

Turning the tide through the written word

Fisherpoet tells tales of his life as a fisherman

BY RAY GARCIA

Toby Sullivan became a commercial fisherman at 19 years old and has worked in the industry for 45 years.

Native to South Windsor, Connecticut, Sullivan left the East Coast seeking adventure. After hitchhiking across the U.S, he ran out of money in Kodiak, Alaska; a place he and his family have called home ever since.

At the time of Sullivan's arrival, the Kodiak King Crab Fishery was experiencing a boom, creating a surplus of jobs and drawing in fishermen, far and wide. With empty pockets and a strong work ethic, Sullivan joined the crab fishing business and became a deckhand on a boat named The Gladys.

"I was really young and real green, I didn't know what I was doing," he said.

With each fishing trip lasting between three or four months during winter, Sullivan found himself face-to-face with one of the most unpredictable environments in the world: the Bering Sea. Due to sub-

zero temperatures and, on average, 40-foot tall waves, fishermen had to always be situationally aware, even during periods of sleep, Sullivan said.

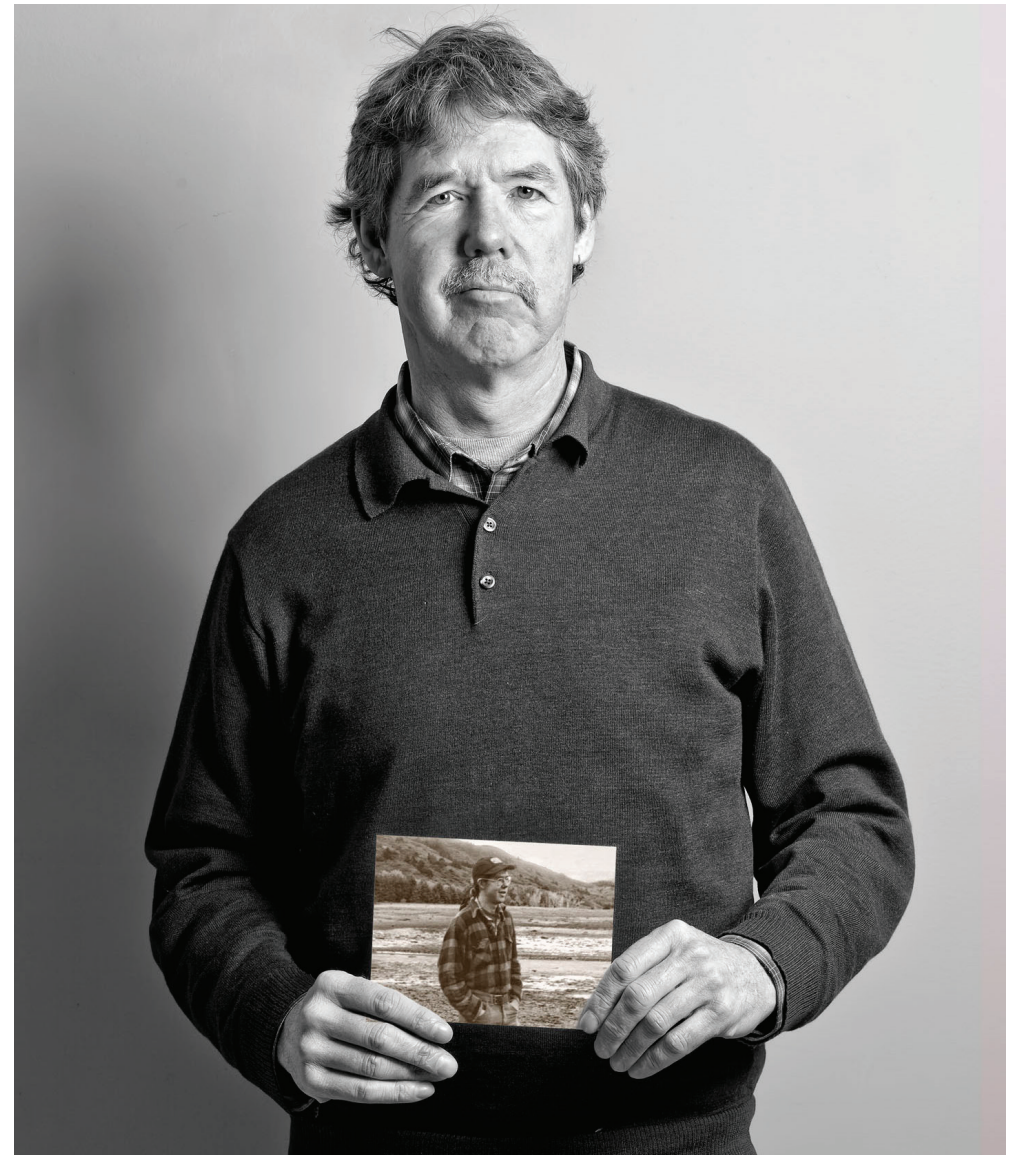
In the early '80s, Sullivan bought a salmon permit hoping to swap between crab fishing in the winter and salmon set-netting in the summer. On his first salmon fishing trip, accompanied by his younger brother and a friend, Sullivan trekked to Uganik Bay on the western shores of Kodiak Island.

"The salmon fishing, to us, that summer was like we died and gone to heaven," he said. "The contrast between the Bering Sea in the winter and Uganik Bay in the summer was pretty amazing. There's a real difference."

Sullivan still goes salmon fishing but has stopped crabbing — though that hasn't stopped him from writing nonfiction stories and poems adapted from his experiences out at sea.

Sullivan received a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Alaska Anchorage and a master's degree in creative writing from Antioch University in Los Angeles. His academic background further advanced his writing craft and

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Toby Sullivan's 'When Crab Was King' portrait.

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Sullivan and his son, Abraham, sail across Uganik Bay in 1996.