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UPHILL WITH ARCHIE: A Son's Journey

By William H. MacLeish

Simon & Schuster. 287 pp.

Biographers seek facts but autobiographers pursue the truth, the tone and feel of a life. And, said Frank Lloyd Wright, "The truth is more important than the facts."

With memoir, the truth is what is remembered, not necessarily what actually happened. In this sensitively observed account, poet Archibald MacLeish's son William confesses, "I wouldn't fully trust my memory for a minute," yet he captures a wealth of fact along the way.

From the start, we sense William MacLeish's eyes will be kind, his voice lyrical: "I could see myself as a boy and then as a young man, sprawled on my back at right angles to my father with my head up on his ribs, listening to his voice roaming around under his shirt." Even remembered anger takes on Horatian dignity: "I had other names for him when he ticked me off--'Arse Poetica' was one."

Oscillating feelings would come easily to a son facing William's dilemma: living beside a giant, will he lift me toward the sun or make me languish in his shadow?

Archibald MacLeish was certainly a giant throughout his almost 90 years. Of Scottish descent, the poet faced perpetual choices between high and low roads, and inevitably took the high. His Yale 1915 yearbook notes: "Football player, captain of the water polo team, Skull and Bones, Phi Beta Kappa, poet, member of several cultural clubs, voted 'Most Brilliant' by his classmates." Returning from the Great War, his gift for creative expression survived Harvard law school, which he completed "'highest in scholarship, conduct and character' among his classmates and gave 'evidence of the greatest promise.'"

He fulfilled that promise as poet, public servant and educator.

Law offered challenge, yet Archie, as his son always calls him, sailed for Paris to write poetry. Paris was not yet the orgiastic America-in-exile of Fitzgerald but the artistically teeming soil of Picasso, Joyce and Malraux: "gifted youngsters... judging themselves by measures they would never match."

At first, Archie's work "smacked of Victorian ideas of poetry he had absorbed at Yale." He disliked his writing and sought innovators like Cummings, striving for "a style made of lucidity and concreteness." He found his voice and by 1926 published the disproportionately anthologized "Ars Poetica," which relieved the cranial pressure of lit majors by declaring: "a poem should not mean/But be."

After he began writing for *Fortune* magazine, Archie's poetry deepened with what journalism showed him of the world. By 1936, the New York Times called him "the most influential poet writing in America today." The three-time Pulitzer winner felt driven by the questions "Why do I owe? For what? To whom?" and "a sense of social rage. That is, rage at injustice." At FDR's request, Archie became assistant secretary for cultural and public affairs. "With Roosevelt, Archie had the chance to serve a cause he believed in passionately," but the Gollum spell of power grew seductive and Archie left for an endowed Harvard chair in 1949, where his only regret mentioned by William is never having John Updike in his writing workshop.

Even reflecting from his deathbed, he viewed life as an artwork, one ready to end, and said to William's daughters: "I'm tired of this play."

How did William walk in such large footsteps? Better than he appears to feel. With candor rather than self-pity, he saw himself "a little boy playing at being an adult, not wanting to know, but knowing, that he is the least of the company." He felt inferior to not only Archie but his older brother, Ken, who wrote for *Life* magazine and even whose misfortunes were tinged with celebrity: his front teeth knocked out in a hockey game by the future Shah of Iran.

More than anyone, though, his mother shrank William's self-image. He describes Ada MacLeish with admiration but nothing that feels like love. Ada emerges as an oddly intriguing character whose story we wish we knew from the inside, as, from a son's perspective she grows sympathetic but cold, watching her husband's triumphs and children's growth while wishing either could be hers, a concert singer whose aspirations suffocated within the narrow walls of a gifted woman's actual prospects at the time.

William reports, "Ada had learned as a child how to run things: houses, kitchens, guests, men." She dressed for dinner in floor-length gowns, necklaces and rings, heavily perfumed, and "had a drill sergeant's ability to turn my knee joints to jelly," and made no secret that Ken was her favorite. Ada boasted that Hemingway once gurgled through his characteristic protest-too-much testosterone that she was the only woman he'd wanted to sleep with that he hadn't slept with.

As mother, she was ice. When William's dachshund died, she offered as consolation: "It was only a dog." "Lacking a memory of being held and nurtured by the woman who bore me, I naturally was backward in the arts of holding and nurturing a woman I yearned for." William names no woman in his life other than his current wife, poet Elizabeth Libbey.

William's life holds its share of triumph. His calling was as environmental journalist, chiefly as writer on marine ecology for *Oceanus*. He has worked at both Cornell and Yale. And, if Eliot is right that the only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility, William sounds bountifully wise, for always he claims he has soared on his father's wings.

He and Archie in his father's final decade settled "into the closest relationship I have ever had with a man." By that point Archie "had shrunk a couple of inches to medium height, my height, but he was not stooped. He was seemly." So too Archie's poetic stature. "His fame began to flake and fall like old housepaint," says William of this poet who suffers no devaluing of esteem but a gradual fading from view behind the thickening veil of years, no less regarded though less read. Archibald MacLeish moves toward Spenser and Herbert and Hopkins, names we sense we should honor but can't remember why, though even a cursory glimpse at their poetry would remind us.

Here, William speaks of both father and poet never analytically, always appreciatively, with love, which accounts for this memoir's poignant beauty. Odd, considering Archie's advice on child-rearing: "You can't do much for a child.... Too much fingering of children doth rot them young. Feed em, keep em alive, respect em and teach them to ask." Debatable as parenting, it echoes the inquisitive spirit of MacLeish's poetry. As with Shakespeare and all estimable poets, we don't go to MacLeish for answers but for direction in forming our most important questions. William MacLeish shows the compassion a life so shaped can produce.

