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Money and the Pursuit of Poetry

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For a man with his surname, Peter Money picked the one profession in which he was almost guaranteed not to make any: publishing.

And not just any kind of publishing, but poetry, which stands about as much chance of raking in millions as the NRA suddenly lobbying for restrictions on gun use. But Money's calling happens to be poetry, and when there are poets whose voices want and need to be heard, they have to find a forum for their work. They need Money, and Money needs them. And more to the point, he wants them.

"It's up to me to invest," Money, who founded Harbor Mountain Press in 2006, said in an interview at his home in

Brownsville. "One doesn't want to think about money when you're talking about poems that will last." Since 2006, the press, which is a nonprofit organization, has published 21 books, most of them poetry, and the occasional children's book. Money publishes a wide range of poets from all over the world — Iraq, Cambodia, Tibet, the Bahamas, Iran, Spain — and the U.S., of course. The press' most recent book is *A Cage Within*, by Cuban poet Wendy Guerra.

Money, a poet himself and a teacher of poetry at Lebanon College, started the press after making a few runs at publishing literary magazines. A friend in New York who'd had literary ambitions but had detoured into the law asked him if he wanted to start a poetry press.

"At first I was thrilled at the sound of it, but also concerned because I knew it was a fairly large endeavor. I always wanted to be a writer, but, boy, being a publisher ..." Money said. After weighing the pros and cons, Money gambled on the venture. "Ultimately, it seemed the kind of offer I couldn't reject, and I couldn't reject it because it seemed the literary thing to do."

Harbor Mountain is named for Mount Ascutney, which faces the house where Money lives with his wife, Lucinda Walker, director of the Norwich Public Library, and their two children, Hartley and Lily. The house looks directly onto the mountain which looms large. The day is warm, the sun slips in and out of the clouds, and hundreds of dandelion seeds sail through the air. Money works at home although he also maintains a small space in White River Junction; his home office is a warren of papers and books, from the floor almost to the ceiling. The family moved to Vermont in 2001 after a long stint in Berkeley.

Money was born in California but grew up in the Northeast Kingdom, in Lyndonville, and on Cape Cod, where he had a keen interest in writing and theater. In one of those unexpected turns that frequently pop up in people's biographies, Money was in a production of *South Pacific*, where he acted with Ricardo Montalban, who played the part of the planter Emile De Becque; Money was one of De Becque's children.



Poet Peter Money is photographed at his home in West Windsor, Vt. on Tuesday, May 21, 2013. Money is also the publisher of Harbor Mountain Press in Brownsville, Vt.

Money, who has a graying beard and intense, dark eyes, began writing poems at a young age, and had enough sense of the importance of poetry in his life to keep his poems in a small toy safe, along with some silver dollars and rare coins. He still has the safe; it's moved with him throughout his life, although he no longer has the poems he stored in it. But he remembers the poems he wrote, including one about spring and swimming in a pool, in which he experimented with the way the words looked on the page, placing and repeating the word "spring" so that it projected like a diving board.

"Spring, spring jutted out as if it embodied an energy I was aware of," Money said. "I was already translating an image, a feeling to the page."

At Oberlin College in Ohio, Money majored in English and began a student literary magazine that complemented the English Department house organ. When he asked college officials for discretionary funds to start the magazine, he got the same response every time: great idea, wish we could help, no money, go out and do it.

"It's what I'm left with," Money said, resigned. "Go out and do it."

His mantra then is his mantra now: "We need to hear more voices and we need other alternatives."

By this point, toward the end of college, after a semester spent in Ireland, Money was thinking about studying poetry for a master's degree. While scanning books of poetry in the college library, he stumbled on a volume by John Ashbery. The cover was marbled, as if it were one of those old-fashioned books you'd find in a grand library, with marbled end papers and an Ex Libris bookplate. The interior had become exterior. "Wow, this guy is speaking my language," Money recalled thinking. "Where does he teach?"

At the time Ashbery taught at Brooklyn College, so that's where Money went for an M.F.A. The bad news was that Ashbery had left by the time Money arrived; the good news was that Money ended up in a poetry class taught by Allen Ginsberg.

So here Money was, young, fired up by poetry, in New York City in the 1980s, learning about the art and craft of poetry from one of America's most daring and talented poets.

But there was an interesting dichotomy between the heat of Ginsberg's poems and his demeanor as a professor. He wore a suit coat and a tie, he kept a strict attendance book, he "went around the room soliciting opinion in a methodical way," and he was unexpectedly paternal, even maternal, with his students, having them over for meals, telling them to eat, eat. "He seemed to care about us as young people. Where were we going? What were we interested in?"

Ginsberg was also magnanimous, giving Money one of his first blurbs on his first book of poetry. But that didn't keep Ginsberg from imposing exacting standards, and taking a scalpel to the solipsism that often afflicts younger writers. And when Ginsberg spoke, his students listened. "To be called out ... is to have your work paid attention to," Money said. "Ginsberg would talk about honoring the subject matter ... It's about the work and it's about the subject."

Money observes the same principle when he looks for poets to publish.

"It has to do with the feeling that the work is absolutely necessary. Whatever form it manifests, I want it to take its hands, if it could place them on my shoulders, and say, This is all I could do and this is necessary and this work and these subjects are as necessary as breath. If those works approach that level of engagement with me, the author has given life to a breadth of subjects that couldn't have been expressed in any other way."

But make no mistake: it isn't easy being a poetry publisher. The press has a skeleton staff: Money and managing editor Partridge Boswell. It involves grant writing, asking for donations, cultivating a readership that can help to carry the press along.

"I have highs and lows," Money said. "But when I'm meeting the right people it seems as if it's destined." He recalled meeting a poet in Brooklyn, an older woman, with whom he fell into deep discussion. "It's the kind of conversation you wait 100 years to have."

Then there are the poets who have had success elsewhere but whose work isn't picked up again by their publishers, or who feel that they're not getting the kind of care they deserve from their publishers. One of the poets Money publishes, Alice B. Fogel, who lives in New Hampshire, has been praised by former U.S. Poet Laureates Robert Hass and Charles Simic, and when she came to Money, he said, "I got tears in my eyes reading her work. I knew it would be wrong to turn this down."

When Money was living in the Northeast Kingdom, his family would go to the Fairbanks Museum, to look at the faintly moth-eaten animal and bird exhibits and the 19th- and early 20th-century curios from other

countries packed into glass cases.

Maybe Harbor Mountain Press is a little like the Fairbanks Museum, Money mused. The museum isn't routinely crowded with visitors, but people do come in to look at the exhibits that are the manifestation of Fairbanks' lifelong passion.

Not everyone will be moved or struck by the exhibits, but even if they affect only one or three people, they've still roused someone's curiosity or stirred an emotion or instinct that may linger or reappear years later in the form of a poem or painting or song. Like Fairbanks, Money is the curator of his own living museum, one built with words.

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