume Destot, July 2001, (http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/jul2001_ts_interview.html), when asked, "Do you read memoirs/autobiographies, and do you value "truthfulness" in such writing?" you answered, *If truthfulness is telling it like it is, yes. The current trend of creative nonfiction gives leeway but it's difficult if one departs too far from the traveled road. Then it becomes fiction.*

First, I understood your answer to be that you value truthfulness in memoirs and autobiographies. But does your appreciation for truth also apply to fiction? Then, how close should fiction flirt with truth?

And by "traveled road" I'm assuming you're referring to experience; therefore, do you approve of writing that doesn't "speak" from experience?

Tom: Truth in fiction is often akin to possibility or the stretch of the mind to possibility. All I have written is rooted in what I know, where I've been, who I know. I fear I can't "speak" from elsewhere; I don't have that capacity. I'm not sure I want it. I'm a farmer who tells stories.

Mia: In that same interview, when queried:

"Is there a reason why some of your stories involve characters who have been irremediably hurt (*One Oh for Tillie; A Toast for Skink; Falling-down Jack, A Study*)? Is it just the natural flow of your inspiration or do you think that literature ought to give a place to the weak, the silent and the forgotten?"

Your answer: *Literature damn well better give them all a shot, for frailty is ours without a doubt and will ever be with us. All our heroes are vulnerable, or they are Supermen. To me they are all remarkable people for one reason or another. Are they here for me, by me? Who knows, but at the end of Jack Winters I say if perhaps I do not remember him, or his like, he will not have been. That is crushing to me. There but for the grace of God, as said. I am warmed thinking of them, of their being real or imaginary regardless of stature, position, influence. I remember my comrades from Korea, here or gone, and the frailest imaginable soldier of all, frightened and glassy-eyed and knowing he is hapless, one foot onto the soil at D-Day, going down, but not to be forgotten, not here.*

I must tell you, I don't view your characters as "irremediably hurt" or downtrodden. Jack Winters, or Skink, or even Leonard, are proud, self sufficient in their own way. I view them as nonconformists who haven't given up on life but on the social conventions of their time. In some ways, they were radical, perhaps more courageous by their unwillingness to rely on the security afforded by social structure.

What I find in your stories are characters that serve as backgrounds to the narrator's search for meaning. The ever inquisitive and sensitive narrator observing and then remembering the different experiences presented to him. He's mystified by these characters more than he is obsessed with them. I am not convinced that these characters would not have existed had it not been for you writing about them. Of course they existed. What you have done is given them a spotlight and brought them to life in such a manner that they become acquainted with your readers. But more importantly, I find that the central theme to many of your stories involves "Man's Search for Meaning" to echo Viktor Frankl.

Would you agree with my assessment, or do you think it's wrapped up too neatly?

Tom: Yuh, that's kind of neat, I guess. I agree with the notion that I'm mystified by these characters or their composites, because of their innate grip on me. They do not let go, or the idea of them does not let go. I heard a writer say one night, talking about writing to a group, "Find out where the crazies live in your town and write about them." I have done that all my life, knowing the uniqueness of them. They, like all of us, were frail, were vulnerable. The thing is, I remember them, am haunted by them, and desperately want them to be remembered. I read a poem about Jack Winters at a public library one night, forty or more years after he had died, and a lady walked up to me and said, "I remember Jack, just like you do." It blew my mind!

Mia: Also in that interview, you stated that you were a fan of Whitman as well as Proust. I just want to point out that Proust is one of my all-time favorite writers. I find much of your writing is paced in the same style of Proust. But your storytelling is more like that of London, Singer, Cheevers, Melville, Dickens, McCullers…to name a few. When I speak of pacing, I'm alluding to the perception that one has to literally slow down to absorb, to digest what is being implied and told to the reader. Your stories are not to be taken lightly. They are full of depth and pathos.

I think, and I say this cautiously, that too much of literature today is created for shock value and an immediate reaction. When the word "dysfunctional" was coined, it seemed that every writer, movie star, artist were pounding out confessional elements in their stories and I found most of it distasteful.

When writing poetry or fiction, what topics do you avoid? What complaints (if any) do you have against current trends and contemporary writing?

Tom: Let's face it, there are a lot of things I don't know enough about to write about. That can be termed avoidance if you want. The truth is I ought to read more but I have to make time decisions; Do I read or do I write? I am faced with that, the mortal me. I have not determined trends in current writing, because it would demand a lot of work for true assessment. I like the works of Richard Yates, Wendell Berry, Reynolds Price, James Lee Burke, Bill Bryson, Elmore Leonard, Seamus Heaney, Dan'l Shanahan, Mickey Hood. I like the expression you put up, "slow down to absorb, to digest what is being implied." Some short stories I've read have a long run in me, like The Scrivener for you. I hope mine do for some readers. Short stories are not gunshots, not to me.

At the same time there is a trend to control writing, viz, "Language Police." That book takes a look at lists of many words that certain groups tend to squash in books. That is frightening.

Mia: I read an editor's response to the question, "What's your exact definition of 'fiction'*?"*

Prose narrative that describes events that have not actually occurred. Fiction may be based on real-life experiences, and may have real-life historical events occurring in the background, but it is not literally true; no reasonably experienced reader could mistake it for a literally true narrative. Thus fiction excludes all forms of memoir, autobiography, and prose journalism.

Remember, the test of fiction is whether it sounds like fiction. If it sounds like memoir, autobiography or journalism, then as far as we're concerned, that's what it is.

To be quite frank, the answers had me a little confused. It is my belief that fiction is anything that could be "reasonably" true, because it is *believable*. You have Gabriel Garcia Marquez whose writing you couldn't mistake for a memoir, but why not? What if **100 Years of Solitude** were based upon his "realities"; therefore, experiential, and would that make his novel less fictional?

Then, you have memoirs that sound like fiction. Because we're all so fallible to memory loss, how in the world could anyone be completely faithful to memory? My answer would be that all writing is fiction. Perhaps, one wants to argue for syndication, journalism, but consider Yellow Journalism.

What is your definition of fiction, Tom and how would you defend it?

Tom: I could not presume to make such a bold statement as to what fiction is. Above I said, "Truth in fiction is often akin to possibility or the stretch of the mind to possibility." I can play with tags if need be. Some of my memoirs can be called short

stories, just as well as some short stories can be called memoirs. It makes no difference to me, because all that material has come out of what I am and I am what I have been.

Mia: I've noticed a current trend in favor of shorter pieces of fiction, poetry…say under 1,000 words for fiction and around 50 lines of poetry in many guidelines. The demand for shorter pieces in the form of flash fiction and a hybrid of haiku seems to be supported by writers themselves who admit that they don't like to read long poems or stories. I think it's shortsighted assumption on the part of editors to restrict writing to any length. Either one is, or is not a reader. Better to say that the story did not interest him/her than to say that there is neither the time nor place for longer stories, novellas, novels.

Tom, have you run across many publications that have refused some of your longer stories due to exceeding in length? How do you feel about the guidelines that state "stories should not exceed five pages in length" for instance?

Tom: I assume the stories being rejected are not liked or admired by editors, not that they don't fit. That does not bother me, work not being liked or admired. I have my own likes and dislikes. One editor had said 8,000 was a max on words and when I questioned it, the editor said, "It's just ballpark." So a 10,000-word piece was used. Stories or poems make their demands on me, and are not based on size. I love long poems and have published a decent number of them. I can picture some editors not wanting to bother with long pieces because it takes a lot more work on their part; they surely have to proofread things on their own, and not take some lazy writer's word for it. That would be haphazard at best. Writing is hard work. Once, years ago, at a seminar the moderator asked for the definition of writing, and I said, from the audience, "Writing is putting the ass of your pants on the ass of your chair and getting done." For that moment, the definition held. I keep to it.

Mia: If you were to teach a writing seminar, how would you teach and what advice would you have for writers hungry for direction? Would you emulate the teachings of your grandfather?

Tom: I would have to look into students' eyes, read them, before I could dare to think I was teaching them. I'd read to them the words that stirred me; John Igoe's words, my father's words, an esteemed colleague's words. I think it was Stevens who said, "Who will know us in the time to come. Let them say there was a burst of fragrance from black branches."

I remember to this minute, his eyes on me, the smile on his face, the smell of his pipe tobacco, the span of his office, the picture on the wall behind his desk, a college prof saying to me, on my return from Korea, "Have you ever read this?" Out in front of me he tossed J.F. Nims' 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 gray 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." It's what I remember of that moment. It has never gone away. My life changed then and there. That man, John Norton, knew what he was up to. As did Johnny Igoe. Thank the good Lord.

Mia: Where do you want to see your writing go? Are there any particular awards, accolades that you wish to aim for?

Tom: Nothing hits me more than a deeply respected friend's words, him 63 years in teaching, saying that a few lines in a poem of mine "might be just about the best thing you've ever written." He does not toss lightly the words he has measured. I am honored by his conviction. And there is a new mystery novel coming out this year, "Death for the Phantom Receiver," and a book of poetry, "This Rare Earth and Other Flights." I'd like to see them do well.

Mia: Is there anything else that you'd like to share with our readers; any other members of your family, children who write and have been published? Do you have particulars?

Tom: I continually extol and honor my family (my wife and children make me proud and humble), my hometown of Saugus, MA and my comrades from Korea. If anyone out there knows anything about Jack Slack, there's a core of us that would love to know. Knocking on the doors of houses on Van Schoick Street in Albany, NY a few years ago, I could feel him in the air, his childhood, his going away. It still shakes me up.

Eldest son Timothy, working his farm in Maine, once said in a poem about a ghost town out west, "For sixty years the sun tried to break in," and an editor wrote to me and asked, "Is this submitter related to you? It smells like Sheehan from way back." I was as excited as one could get. Son Matt, former hockey player, just went from business in Frisco, to visit his FBI pal down south, another ex-hockey player who incidentally had a room in our home for two years. A great kid too! Matt (28) has been awarded a full scholarship at a graduate business school, a monthly stipend, a graduate assistantship, and the presidency of an on-campus organization on supply chains, which is his specialty. Jamie (25), master carpenter, two credits from his degree at night school, just took an apartment with his sweetheart. He writes songs with his army pal Shaun Finn. They are tigers and could wear your new logo, as could Betsy (27) who was here all day yesterday with Alexa (5), Bobby (2 on my birthday Mar 5), and Travis (8 months), swelling this house again with joy. Laurie, in USPO, has one son fishing the Atlantic and one who is a head-knocking high school running back and defensive end I watch in every game.

Mia: Tom, I thank you kindly for granting Tryst this interview. Along with your writing, it has been illuminating and one of the most rewarding moments of being an editor. The Tiger logo specifically created for this issue is dedicated to the memory of those who fought in the Korean conflict. There are no words to express the debt of gratitude owed to those who sacrificed their lives, their youth and their dreams in the name of peace. Thank you.