

Swimming with Howard Moss

DAVID MASELLO

THE FIRST FAMOUS PERSON I wrote to when I moved to New York in 1980 was Howard Moss, the long-time poetry editor of *The New Yorker*. He was the one person, it seemed, that every literary figure—from W. H. Auden to Elizabeth Bishop, Lillian Hellman, or John Updike—knew and liked as a friend. I told him in my note that throughout college I had admired his own poems and the writers he published in the magazine, though the idea of him and the life I thought he led particularly awed me. Also, he had attended, but not graduated from, my alma mater, the University of Michigan, and I thought that our having shared the college would be further reason for him to notice my correspondence.

I had moved to New York a month after graduation and had soon secured a job as assistant to the managing editor of a major book-publishing house. During my initial interview with the editor, she removed her contact lenses and sucked on them as if they were shards of hard candy, before popping them back into her eyes, a procedure I would come to witness every workday. She was an alcoholic, though I didn't know that during the months I had worked for her. She would yell at me, and her other employees, with such vigor that, as she pounded her hand on her desk, entire manuscripts shifted to the edges before falling in a cascade of paper, reigniting her fury.

One day at five o'clock while at my job, I picked up the phone and Howard Moss introduced himself. "I received your note and would enjoy meeting you for a drink," he said. "Let's make a date." He suggested the bar at the Algonquin, which was convenient for both of us. In college, an English professor of mine often invited me to dinners and cocktail parties at his house with visiting writers—Donald Hall, Galway Kinnell, Jane Kenyon, Robert Bly, among others—even loaning me his Volkswagen to pick them up at the Detroit airport. This, however, was the first time I had instigated a meeting with a writer and would be on my own.

The day of the date, my boss found me reknitting my tie in the reflection of my metal desk. "Since you're still new to all this," she said, peeling the tip of a red editing pencil with her thumb nail, "the one thing about him you need to know is that he likes boys. That's the only reason he's agreeing to meet you. Watch your back, if you know what that means."

I hadn't known that about him, and the news was both revelatory and defeating. Was this, indeed, why he was agreeing

to meet with me? I should have discerned this personal information about him from his poetry, but his references to the objects of his affection were too subtle for me. Was my boss right about his motives? Or was it for more noble reasons—that he detected a kindred poetic spirit in my note?

When I arrived at the Algonquin, I hoisted the hotel's resident cat into my lap to calm myself as I awaited Moss's arrival. The moment I saw him walk into the lobby, a man near sixty, I cleaned myself of cat hair with a loop of tape I had already gotten from the front desk clerk and then approached the legendary man of letters.

We discovered that the bar was full, so Howard suggested that we walk down the block to the Iroquois Hotel, a then dowdier version of the Algonquin. "It's not exactly glamorous there," he said, "but we'll be able to talk and get to know each other."

Early on in our conversation, in which he asked about my job at the publishing house, my impressions of New York, and how Ann Arbor had held up since he had briefly attended school there, I immodestly handed him a sheaf of poems, many of which I had written during my senior year of college upon meeting a boyfriend and, later, breaking up with him. I asked if he would read them and he agreed without hesitation, folding the papers and putting them inside his jacket pocket.

A couple of weeks later, I received an envelope at my apartment with the poems and comments he had made on them. The praise was extravagant, but he made no suggestions for publication—my imagined agenda, of course. He thanked me for the chance to read them and urged me to send more. But he also wrote that he might call me again to meet for dinner. And he did, at the end of the week. I was told to come to his apartment on West 10th Street, where we would have drinks and then go to dinner in the neighborhood.

On the designated night, I rang his buzzer and waited for him to respond, hoping—and not—that he might have forgotten. I paced his block for an hour and half, periodically re-buzzing. Finally, a young, handsome man, but older than I, approached me.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. Howard had a heart attack today. I was just with him in the hospital. As he was going in to surgery, he said to me, 'You must go to the apartment and tell David I'm sorry I can't have dinner with him tonight.' That's the kind of person Howard is, to remember a dinner date while he's having a heart attack."

The man offered to take me to dinner as a consolation, but I declined. I had lost my appetite and was disconcerted by suddenly being involved in such an intimate—literally, life-changing

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David Masello's essays and poems have appeared in many periodicals and anthologies, including The New York Times, Town & Country, and Granta.

Almanac

*They fle from me that sometyme did me seke
With naked fote stalking my chambre.*

—Sir Thomas Wyatt

Where have all the beauties gone?
Raoul, young man
tantalizing with closed eyes,
leaning back relaxed
as if caught in a wet dream,
a tiny bee tattooed on his dick;

Judd, sulking
underneath a black Stetson,
his jeans pulled
down, or with only boots
and socks, cock clenched
like a weapon
in his gleaming fist;

cowboy Brad, legs astride
with leather-chaps, bronze
bullhead-buckle belt open
wide horns
above the curly fleece
of a bull's forehead,
lowering, snorting
through a big nose-ring;

and Gio, leaning forward,
listening with cat's-eyes,
whispering *ti voglio bene*,
Latin pupils half-mast,
temptingly un-jealous.
Where must they be tonight?

Envoi:

You smile, your mouth a bow
taut and cruel,
turn your back on me
for the time being
satiated, between us
your blond, untrusting seed:

the bite-mark on your ass
will be fainter tomorrow,
the body's betrayal.
—how soon the body forgets—
a horse-shoe, or the phantom
of a long-desired punishment.

JOHANN DE LANGE

ing—event with someone I admired, but could hardly yet call a friend. “Howard promised to make it up to you,” the man said.

Indeed, a couple of months later, Howard called me at the office to extend an invitation. “This time I’ll be there,” he said. And, perhaps coyly, he added, “My heart is in it.”

Howard lived on the parlor floor of a 19th-century townhouse whose front door was painted a glossy, cherry red (and still is). Thick-trunked wisteria vines spiraled up the façade. We clinked wine glasses on a Juliet balcony off his living room that looked onto a shady backyard. One wall of his apartment was floor-to-ceiling bookcases, and when Howard saw me scanning the shelves, he said, “Go ahead, pull out any volume you want.”

Every book of poetry and prose I removed was personally inscribed. William Styron, Elizabeth Bishop, Katherine Anne Porter, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, Thom Gunn, Tennessee Williams, Christopher Isherwood, Gore Vidal, Robert Penn Warren, Thornton Wilder—these were his friends.

MANY YEARS LATER, after this dinner at his apartment, I attended an exhibition at the New York Public Library of ephemera and memorabilia of poets, past and present—a two-part show called “The Hand of the Poet.” When I came to the glass cabinet under which was assembled material from Howard Moss, one of the featured items was his personal address book. The curator had considered it an object emblematic of the poet. I returned to the exhibit several times during its run and, often, Howard’s address book was randomly opened to a different page, but situated in such a way that only the names but not the addresses or phone numbers were discernible—writers and publishers and editors, even politicians, along with the names of his dentist and dry cleaners. Although my affiliation with Howard had been minimal, I wondered if he had written my name in the book, if I had earned that distinction. I suppose I could have asked the curatorial staff to look it up, but I preferred to believe I was included rather than know that I was not.

Although I know now that Howard would have welcomed a truer friendship, I was never able to relax with him and believe that I had earned his company. Part of me kept returning to the doubt put there by my unstable former boss. One summer, some friends and I rented a shabby house in East Hampton, a place so close to Montauk Highway that truckers would blast their air horns when they spotted one of us in the outdoor shower. Howard, who owned a weekend house in town, invited me for a swim in his pool. I bicycled the long distance through the town’s humid and spookily quiet Northwest Woods area. As soon as I arrived at his low-slung Modernist house, Howard said, upon bringing me inside, “Cocktail, Dave?” It remains the most elegant, sophisticated question I have ever been asked.

We sat and talked in his living room before going for our swim. I was introduced again to the same young man (at least I think it was the same person) who had greeted me at Howard’s apartment the night of his heart attack. Howard’s friend was GQ-model beautiful and easily decades his junior.

I learned that the young man had been a tennis star at an Ivy League college, near pro level, and that now he was calling himself a writer. At first, the young man was gracious and attentive, but the longer Howard and I spoke, the more impatient he became. When Howard suggested that we take our swim while the sun was still strong, the young man said, "I'll be working on the novel while you're swimming. I'll be working over there," he said, looking at me and pointing to a typewriter on a stand in a hallway. As I helped Howard bring glasses and napkins into the kitchen, the young man had already taken a seat and begun to type.

Once we were outside on the apron of the pool, Howard removed his shirt and carefully descended the steps into the turquoise water, though he kept his eyeglasses on. I was shocked to see his bare chest, not because it was unpleasant, but because it was such an intimate revelation. A man of letters of his caliber needed to be fully clothed, I thought.

"Immerse yourself," he said, fanning the water with both palms. "Do some laps. I want you to enjoy this day."

I remember that invitation of his to move in the water. In his essay entitled "The First Line," Howard writes that the opening of a poem "Most often comes ... when I am in motion, when no fixed mooring allows habit to keep from consciousness what the imagination may be evoking." Both the act of moving and the obscuring effects of it are to be coveted by the poet: "The half-seen, the barely glimpsed, if they make an impression, are more usable, usually, than the familiar," he writes later in the essay. Howard recognized the same trait in his poet friend James Schuyler. In the title essay of Howard's book of essays, *Whatever Is Moving* (1981), he says that Schuyler's "fondness for ferryboats" was symptomatic of the poet's wish "to snare the source of action," for "emotion and thought are susceptible to whatever is moving, usually within a small compass."

One of the last times I saw Howard was during a lunch-hour book signing and reading he gave at the old Doubleday store on Fifth Avenue near 54th Street. After his reading, I bought a copy of his *Selected Poems* (1971) and waited in line for him to sign it. When he looked up and saw me, he moved around the edge of the table to put his hand on my shoulder and thank me for coming. I didn't read the inscription he penned in my book until I had returned to the office: "For David, with admiration." I couldn't imagine what he meant by that, a man who had won the National Book Award, who was at the center of international literary life, writing that to me. Was it possible he was referring to my poetry? My youth? Was there an element of desire on his part? Or was he just being a friend?

I never summoned up the courage to call Howard again, though at the reading he had said, "Any time you want to grab a dinner in the Village or visit me in East Hampton some weekend, please call. I would enjoy it enormously. I know you're a busy young man, so I'll leave it to you."

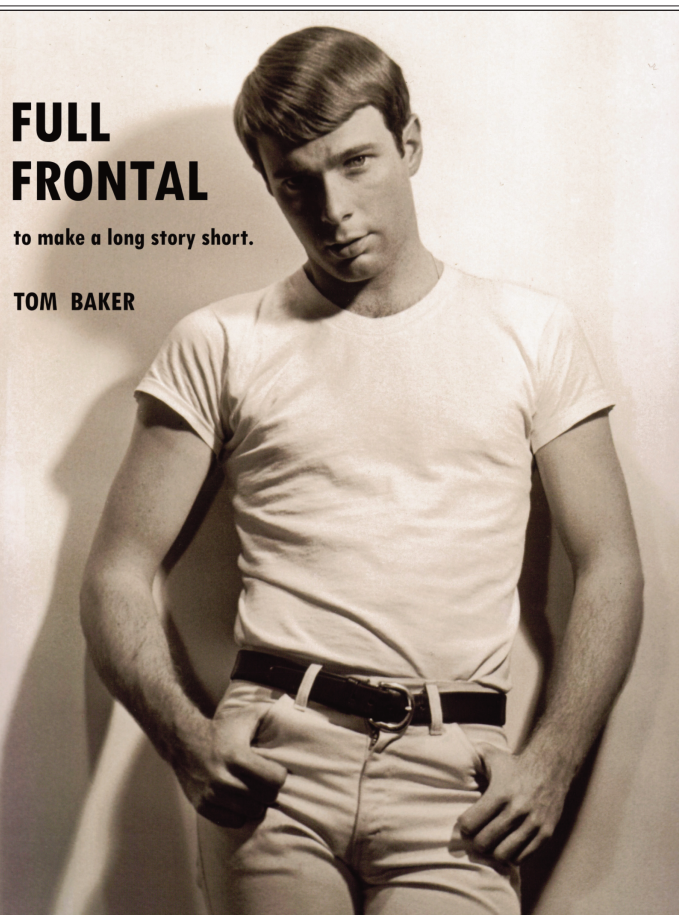
There is much about Howard's poetry that I don't understand. His poems are elegantly elusive and allusive. He conveys a strong current of longing, but often in the context of once having possessed love—a man well acquainted with love but disappointed by it: "Somewhere what I lost I hope is springing/ To life again," he wrote in my favorite poem, "The Pruned Tree," where he adds: "my wound has been healing/

and I am made more beautiful by losses."

One of the aspects of his work that I admired when first encountering it in college was his titles, so immediately engaging that they seduce you into the poems: "A Balcony with Birds," "A Swimmer in the Air," "Letter to an Imaginary Brazil," "At the Fire Fountain," "Going to Sleep in the Country," "Where the Castle Is," "Still Pond, No More Moving."

When I had heard that Howard had suffered a second heart attack, I sent a letter to his home, to which he responded months later. I had heard, too, that he wasn't doing well, and so it didn't surprise me when I came across his obituary in 1987 as I was riding the E train to my job as a junior editor at Simon and Schuster. Even in my twenties, I read the newspaper obituaries first, and upon seeing the write-up of someone famous, like Howard, I would immediately regret not having tried to see or meet the person—or, in some cases, taken further advantage of the introduction I might have made. "The first line may turn out, in the end, not to *be* the first line, and, if it is not, it is usually the last," Howard writes.

Howard was not only a prolific poet but an editor who, for 38 years, had elicited and shaped the work of the best writers of our time. What he wrote in a remembrance of the writer Elizabeth Bowen could apply to him: "She was one of those very rare people who create more life around them than is actually there and who heighten the momentousness of everything simply by appearing." Howard was someone who had appeared to me, but disappeared before I had let us become friends. ■■■



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