

Classic Poetry Series

Campbell McGrath
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Campbell McGrath(1962 -)

Cambell McGrath is a notable modern American poet. He is the author of nine full-length collections of poetry, including his most recent, *Seven Notebooks* (Ecco Press, 2008), *Shannon: A Poem of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Ecco Press, 2009), and *In the Kingdom of the Sea Monkeys* (Ecco Press, forthcoming, 2012).

Life

McGrath was born in Chicago, Illinois, and grew up in Washington, D.C., where he attended Sidwell Friends School; among his classmates was the poet Elizabeth Alexander. He received his B.A. from the University of Chicago in 1984 and his MFA from Columbia University's creative writing program in 1988, where he was classmates with Rick Moody. He currently lives in Miami Beach, Florida, and teaches creative writing at Florida International University, where his students have included Richard Blanco, Susan Briante, Jay Snodgrass and Emma Trelles. He is married to Elizabeth Lichtenstein, whom he met while he was an undergraduate; they have two sons.

Music

In the early 1980s, while a student at the University of Chicago, he was a member of the punk band Men From The Manly Planet.

Awards

McGrath has been recognized by some of the most prestigious American poetry awards, including the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award (for *The Bob Hope Poem in Spring Comes to Chicago*, his third book of poems), a Pushcart Prize, the Academy of American Poets Prize, a Ploughshares Cohen Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Witter Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress, and a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Award." In 2011 he was named a Fellow of United States Artists.

Works

While primarily known as a poet, McGrath has also written a play, "The Autobiography of Edvard Munch" (produced by Concrete Gothic Theater, Chicago, 1983); a libretto for Orlando Garcia's experimental video opera "Transcending Time" (premiered at the New Music Biennale, Zagreb, Croatia, 2009);

collaborated with the video artist John Stuart on the video/poetry piece "14 Views of Miami" (premiered at The Wolfsonian, Miami, 2008); and translated the Aristophanes play *The Wasps* for the Penn Greek Drama Series.

An Irish Word

Canny has always been an Irish word
to my ear, so too its cousin crafty,
suggesting not only an appreciation of close-work,
fine-making, handwrought artistry,

but a highly evolved reliance on one's wits to survive,
stealth in the shadow of repressive institutions,
"silence, exile, and cunning," in Joyce's admonition,
ferret-sly, fox-quick, silvery, and elusive.

Craft, akin to croft—
a shepherd's crooked hawthorn staff,
wind-polished wolds and peat-spent moorlands
high in the Blue Stack Mountains.

Akin to draught—a pint of creamy stout
or a good stout draught horse
or a draughty old house
like the one in which my grandfather was born

near Drimnaherk, slate-roofed, hard-angled,
ringed by thistles in a soil-starved coomb.
His four brothers left home
bound for Australia, South Africa, Liverpool, and Los Angeles

losing track of each other at once and forever
as if to loose the hawsers and set sail
were to sever every filial tether.
His name was Francis Daniel Campbell

but my grandmother Anna was a Monaghan
and her people had been
Maguires, Morans, Mohans, Meehans,
and other alliterative, slant-rhymed clans

all the way back to the nameless
bog dwellers and kine folk.
When her father died suddenly in New York,
he left three baby daughters and a widowed seamstress

with no recourse but retreat
to the old Rose Cottage overlooking Donegal Bay
in a parish of trellised thorns and ricked hay,
taking in mending and needlework to eat.

Market days they rode the train into Derry
to sell embroidered linens and hand-tatted lace,
kerchiefs monogrammed z to a.
She was nearing thirty

when she married and recrossed the Atlantic
and from her my own mother
had a recipe for soda bread, piles of drop-stitch
tablecloths, and a small stoneware pitcher

hand-painted in folksy script—
Be Canny Wi' the Cream.
Nothing could move my brother and I to screams
of laughter like that tiny pitcher,

so serious of purpose, so quaintly archaic,
as we slurped down bowls of Frosted Flakes
before school in the breakfast nook.
The scrupulous economy of the world it bespoke,

the frugality toward which it gestured,
were as inscrutable to us then
as the great sea cliffs at Slieve League when
we drove to the top at Amharc Mór

on a road so thickly fleeced with mist
we might have been lost if not for the sheep
materializing like guardian imps,
imperturbable creatures, black-faced ephreets,

the ocean one vast, invisible gong
struck by padded mallets or mailed fists.
Amharc Mór means “the grand view” in Irish
but all we saw was fog.

Charlie Parker (1950)

Bird is building a metropolis with his horn.
Here are the gates of Babylon, the walls of Jericho cast down.
Might die in Chicago, Kansas City's where I was born.

Snowflake in a blizzard, purple rose before the thorn.
Stone by stone, note by note, atom by atom, noun by noun,
Bird is building a metropolis with his horn.

Uptown, downtown, following the river to its source,
Savoy, Three Deuces, Cotton Club, Lenox Lounge.
Might just die in Harlem, Kansas City's where I was born.

Bird is an abacus of possibility, Bird is riding the horse
of habit and augmented sevenths. King without a crown,
Bird is building a metropolis with his horn.

Bred to the labor of it, built to claw an eye from the storm,
made for the lowdown, the countdown, the breakdown.
Might die in Los Angeles, Kansas City's where I was born.

Bridge by bridge, solo by solo, set by set, chord by chord,
woodshed to penthouse, blue to black to brown,
Charlie Parker is building a metropolis with his horn.
Might just die in Birdland, Kansas City's where I was born.

Campbell McGrath

Dawn

5am: the frogs
ask what is it, what is it?
It is what it is.

Campbell McGrath

EMILY AND WALT

I suppose we did not want for love.
They were considerate parents, if a bit aloof,

or more than a bit. He was a colossus
of enthusiasms, none of them us,

while she kissed our heads and mended socks
with a wistful, faraway look.

She might have been a little, well, daft.
And he—Allons, my little ones, he'd laugh,

then leave without us.
And those "friends" of his!

Anyway, he's gone off to "discover
himself" in San Francisco, or wherever,

while she's retired to the condo in Boca.
We worry, but she says she likes it in Florida;

she seems, almost, happy. I suppose they were
less caregivers than enablers,

they taught by example, reading for hours
in the draughty house and now the house is ours,

with its drawers full of junk and odd
lines of verse and stairs that ascend to God

knows where, belfries and gymnasia,
the chapel, the workshop, aviaries, atria—

we can never hope to fill it all.
Our voices are too small

for its silences, too weak to spawn an echo.
Sometimes, even now, when the night-wind blows

into the chimney flue
I start from my bed, calling out—"Hello,
Mom and Dad, is that you?"

Campbell McGrath

Hemingway Dines On Boiled Shrimp And Beer

I'm the original two-hearted brawler.
I gnaw the scrawny heads from prawns,
pummel those mute, translucent crustaceans,
wingless hummingbirds, salt-water spawned.
As the Catalonians do, I eat the eyes at once.
My brawny palms flatten their mainstays.
I pop the shells with my thumbs, then crunch.

Just watch me as I swagger and sprawl,
spice-mad and sated, then dabble in lager
before I go strolling for stronger waters
down to Sloppy Joe' stride as I stagger
shivers the islands, my fingers troll a thousand keys.
My appetite shakes the rock of the nation.
The force of my fiction makes the mighty Gulf Stream.

Campbell McGrath

Joseph Brodsky In Venice (1981)

La Serenissima, in morning light, is beautiful.
But you already knew that.
Palette of honeyed ochre and ship's bell bronze,
water precisely the color of the hand-ground pigment
with which the water of Venice has been painted for
centuries,
angled slats of aquamarine chopped by wakes to agate,
matte black backlit with raw opal
and anodized aluminum, rope-work of wisteria, wands
of oleander emerging from hidden gardens. At noon,
near the boat-yard of the last gondola maker, a violin echoes
from deep inside an empty cistern.
Lo and behold. Ecco.
A swirl of wind-blown ashes from yet another cigarette
and for a moment you see December snow
in Saint Petersburg, the Lion's Bridge, crystalline halo
crowning Akhmatova's defiant silhouette.
Sunset: bitter orange and almond milk,
sepia retinting the canals with cartographer's ink
as you study the small gray lagoon crabs
patrolling a kingdom of marble slabs
descending into the depths; rising almost imperceptibly,
the tide licks at, kisses, then barely spills
across the top step's foot-worn, weed-velveted lip
in slippery caravans, dust-laden rivulets.
So another day's cargo of terrestrial grit
enriches their scuttled realm,
and they make haste, like drunken pirates in a silent film,
erratically but steadfastly, to claim it.

Campbell McGrath

LATE SPRING

The kingdom of perception is pure emptiness

Po Chü-i

1

I have faltered in my appointed duty.
It is a small sacrilege, a minor heresy.

The nature of the duty is close attention
to the ivy and its tracery on riled brick,

the buckled sidewalk, the optimistic fern,
downed lilacs brown as coffee grounds,

little twirled seedwings falling by the thousands
from the maples in May wind,

and the leaves themselves
daily greener in ripening sunlight.

To whom is their offering rendered,
and from whom derived,

these fallen things
urging their bodies upon the pavement?

There is a true name for them,
a proper term, but what is it?

2

All day I was admonished
to admire the beauty of this single peony

but only now, in late starlight,
do I crush its petals to my face.

Elemental silk dimmed to ash,
reddening already to the brushstroke of dawn,

its fragrance is a tendril
connecting my mind to the rain,

a root, a tap, a tether.
Casting about, lachrymose, branches

of the trees at first light
flush with upthrust flowers

like white candles in blackened sconces.
Such is the form of the duty,

but which is its officer,
the world or the senses?

The many languages of birds now,
refusing to reconcile,

and clouds streaming out of the darkness
like ants to the day's bound blossom.

Campbell McGrath

My Sadness

Another year is coming to an end
but my old t-shirts will not be back—

the pea-green one from Trinity College,
gunked with streaks of lawnmower grease,

the one with orange bat wings
from Diamond Cavern, Kentucky,

vanished
without a trace.

After a two-day storm I wander the beach
admiring the ocean's lack of attachment.

I huddle beneath a seashell,
lonely as an exile.

My sadness is the sadness of water fountains.
My sadness is as ordinary as these gulls

importuning for Cheetos or scraps
of peanut butter sandwiches.

Feed them a single crust
and they will never leave you alone.

Campbell McGrath

Nights On Planet Earth

Heaven was originally precisely that: the starry sky, dating back to the earliest Egyptian texts, which include magic spells that enable the soul to be sewn in the body of the great mother, Nut, literally 'night,' like the seed of a plant, which is also a jewel and a star. The Greek Elysian fields derive from the same celestial topography: the Egyptian 'Field of Rushes,' the eastern stars at dawn where the soul goes to be purified. That there is another, mirror world, a world of light, and that this world is simply the sky—and a step further, the breath of the sky, the weather, the very air—is a formative belief of great antiquity that has continued to the present day with the godhead becoming brightness itself: dios/theos (Greek); deus/divine/diana (Latin); devas (Sanskrit); daha (Arabic); day (English).

—Susan Brind Morrow, *Wolves and Honey*

1

Gravel paths on hillsides amid moon-drawn vineyards,
click of pearls upon a polished nightstand
soft as rainwater, self-minded stars, oboe music
distant as the grinding of icebergs against the hull
of the self and the soul in the darkness
chanting to the ecstatic chance of existence.
Deep is the water and long is the moonlight
inscribing addresses in quicksilver ink,
building the staircase a lover forever pauses upon.
Deep is the darkness and long is the night,
solid the water and liquid the light. How strange
that they arrive at all, nights on planet earth.

2

Sometimes, not often but repeatedly, the past invades my dreams in the form of a familiar neighborhood I can no longer locate, a warren of streets lined with dark cafés and unforgettable bars, a place where I can sing by heart every song on every jukebox, a city that feels the way the skin of an octopus looks pulse-changing from color to color, laminar and fluid and electric, a city of shadow-draped churches, of busses on dim avenues, or riverlights, or canyonlands, but always a city, and wonderful, and lost.
Sometimes it resembles Amsterdam, students from the ballet school like fanciful

gazelles shooting pool in pink tights and soft, shapeless sweaters,
or Madrid at 4AM, arguing the 18th Brumaire with angry Marxists, or Manhattan
when the snowfall crowns every trash-can king of its Bowery stoop,
or Chicago, or Dublin, or some ideal city of the imagination, as in a movie you
can neither remember entirely nor completely forget,
barracuda-faced men drinking sake like yakuza in a Harukami novel, women
sipping champagne or arrack, the rattle of beaded curtains in the back,
the necklaces of Christmas lights reflected in raindrops on windows, the taste of
peanuts and their shells crushed to powder underfoot,
always real, always elusive, always a city, and wonderful, and lost. All night I
wander alone, searching in vain for the irretrievable.

3

In the night I will drink from a cup of ashes and yellow paint.
In the night I will gossip with the clouds and grow strong.
In the night I will cross rooftops to watch the sea tremble in a dream.
In the night I will assemble my army of golden carpenter ants.
In the night I will walk the towpath among satellites and cosmic dust.
In the night I will cry to the roots of potted plants in empty offices.
In the night I will gather the feathers of pigeons in a honey jar.
In the night I will become an infant before your flag.

Campbell McGrath

Nox Borealis

If Socrates drank his portion of hemlock willingly,
if the Appalachians have endured unending ages of erosion,
if the wind can learn to read our minds
and moonlight moonlight as a master pickpocket,
surely we can contend with contentment as our commission.

Deer in a stubble field, small birds dreaming
unimaginable dreams in hollow trees,
even the icicles, darling, even the icicles shame us
with their stoicism, their radiant resolve.

Listen to me now: think of something you love
but not too dearly, so the night will steal from us
only what we can afford to lose.

Campbell McGrath

Pentatina for Five Vowels

Today is a trumpet to set the hounds baying.
The past is a fox the hunters are flaying.
Nothing unspoken goes without saying.
Love's a casino where lovers risk playing.
The future's a marker our hearts are prepaying.

The future's a promise there's no guaranteeing.
Today is a fire the field mice are fleeing.
Love is a marriage of feeling and being.
The past is a mirror for wishful sightseeing.
Nothing goes missing without absenteeing.

Nothing gets cloven except by dividing.
The future is chosen by atoms colliding.
The past's an elision forever eliding.
Today is a fog bank in which I am hiding.
Love is a burn forever debriding.

Love's an ascent forever plateauing.
Nothing is granted except by bestowing.
Today is an anthem the cuckoos are crowing.
The future's a convolute river onflowing.
The past is a lawn the neighbor is mowing.

The past is an answer not worth pursuing,
Nothing gets done except by the doing.
The future's a climax forever ensuing.
Love is only won by wooing.
Today is a truce between reaping and rueing.

Campbell McGrath

Releasing the Sherpas

The last two sherpas were the strongest,
faithful companions, their faces wind-peeled,
streaked with soot and glacier-light on the snowfield
below the summit where we stopped to rest.

The first was my body, snug in its cap of lynx-
fur, smelling of yak butter and fine mineral dirt,
agile, impetuous, broad-shouldered,
alive to the frozen bite of oxygen in the larynx.

The second was my intellect, dour and thirsty,
frowning its fox-like brow, my calculating brain
searching for some cairn or chasm to explain
my decision to send them back without me.

Looking down from the next, ax-cleft serac
I saw them turn and dwindle and felt unafraid.
Blind as a diamond, sun-pure and rarefied,
whatever I was then, there was no turning back.

Campbell McGrath

Shopping For Pomegranates At Wal-Mart On New Year's Day

Beneath a ten-foot-tall apparition of Frosty the Snowman with his corncob pipe and jovial, over-eager, button-black eyes, holding, in my palm, the leathery, wine-colored purse of a pomegranate, I realize, yet again, that America is a country about which I understand everything and nothing at all, that this is life, this ungovernable air in which the trees rearrange their branches, season after season, never certain which configuration will bear the optimal yield of sunlight and water, the enabling balm of nutrients, that so, too, do Wal-Mart's ferocious sales managers relentlessly analyze their end-cap placement, product mix, and shopper demographics, that this is the culture in all its earnestness and absurdity, that it never rests, that each day is an eternity and every night is New Year's Eve, a cavalcade of B-list has-beens entirely unknown to me, needy comedians and country singers in handsome Stetsons, sitcom stars of every social trope and ethnic denomination, pugilists and oligarchs, femmes fatales and anointed virgins throat-slit in offering to the cannibal throng of Times Square. Who are these people? I grow old. I lie unsleeping as confetti falls, ash-girdled, robed in sweat and melancholy, click-shifting from QVC to reality TV, strings of commercials for breath freshener, debt reconsolidation, a new car lacking any whisper of style or grace, like a final fetid gasp from the lips of a dying Henry Ford, potato-faced actors impersonating real people with real opinions offered forth with idiot grins in the yellow, herniated studio light, actual human beings, actual souls bought too cheaply. That it never ends, O Lord, that it never ends! That it is relentless, remorseless, and it is on right now. That one sees it and sees it but sometimes it sees you, too, cowering in a corner, transfixed by the crawler for the storm alert, home videos of faces left dazed by the twister, the car bomb, the war always beginning or already begun, always the special report, the inside scoop, the hidden camera revealing the mechanical lives of the sad, inarticulate people we have come to know as "celebrities."

Who assigns such value, who chose these craven avatars
if not the miraculous hand of the marketplace,
whose torn cuticles and gaudily painted fingernails resemble nothing
so much as our own? Where does the oracle reveal our truths
more vividly than upon that pixillated spirit glass
unless it is here, in this tabernacle of homely merchandise,
a Copernican model of a money-driven universe
revolving around its golden omphalos, each of us summed
and subtalled, integers in an equation of need and consumption,
desire and consummation, because Hollywood had it right all along,
the years are a montage of calendar pages and autumn leaves,
sheet music for a nostalgic symphony of which our lives comprise
but single trumpet blasts, single notes in the hullabaloo,
or even less—we are but motes of dust in that atmosphere
shaken by the vibrations of time's imperious crescendo.
That it never ends, O Lord. That it goes on,
without pause or cessation, without pity or remorse.
That we have willed it into existence, dreamed it into being.
That it is our divine monster, our factotum, our scourge.
That I can imagine nothing more beautiful
than to propitiate such a god upon the seeds of my own heart.

Campbell McGrath

The Everglades

Green and blue and white, it is a flag
for Florida stitched by hungry ibises.

It is a paradise of flocks, a cornucopia
of wind and grass and dark, slow waters.

Turtles bask in the last tatters of afternoon,
frogs perfect their symphony at dusk—

in its solitude we remember ourselves,
dimly, as creatures of mud and starlight.

Clouds and savannahs and horizons,
its emptiness is an antidote, its ink

illuminates the manuscript of the heart.
It is not ours though it is ours

to destroy or preserve, this the kingdom
of otter, kingfisher, alligator, heron.

If the sacred is a river within us, let it flow
like this, serene and magnificent, forever.

Campbell McGrath

The Human Heart

We construct it from tin and ambergris and clay,
ochre, graph paper, a funnel
of ghosts, whirlpool
in a downspout full of midsummer rain.

It is, for all its freedom and obstinence,
an artifact of human agency
in its maverick intricacy
its chaos reflected in earthly circumstance,

its appetites mirrored by a hungry world
like the lights of the casino
in the coyote's eye. Old
as the odor of almonds in the hills around Solano,

filigreed and cancelled with the flavor of blood oranges,
fashioned from moonlight,
yarn, nacre, cordite,
shaped and assembled valve by valve, flange by flange,

and finished with the carnal fire of interstellar dust.
We build the human heart
and lock it in its chest
and hope that what we have made can save us.

Campbell McGrath

The Prose Poem □

On the map it is precise and rectilinear as a chessboard, though driving past you would hardly notice it, this boundary line or ragged margin, a shallow swale that cups a simple trickle of water, less rill than rivulet, more gully than dell, a tangled ditch grown up throughout with a fearsome assortment of wildflowers and bracken. There is no fence, though here and there a weathered post asserts a former claim, strands of fallen wire taken by the dust. To the left a cornfield carries into the distance, dips and rises to the blue sky, a rolling plain of green and healthy plants aligned in close order, row upon row upon row. To the right, a field of wheat, a field of hay, young grasses breaking the soil, filling their allotted land with the rich, slow-waving spectacle of their grain. As for the farmers, they are, for the most part, indistinguishable: here the tractor is red, there yellow; here a pair of dirty hands, there a pair of dirty hands. They are cultivators of the soil. They grow crops by pattern, by acre, by foresight, by habit. What corn is to one, wheat is to the other, and though to some eyes the similarities outweigh the differences it would be as unthinkable for the second to commence planting corn as for the first to switch over to wheat. What happens in the gully between them is no concern of theirs, they say, so long as the plough stays out, the weeds stay in the ditch where they belong, though anyone would notice the wind-sewn cornstalks poking up their shaggy ears like young lovers run off into the bushes, and the kinship of these wild grasses with those the farmer cultivates is too obvious to mention, sage and dun-colored stalks hanging their noble heads, hoarding exotic burrs and seeds, and yet it is neither corn nor wheat that truly flourishes there, nor some jackalopian hybrid of the two. What grows in that place is possessed of a beauty all its own, ramshackle and unexpected, even in winter, when the wind hangs icicles from the skeletons of briars and small tracks cross the snow in search of forgotten grain; in the spring the little trickle of water swells to welcome frogs and minnows, a muskrat, a family of turtles, nesting doves in the verdant grass; in summer it is a thoroughfare for raccoons and opossums, field mice, swallows and black birds, migrating egrets, a passing fox; in autumn the geese avoid its abundance, seeking out windrows of toppled stalks, fatter grain more quickly discerned, more easily digested. Of those that travel the local road, few pay that fertile hollow any mind, even those with an eye for what blossoms, vetch and timothy, early forsythia, the fatted calf in the fallow field, the rabbit running for cover, the hawk's descent from the lightning-struck tree. You've passed this way yourself many times, and can tell me, if you would, do the formal fields end where the valley begins, or does everything that surrounds us emerge from its embrace?

VILLANELLE

Bouncing along like a punch-drunk bell,
its Provençal shoes too tight for English feet,
the villanelle is a form from hell.

Balletic as a tapir, strong as a gazelle,
strict rhyme and formal meter keep a beat
as tiresome as a punch-drunk bell-

hop talking hip hop at the IHOP—no substitutions
on menu items, no fries with the chimichanga,
no extra syrup—what the hell

was that? Where did my rhyme go—uh, compel—
almost missed it again, damn, can you feel the heat
coming off this sucker? Red hot! Ding! (Sound of a bell.)

Hey, do I look like a bellhop to you, like an el-
evator operator, like a trained monkey or a parakeet
singing in my cage? Get the hell

out of the Poetry Hotel!
defeat mesquite tis mete repeat
Bouncing along like a punch-drunk bell,
the villanelle is a form from—Write it!—hell.

Campbell McGrath