

S.P.O.V.*

* Student Point of View

Meeting Dr. Moffett

A young writer and an old physician bridge the distance of 78 years through their love of words. By DANIELLE THRONEBERRY, BA'05

“TAKE A LOOK AT THIS,” Jennifer Casale said from the couch of the tiny *Vanderbilt Review* office, where she sat in a storm of white papers. “This man graduated from medical school in 1932, and he’s sending us poetry. And it’s good!”

I looked up from the computer where I’d been working, pushed the chair away from the desk, and spun to take a polite look. A measured, clear script filled pages that had been carefully torn from a steno pad and submitted to the *Vanderbilt Review*. Jennifer was right. It was good.

That was how Alex Moffett entered my life during my first year at Vanderbilt. Jennifer, who was editor of the *Review*, told me that the details of Dr. Moffett’s life were a mystery, his author’s biography the only information we had. He was known to us simply as a 1932 Vanderbilt University Medical School alumnus who had served briefly as a medical missionary in China and now resided in Grinnell, Iowa.

The fact that Vanderbilt still mattered so much to this man that he had sent handwritten poetry to a literary review that had first begun publishing in 1985—well, my little freshman mind reeled. Would I feel that way when I grew old? Would I still be writ-

ing? Is this what my four years at Vanderbilt would give me?

Dr. Moffett sent us a poem again the next year, then two the year after that. Each time, we marveled at his delicate, subtle verse and placed his name in the table of contents beside writers one-quarter his age. I was certainly no math major, but it was mostly fear that kept Jennifer and me from actually subtracting 1932 from 2005 to try and ascertain just how old Dr. Moffett must be. We were both afraid of that num-

ber—and afraid that the next year a new poem would not appear.

Jennifer graduated and went off into the “real world” of post-graduate life, and because I did not know what to do next, I took over as editor of the *Review*. I spent my senior year collecting pieces for the 2005 20th anniversary volume, planning and

plotting and designing. I tried not to wait for anything from Iowa. January melted into February. I Googled the words “Alex Moffett Grinnell Iowa” and found a phone number but was afraid to call. In March I filled two spaces in the table of contents with his name, but no titles. Finally, one sunny spring day as I was taking a break from working on the journal, the dogwood trees on campus protested so strongly

against endings that optimism overtook me, and I dialed the 641 area code.

The voice on the other end of the line was soft and measured—and slightly confused. I explained who I was and why I was calling, though I was uncertain that I was specific enough or that he was even hearing me properly. I hung up from that first phone call with an odd mixture of elation and dismay. Though he had promised he would call me back, I wasn’t entirely sure that he had really comprehended what I’d said. I walked back to the *Review* offices, hoping that getting back to work would help me wait until his next call.

Just a few short hours later, I was rewarded by a call from a much more articulate and energetic-sounding Dr. Moffett. He had been taking a nap, he explained, and was so happy to hear from me. Of course he had poems he would send me; a friend of his would e-mail them right away. Within a day I had two poems from Dr. Moffett ready to insert into the *Review*’s layout, and a much lighter heart. The man who had been only a few pages of written text now had a voice. When I read his poetry again, I could hear his voice speaking the words, and the sound was as strong as the shouts vaulting from the teenage Frisbee players on Alumni Lawn. It was only then, after Dr. Moffett’s kind voice on the phone line, that I did the math.

The simple equation comes to 100—the total number of years that Dr. Moffett has



DANIEL DUBOIS

been on this earth. It took four of those years for my curiosity to reach the point that, in my post-graduation free-fall, with no job and no grad-school plans, I decided to find out just who this man was. Maybe I hoped that, in some way, meeting him might direct me towards the rest of my life.

My family has an impetuosity bordering on psychosis, which explains how, a few weeks after my graduation from Vanderbilt last May, we found ourselves driving from Atlanta to Iowa. I had checked to make sure Dr. Moffett was free for a visit, and my parents had joined my undertaking with a lunatic zeal.

Grinnell, Iowa, is about 15 miles off I-80 between Iowa City and Des Moines, in the middle of nothing but cornfields and prairie. It boasts several stop-lights, a newly renovated Strand movie theater, a John Deere dealership, a small liberal-arts college, and the Mayflower retirement complex where Dr. Moffett lives.

I knocked on the door of Room 210, and a now-familiar voice invited us in. His dorm-like room was neatly arranged, with an easy chair at the foot of his bed, flowers on the windowsill, a computer in one corner, and walls covered with watercolors and photographs. A portrait of his wife, his son's first headshot, and a photo of his daughter with her fiancé in England looked down on his writing desk, and a bookshelf full of poetry sat near at hand.

"We were all born in China," he tells me, speaking of his eight siblings, four of whom are still with him. "I grew up there. My father was from Kentucky. Mother was from New Orleans. They went over there right after they were married. Father was like one of the old Methodist circuit riders, and traveled to all the little churches around our city."

His voice, measured and low, does not waver as he speaks about his parents. The story is comfortable for him, as though this past is very much a part of his present.

"My mother taught music. The Chinese women would come and spend several

months learning from her. Mother taught all of us, too, got us ready to go off to school."

His early education prepared him well enough to be admitted to Washington and Lee University in Virginia, where he realized he wanted to become a doctor. "Then, you know,

Chapel. His collection of odd jobs saw him through medical school and then his internship. A two-year residency at Central State Hospital in Murfreesboro, Tenn., followed.

It was during this time that he met his wife of 62 years. "I married a Nashville girl," says Alex. "Virginia's home was on Vanderbilt Place, right next to where the front door of the gymnasium is now."

As he continues to speak about his wife, whom he lost eight years ago, a picture of Vanderbilt and Nashville-area life at the time begins to emerge. "Virginia was not one of those society people, but her whole crowd all laughed at the country music. They thought there was nothing to it," he says.

He and his wife did not stay in Nashville forever, though. "We went to China working in medical missions for five years, and then we came out on furlough but couldn't get back on account of the Second World War for a few years. We went

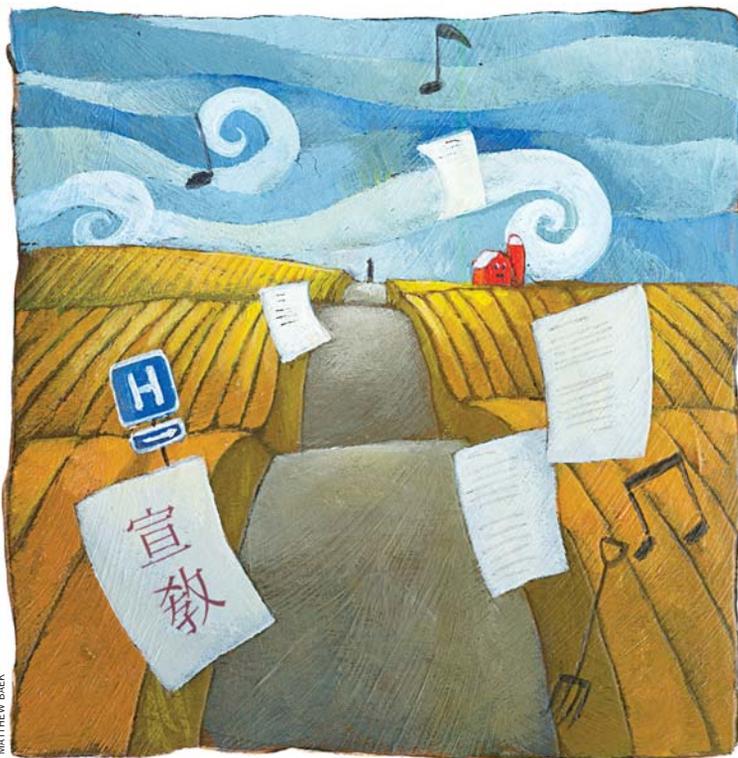
back for another year, just in time to have to get out for the communist revolution. One by one they completely closed down the mission hospitals and took them over. And we had three children, so we got out while there was time."

With China closed to them, they looked for a place in the States where Alex could work as a surgeon, settling on Taylorsville, N.C. "The community decided to build a hospital, and they wanted someone to come and do surgery," he says. "I went down there when the hospital opened. It was a very small town. I had to do a little bit of everything. Delivered a lot of babies."

He and his wife also had babies of their own. "We were in Taylorsville for 29 years. Then we just followed our family around."

He tells me about the five years they spent in New York, where their daughters lived. His strong familial bonds ease my worries that perhaps I am too close to my own family. Maybe driving with one's family across the

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you just applied to medical school. People just got in," he says with a soft chuckle, amazed but not surprised. "Vanderbilt was a small college then, a good one, but small. It was said when I was at Vanderbilt that Chancellor Kirkland had gone to court and took Vanderbilt away from the Methodist church."

He remembers working in the cafeteria to earn his meals. Even with free meals and a missionary child's stipend for tuition, Alex still had to cover rent and other expenses. "I did all the odd jobs I could find, made 35 cents an hour. I pressed Chancellor Kirkland's pants."

The chancellor lived on campus, and young Alex did odd jobs around the residence. He smiles as he tells this part of the story, his large hands resting on his knees. He is very still now, and calm, as he talks and talks.

"He had a big garden," Alex says. "He was quite the gardener, and I helped him there as well."

Alex took biology in the basement of Kirkland Hall, where the library was then housed, and he attended church services in Neely

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country like this is not abnormal, after all. Perhaps it is simply wise.

Dr. Moffett is finishing off the last chapters of his life near his son. He doesn't "get out much," he says, but his knowledge of the town and the contents of his room belie this. Of the Apple computer in the corner, he says, "All I can do is word process. I can't do any of the other stuff. I don't get Internet because I'm illiterate!"

I wonder what it would be like to live without the distraction of the Internet. The Mayflower community, it seems, provides him with all the intellectual stimulation of a big-city cultural hub, thanks to nearby Grinnell College.

"We can go to musical programs on campus without charge, and you can audit most of the courses for free," says Alex. "Except during the summers we have a program once

a week, music or literature or some sort of lecture. I was on the committee for quite a few years and really enjoyed that, getting in touch with the professors and people who'd come in."

He launches into a passionate discussion of poets and poetry and music. He loves to read, he declares, loves John Crowe Ransom, Denise Levertov and Ted Koozer. He is an enthusiastic member of a poetry group in the Mayflower retirement complex.

"We have no organization," he says, smiling. "We just get together. There's a fair amount of talking, it's not strictly poetry. We try to bring our own work, but we *always* read from a good poet."

At that I smile, too, recalling nights from my senior year spent in dorm rooms, one of my writer friends reading aloud to a small group, all of us listening, slightly desperate, hoping to find a clue to uncovering

our own genius buried somewhere within the lines of a "good poet." None of us yet has found that clue. Some have gone searching for it in the stars of the skies of Argentina, others in law school, but our genius remains elusive to us yet.

Still, our hope remains, in part for me because of Dr. Moffett. It must have felt elusive, too, to a first-year medical student putting himself through school, ironing the chancellor's pants and weeding his garden. The pages of his life must then, in a time of market crashes and wars, have stretched before him white and daunting. Perhaps at times he staggered under the expectation of filling his pages. It is that possibility that drives me on, keeps me afloat in similarly turbulent times. My story will be written, too, and my family will surround me as I compose it. I simply must continue, each day from my small surface, to pick up the pen, and write.

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For the next two months, little direct information existed about our neighborhood. We gathered bits from neighbors who made their way back to the city despite the roadblocks manned by the National Guard. We agonized over when to return, and whether we should bring our children. After six weeks Mom finally agreed to shop for clothes. The two outfits she evacuated with were not warm enough for the mid-Atlantic autumn. Those purchases spoke to her acceptance that what remained in her New Orleans closet was ruined.

When she finally returned, her worst fears were confirmed. Doors and windows were swollen shut, and the house could only be entered by breaking windows. The force of the water inside the house created an unholy chaos. The coffeepot floated from the kitchen counter to my bed. A heavy oak table 5 feet in diameter floated over the breakfast bar from the den into the kitchen and separated into 50 pieces.

Dark stinking mold covered everything. Clouds of green dust sprayed out whenever something was moved. Century-old family photographs, World War II scrapbooks, and bank records dating back to the 1920s were

reduced to a soggy mess and covered in sludge. It all looked as though some giant monster had filled the house with water and shaken it like a snow globe.

No one really knows the next step. What's predictable is the morass of bureaucracy that surrounds every logistical detail: insurance claims, FEMA applications and contractor bids. Circular voicemail recordings that ultimately disconnect the caller, along with mounds of paperwork, plague every evacuee. Who makes the determination of renovation versus demolition? Who pays for it? Where does one live in the meantime?

But today Bourbon Street is back in business. The "World-Famous Love Acts" sign flashes garishly, and presumably employees are back to doing whatever they did before the storm to live up to their advertisement. Law-enforcement officers swarm the streets of the French Quarter, but their guns seem smaller and more discreet than in those weeks just after the storm. Café du Monde's mel-low chicory-laced coffee tastes better than ever. Uptown restaurants are bouncing back, and Jefferson Parish schools are back in session.

As for the neighborhood where I grew up, its fate is unclear. After the flood an alligator

was spotted strolling down the middle of Bancroft Drive, adding credence to the belief that the area will be razed and allowed to revert to its pre-1878 status as a swamp. Others expect a developer to bulldoze the houses and create a gated community of McMansions, built on stilts to avoid another flood.

Mom has returned to New Orleans to stay. She is living with friends Uptown while she hunts for a furnished apartment in the French Quarter. Strangely enough, almost every piece of her china and crystal survived the perilous wind and waves intact. My mother is determined that the city will make a comeback. And who knows? Maybe it will. Just yesterday she found periwinkles in the backyard, pushing their way through the broken glass and grime.

When I left New Orleans to fly back to Washington, I realized as my plane rose that the swimming pools are black and the roofs are blue, covered in protective tarps. But by the time we got to 20,000 feet, I smiled at the gentle curve of the Mississippi River below, glistening beside green rectangles of carefully tended sugar-cane fields. Despite it all, man and nature were peacefully coexisting again, at least until the next hurricane.