## *An Introduction and Sampler*

After she read Kenneth Koch's *I Never Told Anybody*, a fine book about teaching creative writing to residents of a nursing home, Marylen Mann of CEMREL and Arts for Older Adults invited me to lead ten creative writing sessions at Webbe Senior Citizen Apartments and the Jewish Center for the Aged in St. Louis. For the first two sessions I read and talked about poems by Theodore Roethke, Gary Snyder and Jerome Rothenberg, having in mind teaching poetry writing. Both weeks I noticed that the participants' comments were frequently stories and anecdotes. Having long been interested in oral narration, I decided to have them tell stories from their own lives.

To begin the third session I spoke about "the elderly" and "the elders", remarking that traditional ways of life revered the elders for their wisdom and enlightenment. I said that frequently the elders told stories from life from which the listener might learn. I told them that in my opinion *they* were the elders and I wanted to hear their stories. A few remarks of agreement, a few smiles, and Mrs. Jimmie Moore, said, "Now you're ready to listen and learn!" From that time on my visits have been a dip into the deepest springs of living memory and wisdom.

I taped that and all following sessions, recording the conversations I thought would yield stories and transcribed the portions of the tape that still sounded good. The rules I set were that I could delete material, rearrange phrases and the order of sentences; I added nothing except

where the reader would be bewildered without a word or two.

Storytelling is a familiar, comfortable activity for the nine people whose stories follow. They are masters of narration, skilled in stirring and holding the listener's interest. Their stories distill a life-time's living and storytelling.

Our knowledge of the past consists of general information about historical figures and the broad sweep of events enlivened by an occasional picture. Described by a skillful storyteller possessing intimate knowledge and first-hand experience, the details of sights and events of past times suddenly live again in the mind's eye:

Joe Phelan: I was a young guy working at Witte Hardware Company. Them days, that was in 1910, when I'd go to work I'd walk all through the produce market along Third Street. You could buy a rabbit for 15 cents and you could get all you'd want. There would be barrels full of them right out on the sidewalk. They were shot. They still had the skins and heads on. The saloons would buy them, too. Don't you think they didn't.

The thoughtful and imaginative reader can infer a good deal from scenes such as these, especially when story adds to story.

A similar effect is discovered in Joe Klein's story. I met Joe too late for me to include more than this:

My father worked for Anheuser-Busch. Augustus Busch, the man with the goatee, used to have a little tavern right outside the gates of the brewery. On Saturday when payday came, he'd have a great big stein of beer. And every employee, when he came through the gate, stopped and had a little sip with Mr. Busch from the stein. He gave each kid a bag full of pretzels. That's what I went for.

A man stood at the gate with a pencil and paper and

checked off each worker's name and gave him a little manila envelope about two inches wide. There was a five dollar gold piece in there. That's what the workers earned.

Then my father took the gold piece to the bank and the teller weighed it. You *never* got five dollars. All you had to do was rub your finger across the coin and you took off two or three cents worth of gold. You know how big a five dollar gold piece is? It looked like a penny.

The plain-spoken word portrays a businessman of historical importance, but from the unusual perspective of a working man's five-year old son. We also discover characteristics of a gold coin and a banking practice of seventy-five years ago: minute, telling details.

Through plot, incident, phrase, descriptive detail and characterization of persons and events, each speaker's voice animates the stories as easily as sunlight passes through a windowpane.

Accustomed to a fairly narrow range of literary types, and especially in a single work, readers are surprised at the variety of forms available to the skillful narrator. Frank Fershter's comments on the subjects of jealousy and mooching demonstrate how clearly emotions and behavior can be explained. Iola Buckner's story about leaving the South for St. Louis, the longest piece collected, could easily be the scenario for another "Days of Heaven". The collection contains autobiography, oral narration, poetry, history, short stories, aphorisms, antique slang, vignettes, folk wisdom, parable, sermon, monologue and conversation.

I showed the people unedited and edited transcripts of their stories. Each person preferred the edited version, feeling that it more accurately conveyed what had been intended. It was agreed that I would shape the stories and determine the order of each story's appearance. It is

instructive to examine successive drafts of a story to see what difference the alterations make.

As told, the story is clear:

You meet fellas when you're bumming. When you're young, you're careless. I wouldn't bum now, couldn't. When you're little like me and you ain't got no weight, you better keep your mouth shut.

I'm Irish. That happened with Irish guys. Oh man, some of them were mean! If somebody'd say anything they didn't like. If they were alive today, they'd be fighting every half hour. They were, a lot of them, mechanics.

But when a few words are cut, one idea rephrased and the order of the last two sentences reversed, the themes of meanness and change become apparent:

Oh man, some of them Irish guys were mean! If somebody's say anything they didn't like! They were, a lot of them, mechanics. If they were alive today, they'd be fighting every half hour.

Through cadence of phrase and sentence the written words recreate essential, nearly-perfect human voices, duplicating the effect the spoken words had on me as I listened.

The manners of simple life guide the essential feelings and speak a plain, emphatic language. There is a daily beauty in the people who live such lives. Entwined in the fabric of the stories' events and words, this beauty pictures active yet simple, imitatable virtues within the grasp of each person:

Sophie Dricker: You know what the Rabbi says to me? If everyone will feel the same way and do the things like I do then the world would be beautiful.

Joe Phelan: I've seen the times when I've worried about something and it never happened. That's a waste of

time. That puts me in mind of patience. Patience—boy, that's a word. Patience is a gift and humility is wonderful. Them two things, if you practice them you'll go to heaven, sure.

By speaking plainly and with understanding about the acts of one's life, "encircled by the sounding music of living speech, the speaker reaches the starry heaven of the spirit." [Martin Buber, *I and Thou*.] Indeed, the stories of loving kindness inhabit the same realm where wisdom and spiritual knowledge reside.

At the seventh session the storytellers agreed to talk with me until enough material was collected for a book. Two remarks demonstrate the strength of motivation the storytellers brought to the agreement. After a particularly moving account, Sophie Dricker said, "Do you know why I wanted to tell you this? So when you write this down and when I die I want my grandchildren to read it in a book." Freda Berns' comment, made three days before she died, dramatizes what had grown between us through the project. Interested to discover if she regarded herself as a storyteller, I asked if she considered herself one. Playing on my being *Dr.* Metz, Freda said:

If you say it, then it must be. The doctor knows. You know what people say? They say that I don't talk. I sit and listen to everything and I don't say a word. (Laughs.) I sit by a table in the dining room with four people and I don't say a word. To you, I talk.