



Somerset Run

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Meet Your Neighbor and His Son

Earl and Allan Coleman

By Chris Retz

(Ed. note: This is a continuation of last week's article on this notable father-and-son pair of poets.)

Tell me more about the jacket design. If you turn it one way, you see Earl, if you turn it the other way, you see Allan.

(A): Earl's fond of his friend Hank Virgona's sketched portrait of him, and so am I; we use it as they key image of him at the Stubborn Pine Web site, but it's never seen print. I wanted to match that with a portrait of myself, for my side of the book. I had a black-and-white photo booth self-portrait that I'd made during a residency in Switzerland a few years earlier. Right at hand, easy to scan, no permissions necessary, and more than just a good likeness. I think it catches something of my personality. It came out of the machine just the way you see it, four-up, and I

thought it worked best that way graphically in the layout.

We printed the book in Shenzhen, China, with my wife Anna, who's Chinese, providing invaluable service as go-between.

(E): A word about Hank Virgona, whose work is hung in the Whitney and in dozens of other distinguished venues. (Ed. note: Virgona is a member of New York Artists Equity, and his work is on permanent display at the Butler Institute of American Art, The Smithsonian, and the New York Public Library.) The sketch was not originally intended for this use. We were sitting in his studio discussing politics and art and he dashed off about 50 of these in an afternoon. I chose this one for the cover, and keep the rest along with perhaps 70 or so of his etchings and other works.

What 2-3 postmodern poets do you each admire the most and why? Which poets have most influenced your writing careers? Are there any prose writers who have influenced you? If so, who and how?

(A): If by postmodern you mean poets from the period after modernism—let's say 1980 through the present—I'd say: Richard Kostelanetz, for his relentless experimentalism; Marie Howe, for demonstrating how the personal is political; and Carolyn Forché, for reminding us that the political is personal.

My own writing career, professionally speaking, involves the prose essay, so there's no specific influence of poetry on that work. But everything I read feeds my use of language in any form. Lately, as a poet, I've gone back to re-immense myself in the "new American poetry" of the 1950s and '60s: the Beats, the New York School, the San Francisco Renaissance, etc. I have a new understanding of what they were engaging, individually and collectively, and I'm ready to learn from them in a way I couldn't before.

I've been affected by prose writers as diverse as Sherwood Anderson, Samuel Beckett, Marilyn French, William Burroughs, and John Dos Passos. Each of those, and others, opened stylistic

doors and showed that one could take many paths toward the creation of an authentic, resonant voice.

Music—especially jazz and blues—has also influenced my writing deeply; I speak of that at length in the self-interview in *Like Father, Like Son*. And my long-term engagement with photography has taught me how to use my eyes—an invaluable set of lessons.

(E): I think of Lauterman, Lux, and others as well as Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser—but as to influences—I don't think so. For that I have to go back to Milton Blau, Tom McGrath, even Silone and Bertolt Brecht for what they taught me about making poetry that's personal/political, and making clarity.

How have you influenced each other's poetry?

(A): The fact that Earl wrote poetry and fiction, as did my mother Frances, probably affected me more deeply than anything specific either of them produced. Also, up through my early years Earl ran weekly writers' workshops—in which both poets and fiction writers joined—in the living rooms of our Manhattan apartments. So I grew up surrounded by examples of people I knew, some well and some intimately, who worked steadily at the craft of writing. That made the process real and available to me in a way that reading books did not.

These were all mainstream writers, stylistically speaking. As I recall, the poets had more in common with Matthew Arnold and Marianne Moore than they did with Pound or Eliot or Olson; no High Modernists or Beats or New York School among them. Where they diverged from the mainstream was in their frequent address of social and political issues, from a left perspective—this is at the height of the McCarthy ear. So at an early age I got firsthand exposure to a poetry of resistance, a poetry that sought to speak truth to power. I found that invaluable, and still draw on its example in all my writing.

(E): Ours was a lefty household and from Allan's earliest years we were both involved with writers of similar politics and talents, both in workshops I organized and ran as well as friendships. Our language was a common one. This hardly means there were no controversies. The reverse. There are 50 roads to Rome as they say, and we were pursuing (sometimes madly) the one that seemed the best. Many of us became mainstream, finding points of confluence. It would be fair then to say that Allan and I didn't influence each other's poetry so much as life itself influenced us both in sometimes totally different ways.

What direction is poetry headed in today?

(A): In a parody of the romance novel, the twentieth-century Canadian humorist Stephen Leacock once described a man who "flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions." That seems a reasonable description of the condition worldwide of the arts today, including poetry: a wild pluralism with endless hybridizing. I think we're in for more of the same, and am not sure it will end. I don't foresee the emergence of some compelling new paradigm that will draw the majority of practitioners. The options offered by hypertext and multimedia have barely been tapped so far; I do expect we'll see much more of that.

(E): Remember, this project began with the notion of the "going down." What sparked the initiation of our dialogue was the "Poetry Contest," a naked mode of coining money from the aspirants, and yet a necessary mode if the journal in question is to find the funds to continue in this age when literacy is dropping as we speak. In this environment obscurantism works as one mode. Writing for other academics works. Trying brand-new modes that lean on type fonts, line spacing, etc., work. Loud



cries work. Even real prose that doesn't even take the trouble to refine itself can disguise itself by breaking itself into "poetic" lines. What's missing of course is the real stuff. . . . "There's My



Last Duchess" . . . "Just for a handful of silver he left us" . . . "When I consider how my light is spent," etc., What's missing is the guts. That's what the two of us are trying for.

Do you have any other plans for written or oral collaboration?

(A): We hope to set up some joint readings in the tri-state area. We've talked about doing some short videos and/or audiotapes/pod casts for the Web. Aside from that, we both have separate writing projects on the front

burner right now.

(E): Allan and I both know people in film so most likely (if it ever happens with Allan's busy schedule and mine) that's the one crying for us to do. There are any number of notions for a series of films of which we could be part.

How can people purchase the book?

(A): *Like Father Like Son* can be ordered via Amazon.com (in the Books category, search for Earl M. Coleman). It is also available directly from the publisher, the simplest way to get it. An order form appears online at likefatherlikeson.info, this book's homepage. The list price is \$15, plus \$3 for postage.

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