Releasing the Sherpas (2012) – Campbell McGrath

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,   
furrowing 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.

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Excerpt From: Nagasaki, Uncle Walt, the Escatology of America’s Century (1993)

Campbell McGrath

The collective Purgatorio of America’s century,

where the spirits of the departed compose a fluid societal matrix

embracing freedom of expression and laissez-faire economics,

democratic, nonsectarian, centrally air-conditioned,

lacking only a sense of higher purpose-altruism, *civitas*,

the numinous, the sacred-the Las Vegas of the soul,

complete with keno parlors and fast-food franchises,

laundromats and mobile homes and glassy office parks,

a necropolis populated by lonely souls of all descriptions

drinking 7-11 coffee on the way to work,

a mosaic we could tile with the pearl and ebony tessare

of our favorite cultural icons, JFK and LBJ,

Lucy Ricardo and Charlie Parker, Malcolm X

teaching self-empowerment at the local community college,

Speed Racer hunkered down in the grease pit at Jiffy Lube,

John Belushi playing the slots, Sylvia Plath perambulating Wal-Mart

for Jumbo packs of Pampers, the self-destroying angels,

we could make a suburb of their deaths: the Blue Deuce Lounge,

where Hank Williams and Janis Joplin torch a plaintive duet

while Marilyn and James Dean slow dance in the dark;

Kerouac's Bar & Grill; Anne Sexton's Brake & Muffler;

Jarrell & O'Hara's Body Shop and Custom Re-

Finishing-Jackson Pollock is out back right now

air-brushing Chinese dragons on a baby-blue conversion van.

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Excerpt from “Commodity Fetishism in White City” Bob Hope Poem, Section III (1996) - Campbell McGrath

City of concrete, city of illusion, how to decipher such dialectical ambiguity?

How can I reconcile my affection with my anger, my need to criticize with my desire to praise?

If there’s only one Chicago, which is it: Thorstein Veblen’s or Milton Friedman’s, Gene Debs’s or Mayor Daley’s, Studs Lonigan’s or Bigger Thomas’s,

the White City, the Gray City, the Black city abandoned to sift through the ashes?

If no man is an island, why was Daniel Burnham buried on one?

If even this utopian visionary elects for himself eternal isolation what hope can there be for any commonweal?

What does it mean that Louis Sullivan ended in impoverished oblivion, tormented by the shadows of the skyscrapers he designed?

Can it be a mere coincidence that the balloon-frame building method was invented by a man named Snow—

or else Augustine Deodat Taylor,

depending on which source you credit?

Have I mentioned that the Museum of Science and Industry is in fact the last vestige of the Columbian Exposition,

the former Palace of Fine Arts at the great fair, the only one of the White City’s temples built of actual stone?

Or that Lincoln logs were invented by John Lloyd Wright, first son of famous Frank?

What sort of diminutive Oedipal revenge is this: Laius stabbed to death by a toothpick, modernism brought down by Lilliputian arrows?

How can I account for my love of this place?

Is it simply nostalgia, that I was born here, that my son, so soon, presumably will be?

Could it really be as simple as fathers and sons, that ancient, atavistic, blood-weary principle?

What voice is this that issues from the deep well of the past?

Who calls to me from that vast assemblage?

All this, all this—and what?

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Reading Emily Dickinson at Jiffy Lube (2019) – Campbell McGrath

Sitting in the waiting room at Jiffy Lube, reading Emily Dickinson and watching a rerun of Matlock, I realize that my life is exactly like this moment, when Andy Griffith turns to the jury, beaming his most grandfatherly, country-wise smile, ready to unmask the killer, and says—and says—well, they’ve cut to a commercial, I don’t know what he says.

But then it wouldn’t be much of a mystery if I did.

Anyway, I am old enough to know that guilt and innocence are relative virtues on daytime TV, and that even the present instant, with its brash odors of coffee and newspaper ink, its flocculent light, even this empire of the senses is an abiding enigma.

If I should live to be one hundred, in the year A.D. 2062, I will have seen the 200th anniversary of the annus mirabilis in which Emily Dickinson wrote three hundred poems while the Civil War raged at its most horrifying intensity,

and my own birth, half a century ago, will mark a fulcrum between those time-vaulting poles—

between the bloodletting at Shiloh and Antietam, while Emily, in her solitude, penciled stanzas on scraps of wrapping paper and torn envelopes, cuttings from a landscape of fertile ingenuity, a marvelous mental garden, the undiscovered continent of the self—

and the imponderable far-off future,

when new technologies will empower us and new populations seethe with needs and the oceans shall have risen to consume this fragile sandbar on which I have injudiciously staked my claim,

and if so, this moment, right now, would mark a similar midpoint in my own life, though five more decades seems unlikely,”

and I am old enough to know that I will never be Emily Dickinson.

I am old enough to recognize that justice is a prime-time fable, that the moon smiles down upon the savage and the merciful alike, old enough to understand that I will never live in the desert, which makes me sad, though I fear the desert instinctively and would never want to live there.

Still one takes comfort in imagining the contours of a life in Arizona, a life of Franciscan austerity in Bend, Oregon.

One imagines all the barrier islands and beach towns up and down the East Coast swallowed by the tantalizing waters of the Atlantic Ocean, all the taffy shops and nail salons of the Jersey Shore, the skate punks in the parking lot of the convenience store and the headbanger at the register of the convenience store and the buying of condoms and six-packs of Smirnoff Ice, a place so inimitable “and ass-kicking I can already hear the pulsating guitar-and-glockenspiel intro of “Born to Run” unrolling its red carpet to my heart, a song that remains a primary text of American male identity, like The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, and being hokum, being a confection of swagger and tattered glory, subtracts nothing from its legend, and when I think of Bruce Springsteen’s improbable rise to eloquence, his silent and bitter father, his bantam insecurities, his boardwalk voice and secondhand guitar, I am reminded that no act of self-expression is unrealizable here, and when I think of him now, defanged but uncorrupted, chugging through soggy Dust Bowl ballads—

as if New Jersey were not the mythic equal of Oklahoma, as if “Atlantic City” were not a folk song as potent as any of Woody Guthrie’s—”

well, I guess we all lose our way, sooner or later, in America,

even Bruce Springsteen.

Oh, but there was a song sung, wasn’t there, eight maids a-milking and a bobtail nag, the morning after Thanksgiving and all the middle-aged stoners calling in to Z104 requesting REO Speedwagon?

There was a mystery solved, a day lived through, all sugar and oil, all lips and wind, a hat, a rabbit, a magic word.

Praise the sun’s masons assembling the sensorium from photons and scraps of subatomic shadow!

Praise images that leap from the mind like ninjas!

Praise Emily Dickinson’s folk-strumming daughters and Walt Whitman’s fuel-injected sons—*forth-steppers from the latent unrealized baby-days!*

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The Mercy Supermarket (2022)- Campbell McGrath

Everything is alive, everything is shimmering  
with vitality—the tomato rootlings  
in their fragile sheaths  
of soil, oil-colored worms in leaf mulch,  
pollen from the burst-open, canoe-shaped pods  
of the royal palms caught in the first  
imperious shafts of sunlight  
rising from the sea.  
One flower resembles a puff of red lint,  
another resembles a pig’s ear,  
every petal, in this light, painted with deep lucid  
particularity. Seconds flare like fireflies  
in a summer meadow  
though they are illusory, time is  
not a meadow but an ocean to be swum  
endlessly by starlight. Days die  
and so do we,  
banal, tedious, futile to protest  
yet still we argue, as if  
death were a rental-car agreement  
whose stipulations might be recalculated  
by a helpful service representative.  
Most days this silvery half-light is enough  
to nourish the fledglings skyward,  
to charge the battery  
of the heart. And later  
night will whisper  
encouragements in a language  
nobody really understands,  
no drama or falsity, just the moon above  
the Mercy Supermarket  
and the city beating its heart for the numberless,  
the unknowable, the unnamed.  
Who’s with me on Biscayne Boulevard tonight?  
Who else is in the market for a pint  
of papaya juice, a scruple of compassion?  
Would it help if we could itemize  
every lost or misbegotten soul,  
enter every name in a vellum registry?  
Would it summarize my life  
to list every object  
I have touched with these two hands?  
Yesterday I held for the first time  
an infant born two months ago in Chicago  
with a tiny glitch  
in the long arm of chromosome 17,  
the slightest of clerical errors,  
one skewed letter in an ever-cascading text,  
so how useful  
can any catalogue of particulars be?  
Why do we even have them—  
hands, thumbs,  
a heart,  
this jawbone I hear click  
as the rusty joints  
swing open and closed,  
like a drawbridge.  
I hear the thunk, thunk, thunk  
of ideas rebounding like rubber balls  
against the sturdy armor  
of my skull, ideas tasting of iron  
and childhood, like water from a garden hose.  
We want so much before it’s taken from us,  
objects cry out, the things  
of this world, they are magnificent,  
they glow—the radiance archive,  
everything that shines is in it.  
Still, the lemon tree levies a tax upon my soul.  
Flowers strike their tiny hammer blows.  
The city makes its thousand demands,  
the city is a honeycomb  
of needs. Stepping over a man  
curled like a fetus at the base of a light post  
with a sign—i have aids  
i am dying  
i am hungry please help—  
but the man, even if you wanted to help, is asleep,  
or unconscious—not dead, surely?—  
splayed amidst the overspill from a trash can  
of filth and doughnut sacks,  
entirely oblivious to the flood  
of kids still pouring from the high school  
around the corner  
on 16th Street, the mind recoils  
from their sizzling aura  
of sass and young-ram bravado,  
their cell phones and cartoon umbrellas and eyes  
fixed on a future  
that does not contain  
this broken man, or you, or anyone  
like you. But the man is  
real, he is  
here  
right now,  
wrapped in rain, and you  
tuck a five-dollar bill beneath his arm  
hoping for a measure of mercy  
no larger, perhaps, than a coffee cup,  
and though he does not move  
he begins, as you turn away, to speak—  
Thank you, you are a good person,  
may God bless you forever.  
Dearest god, I thank you  
for this blessing,  
though I cannot believe in it, or you.  
Nonetheless I honor your name  
for allowing me tenancy on this, your firmament,  
and I accept its provision as my lot.  
If sorrow is the sentence  
I will serve it.  
If pain is your message I receive it.  
Leaves are trembling  
in an otherwise imperceptible breeze,  
I watch their dance of accommodation and delight,  
moved by invisible forces.  
So, too, do I tremble, so am I moved.  
Right now, I tell you  
I am listening to something that says  
let it go, fear not, rise  
along with me  
into a sky the color of amethyst and copper dust.  
It is not a voice, it is not even a bird,  
but I am listening.  
I believe it may be the light  
itself speaking to me,  
because the sun has arrived, robed in gold,  
as the sun is continuously arriving  
at one horizon only to depart from another—  
it is perpetual daybreak, do you see,  
it is time’s corolla,  
time’s counterweight  
to the pendulum of our grief, it is  
that all-consuming journey into radiance, the dawn.

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Shopping for Pomegranates at Wal-Mart on New Year's Day (2010)

​Campbell McGrath

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 pixilated 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 subtotaled, integers in an equation of need and consumption,  
desire and consummation.

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Bonus Track – McGrath writes a poem about his Irish roots.

An Irish Word (2011) – Campbell McGrath

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.

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