

Thomas McGrath

Selected Poems



Thomas McGrath

November 20, 1916 [Sheldon, North Dakota] –

September 20, 1990 [Minneapolis, Minnesota]

McGrath grew up on a farm in Ransom County, North Dakota. He earned a B.A. from the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks. He was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship, at Oxford and also pursued post-graduate studies at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge where he studied with Cleanth Brooks, Alan Tate and Robert Penn Warren. He served in World War II before starting his Rhodes Scholarship. He moved to Los Angeles around 1950 and taught at Los Angeles State College (where he mentored Henri Coulette and was faculty advisor of *Statement* magazine). He was dismissed in connection with his appearance, as an unfriendly witness, before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1953. *Pictures of a Gone World*, a collection of shorter, satirical pieces, dedicated to his wife, Alice and to the memory of Edwin Rolfe, appeared in 1955. Sections of his best-known work, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, first appeared in the volume *Poetry Los Angeles I* (1959) which he co-edited with James Boyer May and Peter Yates (the entire poem was published in 1997 by Copper Canyon Press). Though only living in Los Angeles for a decade, McGrath was hugely influential, especially among the poets with left leanings and those associated with the journal *California Quarterly* and *Coastlines*. An exhibition, “Holy City Adrift: Thomas McGrath’s Los Angeles,” organized by Andrew Lyndon Knighton, was held at Cal State LA’s library in 2016.

Figures from a Double World. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955.

The Gates of Ivory, The Gates of Horn. Mainstream Publishers, 1957

Clouds. Melmont Publishers, 1959

The Beautiful Things. Vanguard Press, 1960

Letter to an Imaginary Friend, Part I. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1962

New and Selected Poems. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1964.

Letter to an Imaginary Friend

for Alice

IV

1.

The immortal girls, the summer manifestoes
Startle the buzzard in the corpse-bearing tree.

Explosion of daisies in the stricken field.
The lilac is lifting its lavender toward Arcturus...

Noon's incandescence, autonomy of night
Cracked open throttles on my resurrection bone
My moon-steered master, midnight fisherman
Bound for the Indies...

Coiffeur of dream, oh bright improbable gold!
The blonde-haired women, crowned as with surplus light,
Curls crisp as lettuce on their bellies porch
And slick and secret when the armpit yawns,
Hair! dimension of heat!

Lit by subliminal suns

That shrink their dresses half way up their thighs
It ripens outward.

Furry as a peach

It licks the hand that hungers at the knee;
And where the back and buttocks sweetly mate
Like queenly empires joined in natural peace
(Equation of the palm! 0 sweet division!)
Glints like shot silk. And where the pubis thrusts
Into my world to light me into dark
Is stiff and secret as a buried fence
Or bristles friendly as a welcome mat.

Yes: and those soft brunettes, their eyes like caves
Their third eye winking in the knowing dark!

O ox-eyed honeys with the wine dark hair,
Branches of midnight where all moon long and climbed
Punching our tickets on the train toward dawn—
How black your hair!

Belly of smoky wheat,
Buttocks of solid water, legs like a slow dream—
O, as to a citizen of Jupiter's moons
Your soft enormous breasts, over the bare horizon,
Loom, golden and dusky rose, tremendous planets
Pendulous...
Iris toward the nipple and the nipples pink, veiny
Shot with faint blue. . .
And your eyes, O magnificent black-haired women!
Invincibly glazed or wet as a pool-side stone,
Heavy with sleep; and your mouths wide and elastic
And your lips, thickened with heat, which your tongue keeps wetting!
Ah, woman with your ass as thick as a pillow,
With your thighs like deadfalls and the black nest of your sex
Like a midnight hungry quicksand where I drown!
Drown and am born. Upbome! Resurrected!
Starting the buzzard on my shoulder tree.
—I've come through your black pass many's the sunny night!

And the brown-haired women, slim, with their lenten graces,
Or short and thickset and busy as a bear,
Their knees dimpled and their hips slung like a hammock,
Their bellies snug to my gut as a flesh muff;
And the red-heads, electric, with their buttermilk skin,
And the tickle inside the knee, and their burning bush,
With its wise unsleeping bird, more dark than their eyebrows—
Bucking like goats, quicker than minks, randy
As the wild strawberry roan: Sunfishing by moonlight
They have ridden me into a stall where I sleep standing up.

2.

Sweet Jesus at morning! the queenly women of our youth!
The monumental creatures of our summer lust!
Sweet fantastic creatures, as full of juice as plums,

Pneumatic and backless as a functional dream—
Where are ye now?
Where were ye then, indeed?

Walking three-legged in the sexual haze,
Drifting toward the Lion on the bosomy hills of summer
In the hunting light, the marmareal bulge of the moon
I wooed them barebacked in the saddling heat.
First was Inez, her face a looney fiction,
Her bottom like concrete and her wrestling arms;
Fay with her breasts as hard as hand-grenades
(Whose father's shot gun dozed behind the door);
Barefooted Rose, found in the bottom lands
(We layed the flax as flat as forty horses,
The blue bells showering); Amy with her long hair
Drawn in mock modesty between long legs;
And Sandy with her car, who would be driving and do it;
And June who would roll you as in a barrel down hill
(The Gaelic torture); Gin with her snapping trap,
The heliotropic quim: locked in till daybreak;
Literary Esther, who could fox your copy,
And the double Gladys, one blonde, one black.

O great Kingdom of Fuck! And myself: plenipotentiary!
Under the dog star's blaze, in the high rooms of the moonlight,
In the doze and balance of the wide noon,
I hung my pennant from the top of the windy mast
Blue peter, sailing the want-not seas of the summers.
And under the coupling of the wheeling night
Muffled in flesh and clamped to the sweaty pelt
Of Blanche or Betty, threshing the green baroque
Stacks of the long hay—the burrs stuck in our crotch,
The dust thick in our throats so we sneezed in spasm—
Or flat on the floor, on the back seat of a car,
On a groaning trestle table in the Methodist Church basement,
And far in the fields, and high in the hills, and hot
And quick in the roaring cars: by the bridge, by the river,
In Troop Nine's dank log cabin where the Cheyenne flows:

By light, by dark, up on the roof, in the cellar,
In the rattling belfry where the bats complained,
Or backed against trees, or against the squealing fences,
Or belly to belly with no place to lie down
In the light of the dreaming moon.

3.

Dog watch and silence.

In the high school yard, the dust
Settles; of vanished cars, the vast nocturnal migrations.
Under the moon
Paler than flowers the condoms gleam on the lawn.
Delicate, blue
Fragrance of lilac drifts in the night air, purer,
Sweeter than moonlight.

The lilac points to Arcturus.
Points down the street to my Grandfather's clapboard house
To the gimcrack mouldering porch where a beehive sleeps in the wall,
Toward his Irish keening.

"Ay-you, Tom. Avoid the occasion of sin.
You're a quick hand with a book. Pick up an education
And don't run about be the night!

Boy, its a wide
Road runs down to hell and its clear coasting
And the skids are greased for the poor. Boy, be learning!"
And up to bed, past the squeaking third step, bearing
Through the whispering grandfather dust, in the bellowing night of my sex
My little learning (Gladys and Daisy) bearing
The golden apple of my discontent.

4.

The dust settles. Settles like time. The years
Swing round my head like birds.

It is fall, now, evening,
The long and lonesome season.
The car bumps on the wagon road. In the lights

The dust is thick. The cattle hump and shuffle.
The smell of the autumn river in the cold night air
Is wild and alien.

Out of the river pasture,
Out of the gone summer we drive the cattle.
They plod the road, blind in the carlights' dazzle,
Docile enough. The car bumps and complains.
Wally is driving. The car crawls in low gear
And the dash-light gleams in the hair of my littlest brother.
"Where will you go?" he says. "Is it far to the town
Where they keep the college?"

He is five years old, maybe seven.

"What will you learn to know?"

I know it is warm in the car. The night stiffens
With black frost but the car is warm.

What shall we learn

In the cold? In the cold country where the books are burning?
Across the classroom of the north forty
My father professes his love and labor.
In the black field, burnt now, where the flax
Small breakers ran, the Wobblies' footprint is buried.
A cold moon hangs in the trees.
"I hate September," says Wally. "The damn blank lonesome fields—
What will you learn anyway?"
And Jack says, sleepy, leaning his furry head
Into my side:
"Is it far? Is it long?"

5.

And returned then, up the coulee hills from the river
Later than gopher light, with the colder and older moon
Riding my back like a buzzard.

Past the squeaking third

Step on the grandfather stair, past the dusty
Belfry and Daisy caught in the lilac,
Past barns where the country wenches were singing like cardinal sins—
And do they sing in the dust still?

Do their bones

Sing in the golden dust in the stallion summers?

O small girls with your wide knowledge, you lead me
Into the continent of guilt and forgiving, where love is.
Thru the small gate of your sex I go into my kingdom.
Teachers of men! O hot, great-hearted women
The world turns still on the axis of your thighs!

