

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

Richard Moore

MY EARLY CAREER AS A POET:

How i blew it at THE NEW YORKER

Dear New Yorker editors,
This can be taken as fiction, though it isn't.

Your one-time contributor,
Richard Moore

THE NEW YORKER

We regret that we are unable to use the enclosed material. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to consider it.

Sincerely,

The Editors

MY EARLY CAREER AS A POET:

How i blew it at THE NEW YORKER

Like other boys and young men afflicted with the urge to write and publish poetry, I felt the ambition someday to see my poems in *The New Yorker*, that epitome of reputation, style, and elegance. But my life in this respect had a somewhat unusual beginning. Ambitions and other natural urges were not to be entirely trusted. Like other sons I wanted to please my father, but the father that fate had dealt me was a tangle of unacknowledged contradictions. He was an ignorant boy from the hills of Vermont who avoided being shot at in The First World War by using his degree in engineering to get himself an officer's commission in the part of the army where they test the weapons. His best friend in the army (in which he never left New Jersey) was a young man of German extraction whose sister became my mother.

My father had fierce loyalties. The connection with Germany, where both my mother's parents had been born, led him to an early (and in those days not uncommon) admiration of Adolph Hitler which went nicely with the disgust he harbored for Franklin Delano Roosevelt. After the war he found employment in New York City by a man named Robbins, an older fellow graduate of The University of Vermont, who owned a company that published ten or so small business magazines with names like *The American Printer*, *Advertising and Selling*, *The American Perfumer* (this last with publishing offices in Paris and the custom of paying for advertising in the magazine with "due bills" issued by fancy European hotels. Over the years these "due bills" led to several European trips for my father, his wife, and his growing family.)

My father felt out of place among the wealthy people that now seemed to surround him, but that did not prevent him from taking up residence in Greenwich, Connecticut, one of New York City's poshest suburbs. He was a fiercely ambitious social climber, but the proud New England traditions to which he clung (or pretended to cling) taught him to mock and despise the classes he aspired to join. Inherited wealth in particular drew his fury, but this did not prevent his personal tailor from clothing him at grand expense in suits carefully suited to every peculiarity of his large, well over six-foot-tall body.

As soon as his rising income could bear the burden, he bought a three-acre lot on which he supervised the building of a colonial-style house that dwarfed its neighbors and had ample space for a live-in Negro maid, numerous guests, and a bedroom for Tanta Minna, my mother's maiden aunt, who had become necessary to the household at about the time we moved into the new house.

Mine was the last of our family's three births. I was preceded six years earlier by a brother and a year after that by a sister, to make an ideal American family that would soon be ready to join trips to fancy hotels in Europe. So my arrival five years later came as an unpleasant surprise, at

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least to my father, who took both his duties and his passions with great seriousness.

My mother was an attractive blond woman with the unschooled, slightly inane wit that was expected of women destined for social advancement in those days. She was not as troubled by the new pregnancy as my father, but it was her role to sympathize with his feelings and consider his desires. She took pills, hoping to curtail nature's progress. The pills made her uncomfortable and her doctor angry. He too was an authority in her life, threatening her with dire consequences.

So I was born, and Tanta Minna came to live with us. It was years later that my mother, troubled by the strange behavior of her youngest child, first hinted at, then gradually confessed these events to me out of the feelings of guilt that she felt, fearing that the pills might have affected my development as a fetus.

My early life, indeed my whole life, has been troubled by dyslexia---as it is now called; it had a different name when it first appeared, and no name at all when, as I suspect, my father had it, and by determined acts of will, concealed and overcame it. The dyslexia was of a milder, concealable sort, and I recognized in some of his odd practices steps that he might have been taking---perhaps even unconsciously---to conceal the symptoms.

But matters were different with me. I sensed myself, unlike my father, who was the firstborn, out of place somehow with my family, and to my difficulties, learning how to read, I added a rebellion against learning to read and a secret despair about being "backward." But Tanta Minna forgave all and, much to the annoyance of the rest of the family, especially my father, was outspoken in her witless admiration of me. Childish herself, she loved the spontaneity of children, and my arrival in her last years was a marvelous recompense for her never having had children of her own; and her witless admiration of my early peculiarities may have been a fatal encouragement. I avoided reading and resisted addition and subtraction until well into the 7th Grade, and before that, to the horror of all, clung to disgusting habits like stuffing my freshly laundered little pockets with dirt and earthworms.

This first period of my life was brought to a surprising end by Dr. Bectell, a lady Ph.D. in psychology, whose job was examining, testing, and making recommendations for the problem children in Greenwich's well-financed school system. There was also a teacher, the elderly Miss Munchenbacker, who had had the pleasure of teaching my older brother and sister when they were finishing grade school before they went off to boarding schools for their college-preparatory years. She was troubled by her experience of me and the contrast I made with my siblings. How could it be that this youngest of the same family could be interested and skilled only in woodworking?

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The judgment of Dr. Bectell was even more surprising. The famous Binet IQ, a test given orally, so requiring no knowledge of spelling, testified that my score was nudging the genius category. Around this time I did actually learn how to read. The first books were a series of pop novels about airplane pilots and the flivers they flew in the First World War.

How lucky I was! I had deftly avoided all of children's literature! The next book was a huge project in keeping with my newly acquired genius category: the thousand closely printed pages of H. G. Wells' *An Outline of History*, which took me months, day after day and night after night, reading them at my dyslexic speed of eight or nine pages an hour.

My father loved history, and I supposed at first that he would be pleased, but he surprised me with his fury. Wells was a Fabian Socialist--the worst kind! Did I try to anger my father? Without a doubt; but how sorely hurt I was when I succeeded!

On a deeper level, I was indeed managing to inherit the confusion of his values. As I have mentioned in an earlier account, I began what turned out to be my career as a poet with a passion for mathematics. Boarding school as preparation for college was about to enter my life as well. My brother's recent record at The Loomis Institute for boys had been mediocre, and there was still some question about my backwardness. But my brother had been accepted at Yale, and Loomis allowed me to follow in his path.

But by then it was wartime and things were getting unusual, even at The Loomis Institute. My teacher in Freshman English was the wife of a regular English teacher who had gone to war. She had a wildness about her, that faculty wife, and when she encountered the mathematically inspired wildness with which, after an absurdly long struggle, I dealt with her first standard little theme assignment, she was charmed and read the theme with all its misspellings and other gaucheries to the class. That bit of glory for one who had such small reason to have hopes was the beginning of my literary career (supposing that I have had one).

But the war had still not left us Loomis children alone. The next year it brought us William Skinkle Knickerbocker from The University Of The South, to this day still the home of The Sewanee Review. He was a New Yorker and, proud of his New York Ph.D., was the first Sewanee Review editor to invite well-known contributors and launch the quarterly on the path to the reputation it still enjoys. But the war produced a decline of enrollment at Sewanee, and Knickie, as we called him, had to accept work in the wartime-thinned faculty of Loomis, where---what could be more natural?---he became the faculty advisor of the Loomis literary magazine, The Loom.

And that produced another of my life-changing literary moments---no,

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not just one: an unruly gang of them (that may have owed something to the unhappiness of Knickie's marriage) in the three Loomis years remaining before I followed my brother into Yale, still thinking I might major in mathematics.

My brother was gone before I arrived, following my father's military path and thence his path through the Robbins Publishing Company, which, with Robbins' retirement and death and Robbins' sons' struggles with my father, became The Robbins-Moore Publishing Company, then The Moore-Robbins Publishing Company, then with the Robbins sons bounced out at last, The Moore Publishing Company; and now, with the Plague Of Moores gone, God knows what it's called. The struggle with my father was also the ruin of my brother, who fed the fire in his own way, God rest his soul.

I too was offered, but managed to dodge the opportunity to follow my father's path through the Army. I may have been tempted by his frequent remarks about what fools those life-risking Air Force pilots were---especially the fighter pilots. So, ignoring his offer, I found a way to enlist in The U. S. Air Force's own Aviation Cadets, and a year later, having been the one in my first group of trainees voted to be the one least likely to graduate, was among the poor condemned little group who finally did graduate.

My habit of rebellion whenever I found myself (maybe it was my way of finding myself---as it had been my father's!) had carried me through Loomis, Yale, and now in the Air Force, which I had been obliged to join to avoid the draft that had been revived for the Korean War, years before the Viet Nam debacle, and patriotism was still in command. . . . We had fought our way into the dreadful winter when we were mopping up the North Koreans and suddenly the Chinese entered in overwhelming numbers and put us into full retreat. We new trainees were discussing this awful situation at the beginning of our training, and there was a vociferous fellow holding forth. He could never just say "The Chinese:" each time he mentioned them, he had to call them "The Chinese Communist Aggressors."

Finally I couldn't stand it any longer and quietly asked, "How far are we defenders of freedom away from our own country?" Seven or eight thousand miles, we all agreed. "And how far are those 'Chinese Communist Aggressors' away from theirs?"

The coiner of the phrase never answered my question, but posed a question of his own: "What are you---some kind of Commie or something?"

It was a night of unanswered questions.

But what does all this have to do with getting published in The New Yorker? More perhaps than one might guess.

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I didn't much like the things I was expected to learn at Yale, and my interview with the Yale Lit went badly. So I used my Yale years to develop my skills at writing term papers and to wonder about my failure as a poet; and the reader has just had a taste of the sort of rhetorical skills I developed in the Air Force.

The years that followed were years of preparation, as it turned out, and they reached their climax in 1962, when, after two years of the most intense work (or was it play?) I had ever undertaken, I finished what I finally titled *The Mouse Whole*: 6500 lines in rhyming trimeter couplets, the autobiographical of the life of a sewer mouse with a longing for beauty, completed when I was 34 years old and finally published in its entirety 34 years after that in 1996. In 1965, three years after finishing the mouse epic, I sold and published four poems in *The New Yorker*. Two, maybe not the best two, follow herewith:

SUBURB HILLTOP

Withdrawn from layers of upper air, ice-blue and clear,
the city wrinkles down under its mist
as if in fear,
as if it wished to hide
under those smokey threads which twist
up in the winter afternoon.
They've spun a huge, bruise-colored cocoon
with all the city's larval movements there inside.
I watch a trolley like a worm explore,
halting, over the valley floor,
the lice of traffic and, far away,
black-feelered freighters squatting on the bay . . .
The smoke's cocoon, half curled
back, shows me this new wriggling world,
framed
where my eye has aimed
and pinned it to the valley floor,
visible through my metaphor.
My urban larva, bared to the sharp view
of such iced weapons and the skies,
what will we do
now? Flutter into butterflies?

MAKERS

Dog footprints in cement,
the pats half filled with dust,
stop me to see where they went,
pressed in the hardened crust--
a big dog plainly, yelping and flying
over that nice smooth new-laid sidewalk drying.
Into the leveled mire,
what mad pursuit, what races

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after a screeching tire
have left these fitting traces?
He's no doubt dead now. Was he caught?
Punished? These dogprints tease me out of thought.
Or does he, stiff with age,
still snooze by winter fires,
forgetting youthful rage
and puppy-wild desires
to get the feel of gooey walk---
to plunge in, show off, make the neighbors talk?
Too spirited to mind
his betters, he stayed nimble
and leapt, and left behind
this gay, enduring symbol.
I stand, well tamed, charmed by residual
traces of an untamed individual.
We men must standardize
the things we shape and touch.
Modesty in us shies . . .
we daren't reveal too much.
But be it sidewalk, poem, street,
our souls are always in it, or our feet.
In this dull human plane
an artist's hairy hand!
His shapes, we see, contain
dry pools of dust and sand,
which years will harden and the form
they took preserve---once pulsing, soft, and warm---
a fossil, almost made.
You see in deathless stone
a life long since decayed.
O memoir of a bone,
your maker didn't trot the earth
worrying what his fossils might be worth.

I think I remember writing someone about "Makers" just after finishing it, saying how wretched it was: the sort of silly poem that one might find in *The New Yorker*, and "Spring Thaw," probably their favorite, was even sillier. (But of course, no such criticisms prevented me from including all four poems in my first book, finally published in 1971.)

Those were the only four of my poems ever published in *The New Yorker*. The reason almost certainly was that in the same year I had to express my annoyance at what I considered to be their trivialities and sent them a longer and I thought (and still think) much better poem, as follows:

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ELEGY (First published in The Transatlantic Review.)

It's time that I deciphered the last traces
of our engagement out in windy spaces
the time my country fought in North Korea.
Marriage was my idea---
because I needed roots
in a prim Texas town
that outlawed prostitutes.
I wanted life more normal,
an so, like war declared, when you came down
I made our marriage formal.
Fanatic nations pursue objects, blind.
I had an image of you, hanging in my mind,
out of your body.
Too gentle, frightened almost, for a nurse,
you could still work. Things might have been much worse.
A homosexual chaplain I'd befriended
married us. You pretended
to like him, and he did the same for you.
Allergic to cats too---
it may have been the kittens in your trunk
more than our cheap champagne that got him drunk.
Who made you more afraid,
he, or the dying man with his face flayed
in your hospital? Keeping those two cute
newborn kittens, you quit without dispute.
There was enough between us---was there not?---
since both of us knew well what pleasure could be got
out of your body.
Kittens consumed our honeymoon. We fed
them with doll bottles; rubbing them, we'd vex
their little bowels to move into Kleenex;
and on each hotel bed
we'd watch their loving romps---
till this all ended in the Georgia swamps.
There, where a captain's crazy English wife
screamed and attacked her children every night,
their eyes opened, they learned to fight for life.
Yours was the female. White
and sickly, she looked cowed.
Maddening how she constantly miaowed.
And yet you wept for her,
when through her tufts of fur
you saw spreading my trowelfuls of dirt,
as if she had been taken, stiffened and inert,
out of your body.

The war went on, our whole economy boomed,
and every day I zoomed
over the negroes down
sweating in shanty town

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up to the clouds in million-dollar machines---
I, in the elite corps
who'd fight the Next Great War
mostly by automation,
exterminator hired by the Nation
to keep this over-crowding world in check.
While army and marines,
holding it by the neck,
killed Communist Chinese,
I picked our kitten's fleas
and pictured things much better left ignored.
That yellow male survived,
seemingly million-lived
as that unwashed Asian horde
resisting Freedom's probe
from halfway round the globe---
they died with such abandon, backs to their own border.
All I could find was monstrosity, insane disorder,
out of your body.
Then even you grew pregnant---and that cat,
swallowing spiders, wilder---and he spat
back at me, dared to enter
my room at night, tormenting his tormentor---
maybe in quest of rubbing, warmth, or food,
and unaware as loud, unturned-off radios,
booming the news, I needed solitude.
What can one do? On throws
whatever comes to hand, out of one's wits,
and the cat spits.
You feared he might disturb me. Yes, he might.
Sometimes it seemed he cried
as you cried, cried each night
for the tough life inside
you, growing. . . . But one dawn
you woke; the cat was gone.
Who forced him out, then, tempting him, or goading?
Your eyes filled with foreboding---
and General Eisenhower
proclaimed the earnestness of the hour
and said that creeping socialism must be stopped.
We drove to Jacksonville and had the baby chopped
out of your body.

You will recognize, readers, the barracks-floor incident that I described earlier. Howard Moss, at the time *The New Yorker's* poetry editor, wrote that he liked the poem and wanted to take it, but it didn't work out. He was the poetry editor; how could it not have been accepted if he wanted to accept it? So there was a higher editorial authority at *The New Yorker* that imposed political standards on its poets---just as in Stalin's Soviet Union. That did not stop me, however, from continuing to send them my charm-

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ing little poems. But for twenty or thirty years (I forget when I finally gave up on them) they never accepted another. I had been blacklisted.

I have to remark in conclusion that my father has turned out to be the central character in this little essay. Now that he no longer lives among us, I have come to realize that I love him dearly. And of course the role he almost played in my birth was the same role that I more successfully played at the end of the poem.

Thanks, Dad!