

Classic Poetry Series

**Roger McGough**  
**- poems -**

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## Roger McGough(November 9 - 1937)

McGough was born in Litherland, Lancashire, to the north of Liverpool, the city with which he is firmly associated, and was educated at the University of Hull at a time when Philip Larkin was the librarian there. Returning to Merseyside in the early 1960s, he worked as a teacher and, with John Gorman, organised arts events. After meeting Mike McGear the trio formed The Scaffold, working the Edinburgh Festival until they signed to Parlophone records in 1966. The group scored several hit records, reaching number one in the UK Singles Chart in 1968 with their version of "Lily The Pink". McGough wrote the lyrics for many of the group's songs and also recorded the musical comedy/poetry album McGough and McGear.

McGough was also responsible for much of the humorous dialogue in The Beatles' animated film, *Yellow Submarine*, although he did not receive an on-screen credit. At about the same time a selection of his poems was published, along with work from Adrian Henri and Brian Patten, in a best-selling paperback volume of verse entitled *The Mersey Sound*, first published in 1967, revised in 1983 and again in 2007.

On March 2, 1978, McGough appeared in *All You Need Is Cash*, a mockumentary detailing the career of a Beatles-like group called The Rutles; McGough's introduction takes so long that he is only asked one question ("Did you know the Rutles?" to which McGough cheerfully responds "Oh yes") before the documentary is forced to move along to other events.

One of McGough's more unusual compositions was created in 1981, when he co-wrote an "electronic poem" called *Now Press Return* with the programmer Richard Warner for inclusion with the *Welcome Tape* of the BBC Micro home computer. *Now Press Return* incorporated several novel themes, including user-defined elements to the poem, lines which changed their order (and meaning) every few seconds, and text which wrote itself in a spiral around the screen.

McGough won a Cholmondeley Award in 1998, and was awarded the CBE in June 2004. He holds an honorary MA from Nene College of Further Education; [citation needed] was awarded an honorary degree from Roehampton University in 2006; as well as an honorary doctorate from the University of Liverpool on 3 July 2006. He was Fellow of Poetry at Loughborough University (1973-5) and Honorary Professor at Thames Valley University (1993).

In 2006, he appeared on an episode of the BBC Television quiz show.

# Beguiling

She is so beguiling  
That when she beckons  
I can run a mile  
In twenty seconds.

Roger McGough

# Cake

i wanted one life  
you wanted another  
we couldn't have our cake  
so we ate eachother.

Roger McGough

# First Day At School

A millionbillionwillion miles from home  
Waiting for the bell to go. (To go where?)  
Why are they all so big, other children?  
So noisy? So much at home they  
Must have been born in uniform  
Lived all their lives in playgrounds  
Spent the years inventing games  
That don't let me in. Games  
That are rough, that swallow you up.

And the railings.  
All around, the railings.  
Are they to keep out wolves and monsters?  
Things that carry off and eat children?  
Things you don't take sweets from?  
Perhaps they're to stop us getting out  
Running away from the lessins. Lessin.  
What does a lessin look like?  
Sounds small and slimy.  
They keep them in the classrooms.  
Whole rooms made out of glass. Imagine.

I wish I could remember my name  
Mummy said it would come in useful.  
Like wellies. When there's puddles.  
Yellowwellies. I wish she was here.  
I think my name is sewn on somewhere  
Perhaps the teacher will read it for me.  
Tea-cher. The one who makes the tea.

Roger McGough

# Goodbat Nightman

God bless all policemen  
and fighters of crime,  
May thieves go to jail  
for a very long time.

They've had a hard day  
helping clean up the town,  
Now they hang from the mantelpiece  
both upside down.

A glass of warm blood  
and then straight up the stairs,  
Batman and Robin  
are saying their prayers.

\* \* \*

They've locked all the doors  
and they've put out the bat,  
Put on their batjamas  
(They like doing that)

They've filled their batwater-bottles  
made their batbeds,  
With two springy battresses  
for sleepy batheads.

They're closing red eyes  
and they're counting black sheep,  
Batman and Robin  
are falling asleep.

Roger McGough

## Kinetic Poem No.2

with love  
give me your hand  
some stranger  
is fiction than truth

without love  
I'm just a has  
been away  
too long in the tooth.

Roger McGough

# Let Me Die A Youngman's Death

Let me die a youngman's death  
not a clean and inbetween  
the sheets holywater death  
not a famous-last-words  
peaceful out of breath death

When I'm 73  
and in constant good tumour  
may I be mown down at dawn  
by a bright red sports car  
on my way home  
from an allnight party

Or when I'm 91  
with silver hair  
and sitting in a barber's chair  
may rival gangsters  
with hamfisted tommyguns burst in  
and give me a short back and insides

Or when I'm 104  
and banned from the Cavern  
may my mistress  
catching me in bed with her daughter  
and fearing for her son  
cut me up into little pieces  
and throw away every piece but one

Let me die a youngman's death  
not a free from sin tiptoe in  
candle wax and waning death  
not a curtains drawn by angels borne  
'what a nice way to go' death

Roger McGough



# Mrs Moon

Mrs Moon  
sitting up in the sky  
little old lady  
rock-a-bye  
with a ball of fading light  
and silvery needles  
knitting the night

Roger McGough

# Q

I join the queue  
We move up nicely.

I ask the lady in front  
What are we queuing for.  
'To join another queue,'  
She explains.

'How pointless,' I say,  
'I'm leaving.' She points  
To another long queue.  
'Then you must get in line.'

I join the queue.  
We move up nicely.

Roger McGough

# Soil

we've ignored each other for a long time  
and I'm strictly an indoor man  
anytime to call would be the wrong time  
I'll avoid you as long as I can

When I was a boy we were good friends  
I made pies out of you when you were wet  
And in childhood's remembered summer weather  
We roughandtumbled together  
We were very close

just you and me and the sun  
the world a place for having fun  
always so much to be done

But gradually I grew away from you  
Of course you were still there  
During my earliest sexcapades  
When I roughandfumbled  
Not very well after bedtime  
But suddenly it was winter  
And you seemed so cold and dirty  
That I stayed indoors and acquired  
A taste for girls and clean clothes

we found less and less to say  
you were jealous so one day  
I simply upped and moved away

I still called to see you on occasions  
But we had little now in common  
And my visits grew less frequent  
Until finally  
One coldbright April morning  
A handful of you drummed  
On my fathers waxworked coffin

at last it all made sense  
there was no need for pretence

you said nothing in defence

And now recently  
While travelling from town to town  
Past where you live  
I have become increasingly aware  
Of you watching me out there.  
Patient and unforgiving  
Toying with the trees.

we've avoided each other for a long time  
and I'm strictly a city man  
anytime to call would be the wrong time  
I'll avoid you as long as I can

Roger McGough

# Survivor

Everyday,  
I think about dying.  
About disease, starvation,  
violence, terrorism, war,  
the end of the world.

It helps  
keep my mind off things.

Roger McGough

# The Identification

So you think its Stephen?  
Then I'd best make sure  
Be on the safe side as it were.  
Ah, theres been a mistake. The hair  
you see, its black, now Stephens fair ...  
Whats that? The explosion?  
Of course, burnt black. Silly of me.  
I should have known. Then lets get on.

The face, is that the face mask?  
that mask of charred wood  
blistered scarred could  
that have been a child's face?  
The sweater, where intact, looks  
in fact all too familiar.  
But one must be sure.

The scoutbelt. Yes thats his.  
I recognise the studs he hammered in  
not a week ago. At the age  
when boys get clothes-conscious  
now you know. Its almost  
certainly Stephen. But one must  
be sure. Remove all trace of doubt.  
Pull out every splinter of hope.

Pockets. Empty the pockets.  
Handkerchief? Could be any schoolboy's.  
Dirty enough. Cigarettes?  
Oh this can't be Stephen.  
I dont allow him to smoke you see.  
He wouldn't disobey me. Not his father.  
But that's his penknife. Thats his alright.  
And thats his key on the keyring  
Gran gave him just the other night.  
Then this must be him.

I think I know what happened  
... .. about the cigarettes

No doubt he was minding them  
for one of the older boys.  
Yes thats it.  
Thats him.  
Thats our Stephen.

Roger McGough

# The Leader

I wanna be the leader  
I wanna be the leader  
Can I be the leader?  
Can I? I can?  
Promise? Promise?  
Yippee I'm the leader  
I'm the leader

OK what shall we do?

Roger McGough



# The Lesson

Chaos ruled OK in the classroom  
as bravely the teacher walked in  
the nooligans ignored him  
his voice was lost in the din

'The theme for today is violence  
and homework will be set  
I'm going to teach you a lesson  
one that you'll never forget'

He picked on a boy who was shouting  
and throttled him then and there  
then garrotted the girl behind him  
(the one with grotty hair)

Then sword in hand he hacked his way  
between the chattering rows  
'First come, first severed' he declared  
'fingers, feet or toes'

He threw the sword at a latecomer  
it struck with deadly aim  
then pulling out a shotgun  
he continued with his game

The first blast cleared the backrow  
(where those who skive hang out)  
they collapsed like rubber dinghies  
when the plug's pulled out

'Please may I leave the room sir? '  
a trembling vandal enquired  
'Of course you may' said teacher  
put the gun to his temple and fired

The Head popped a head round the doorway  
to see why a din was being made  
nodded understandingly  
then tossed in a grenade

And when the ammo was well spent  
with blood on every chair  
Silence shuffled forward  
with its hands up in the air

The teacher surveyed the carnage  
the dying and the dead  
He wagged a finger severely  
'Now let that be a lesson' he said

Roger McGough

# The Sound Collector

A stranger called this morning  
Dressed all in black and grey  
Put every sound into a bag  
And carried them away

The whistling of the kettle  
The turning of the lock  
The purring of the kitten  
The ticking of the clock

The popping of the toaster  
The crunching of the flakes  
When you spread the marmalade  
The scraping noise it makes

The hissing of the frying pan  
The ticking of the grill  
The bubbling of the bathtub  
As it starts to fill

The drumming of the raindrops  
On the windowpane  
When you do the washing-up  
The gurgle of the drain

The crying of the baby  
The squeaking of the chair  
The swishing of the curtain  
The creaking of the stair

A stranger called this morning  
He didn't leave his name  
Left us only silence  
Life will never be the same

Roger McGough

# The Time I Like Best

The time I like best is 6am  
when the snow is 6 inches deep  
which I'm yet to discover  
'cause I'm under the covers  
fast, fast asleep.

Roger McGough

# The Trouble With Snowmen

'The trouble with snowmen,'  
Said my father one year  
'They are no sooner made  
than they just disappear.

I'll build you a snowman  
And I'll build it to last  
Add sand and cement  
And then have it cast.

And so every winter,'  
He went on to explain  
'You shall have a snowman  
Be it sunshine or rain.'

And that snowman still stands  
Though my father is gone  
Out there in the garden  
Like an unmarked gravestone.

Staring up at the house  
Gross and misshapen  
As if waiting for something  
Bad to happen.

For as the years pass  
And I grow older  
When summers seem short  
And winters colder.

The snowmen I envy  
As I watch children play  
Are the ones that are made  
And then fade away.

Roger McGough

# You And I

I explain quietly. You  
hear me shouting. You  
try a new tack. I  
feel old wounds reopen.

You see both sides. I  
see your blinkers. I  
am placatory. You  
sense a new selfishness.

I am a dove. You  
recognize the hawk. You  
offer an olive branch. I  
feel the thorns.

You bleed. I  
see crocodile tears. I  
withdraw. You  
reel from the impact.

Roger McGough