

# Portland poet, 92, writes about climate change, degradation of Earth

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Jacqueline Moore compares writing poetry to throwing a clay pot. You put a blob of clay on the potter's wheel and give it a spin. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't.

"It's messy work," she says. "You have to get your hands dirty."

## Poems by Jacqueline Moore

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### **"Peaceable Kingdom"**

Orchid,

that pink-pink-pink

extravaganza

in the cloud forest,  
rearing  
and muscular,  
flashy  
and loud-mouthed,  
hungry  
yet with a full  
nectary  
in open-petalled  
readiness.  
Hummingbird,  
that blue-green-blue  
iridescence  
down curving  
its bill  
into sweetness, hovering  
in that jungle  
moment  
before the cloudburst  
and bulldozers  
crawl all over  
the land.

**“On This Day of All Souls”**

Bless the ancient highways

and dark Andean soil,  
bless the sacred mountains  
and condors flying free.  
Praise the women spinning  
bridges over canyons.  
Praise the llamas and guinea pigs,  
food for the Lord Sun.  
Curse the shanty towns  
and deep-pit mining.  
Shelter those who escaped  
on this Day of All Souls.  
Return home with them  
and speak with the condors.  
Learn to spin, spin, spin our souls  
from the peaks.

Moore has been doing the dirty work of writing poetry for more than 40 years and at age 92 has just come out with a volume of what she calls eco-poetry, "Chasing the Grass," published by the independent Portland-based [Littoral Books](#). Her poems are a response to an endangered world, a reminder of what's at stake and a plea for action. Just as 16-year-old Greta Thunberg speaks about climate change from the urgent perspective of youth, Moore represents the earnest older generation, which has seen a lot and earned a voice in the conversation.

Moore lives in the 100 State Street apartment complex in Portland, but spent much of her life living without electricity or running water near Morrill, outside of Belfast, in a homestead built by a beloved and exotic aunt, who made her living dancing on Broadway before becoming a vaudeville star and buying land in Maine in the 1920s. Moore grew up in Greenwich Village and has lived and worked in London, Warsaw and Boston.

She's thrived on the energy of whatever city she's lived in, including Portland, but cherishes the memory of living off the grid in Morrill, especially the silence and the stars. Living in the woods and adapting her life to the larger forces and rhythms of the natural world shaped her sensibilities and values. "The sky was totally clear and the stars were unbelievable. You couldn't see the lights of Belfast. It was a totally different world," she said. "I do miss it. I miss dropping out of the modern world. Without electricity, life is totally different."

Moore began writing poetry in the 1970s, and studied with Irish poet and playwright and Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney when they crossed paths at Harvard. She decided to publish the book now, because, she says, she's not going to live forever and the Earth is crumbling. She hopes her poems wake people up. "If we don't take the moment, if we don't seize the moment, we can lose everything," she said.

Her first and only other book of poems is "Living Tilted," which she self-published in 2016 through Maine Authors.

Moore drew 50 to 60 people to a reading at Print: A Bookstore in September in a conversation with former Maine poet laureate Betsy Sholl. Moore will read poems at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 10, at the Peaks Island Branch of the Portland Public Library, appearing with other Littoral authors Liza Mattison and Eleanor Morse.

Josh Christie, co-owner of Print, enjoyed listening to Moore read her poems and speak about her life, and said people in the audience were enthralled with her insight, wit and ability to frame the climate crisis in tangible terms. "The way she captures the sense and smell of the world around us is really powerful," Christie said. "The way she writes about nature and the world is timeless in a way a lot of nature writing is, but a lot of it feels current because so much of it deals with what is happening to the world now," he said.

In her writing, Moore avoids sentimentality and presents nature with a sense of awe, wonder and despair. She writes with resolution and insistence, and there's a lot of Maine in her words. Her poem "Scorpions of the Earth," which takes its title from the Book of Revelations, describes the contradictory forces at play when a woodlot is cleared:

"A hundred acres of money-wood/  
and you're whining about warblers?  
/Cut those trees or somebody else will.

"We'll come with our John Deere/  
fifty-thousand dollar skidders/  
and work 'em to death.

"We'll twitch those logs, skid 'em,  
/leave your woodlot stripped clean.  
/Nothin' but stumps and air.

"\$480 per load trucked to the mill.  
/They'll have their toilet paper.  
/We pay John Deere.

"You'll get cash and clearcut,  
/your memories of birdsong/  
and a bear feeding on beechnuts."

Littoral co-founder Agnes Bushell became aware of Moore's poetry when the press issued a call for poems for its recent anthology, "Balancing Act 2." Moore submitted several, which Littoral included in the anthology. Moore introduced herself at the book launch and told Bushell she had more.

"We decided to publish it because, No. 1, the poems are excellent. They're right on point and so much on target with what is going on right now," Bushell said. "And we also wanted to do a book for her and have her work out in the world at a time she could enjoy it."

The softcover volume includes original art by artist Michel Droge, as well as an interview with Moore about her life by Marieke Van Der Steenhoven of Bowdoin College's department of special collections and archives.

Moore grew up in New York during the Depression. Her father was an artist, who showed his paintings in Washington Square Park. Her mother came from a wealthy Austrian family, which relocated to the United States during World War I. When the family returned to Austria after the war, Moore's mother stayed in New York, where she met and married Moore's father.

"My father was an artist, but we were starving all the time," she said. "Life was really tough. But in those days, even if you were very poor in New York City, everything was free. You had a chance. It was a different world."

She was inspired by her aunt Mary Jacqueline Bragdon after whom Moore was named. Her aunt danced "on the streets for coins" to help support her family, Moore said, and became a dancer. She worked on Broadway and later toured the country doing vaudeville.

Her aunt met a Boston law student, who quit law school to join her on the road as a theater producer. "One spring, they came up to Maine on a lark and bought property and brought up their theatrical friends," Moore said. "They played jazz records, drank gin and horrified the neighbors."

When Moore turned 3, her parents sent her north to live with her aunt in Maine every summer. Later, as an adult, she spent half the year in Morrill. She'd live there still if she could, but that's no longer possible at her age, she said.

Moore majored in English at Hunter College, earned a Fulbright scholarship and moved to London to teach American literature. She met her husband, a philosopher from Poland, in London and married him in 1963. They moved back and forth between London and Warsaw and eventually came to the United States, settling in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Moore divorced her husband in the 1970s and began writing poetry. A friend suggested she begin writing to help her through the divorce. "I got whipped right up in the whole thing and joined a poetry group. I wasn't good to start with. I had a long way to go," she said.

Invigorated by her personal freedom and fueled by a creative desire that reminded her of her aunt, she moved to Boston. "I wanted to get closer to Maine, and Boston seemed halfway." She got a job at the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard and sought out Heaney when he offered a poetry workshop. She was older than he was, and they became friends.

"I heard him read and I was smitten," he said. "We would meet at his favorite Irish bar in Harvard Square and we would discuss the world. We had these interesting discussions, not about poetry so much but about Ireland and everything else going on in the world. We talked about Maine and about farming and all kinds of things."

That's when she became serious about writing poetry and began spending long chunks of her life in Maine on remote, quiet land, a long way from the lights and sounds of town.

It's taken her a lot of time to pull these poems into shape. Writing poetry is a lot of work, she said. Like a potter at the wheel, she builds her poems line by line, in search of the right combination of words that express the urgency, and hope, stirring in her soul.

"It's not my nature to give up," Moore said. "It might be logical to give up, but that's not in my nature. Otherwise, I would not write poetry."

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