

A SHORT HISTORY OF SIX MILES OF THE TROUT RIVER

(Excerpts)

From Marshall's to the Lines may be described
as the centre of the Trout river settlement,
for within these six miles the Americans mostly
abounded and the first Old Countrymen took up land
in the early 1820s.

—Robert Sellar

*A History of Huntingdon and of the Seignories
of Beauharnois and Chateauguay (1888)*

1.

If you don't write
your own history
no one will write it
for you, or if they do
they'll describe events
not as they happened,
but changing names,
dates, places, or delete events
and people altogether,
images cut from photographs,
newcomers supplanting
the old, people who don't care
about the past but committed
to their version of truth;

now, this is what I aim to do:
write what I know
—the soul's archive—
psyche involved in all things;

not revisions of revisions
but the poetry of events,
what happens in the space
between mythology and story,
the space of history and dream
separated by a thin curtain
of being.

2.

I bought a house
in June 1979,
a house we later
named “The Cedars”,
located on Route 138
sixty miles south
of Montreal—Trout
River running parallel
to the highway
from our home
to the American border—
our home across the road
from Marshall’s school house;
the Marshall family home,
was torn down or destroyed
by fire, and a small white
bungalow built
on the site
behind which
is Marshall’s cemetery,
grave stones sinking
yearly into oblivion.
This area, at the northern
end of six miles of the river,
was once called Marshallville,
although this name

is almost forgotten,
it is where the Trout River
Post Office was located,
and where I lived
until we returned to the city
in June 1997. My time
at Trout River was spent
in domestic life,
raising my son,
paying a mortgage,
a house to maintain,
and work to keep
family happy,
write some poems,
then a divorce
and a second marriage,
finding love in middle age.
This is where I lived
those years, time allotted
to me, filled now
with memories; all of this
a part of my journey,
those years spent
in the currency of time,
for which there is no return.

3.

Never deep enough to swim far,
on summer mornings
I waded the Trout River
near the Morrison Bridge,
and when the water was waist deep
I plunged in and swam underwater,
inches from the sandy river bottom.

The Trout River flows north
from the Adirondack Mountains
in New York State
then crosses the border
into Quebec, and when it rains
in the mountains,
the current changes
from being hardly noticeable
to a rushing torrent
eroding the river's banks
and flooding adjoining fields;
trees, branches, and leaves
collect where the river curves
and sand bars form
until the next big rain,
in a month or next year,
sweeps them away
overflowing the steep eroded banks.

Mrs. Robert Ford,
who settled here
in the fall of 1828
tells us, *The banks
of the Trout River
were different from
what they are now,
being green and grassy.
Cutting down trees
removed the roots
that preserved their
shape, and the water
washing away the loose
earth, the banks gradually
became as they are now,
broken and unsightly.*

Not "unsightly" to me,
the river was a place

of peace and quiet:
the Trout River
(where, Robert Sellar writes,
trout or salmon never swam)
and where in summer
I'd sit on a lawn chair
propped uneasily
on a large flat rock
in the river—maybe the river was
fifty feet wide and three feet
deep at that point—and I'd watch
red-finned suckers gather,
yard long fish
swimming around
where I sat, looking up
at me, mouths emerging
from the water
making sucking noises;
I'd stand on this rock
doing exercises,
turning at the waist,
bending, and turning again,
thinking of the inevitable
decline of the life
I was living, and fish
observing me, a foreign
creature, of no importance
in their scheme of things.

The field
behind the house
of our neighbour
Donalda Smith,
rented out to a local farmer,
his crop of cow corn
grown with pesticides
and chemical fertilizers;

I watched the barren
fenced-in acres
from my bedroom window
when the field lay fallow,
year after year,
only a few patches of weeds
would grow, the earth depleted.
James Marshall,
who once lived across the road
from Donald's property,
recalls living here in the 1820s: *Our crops
for many years were splendid.
A stook, 12 sheaves, gave
a bushel of wheat. Deer
were plenty, and in
the morning we often
found them with
the cattle.*