

 HarperCollins e-books



# Seven Notebooks

**Campbell McGrath**



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# Seven Notebooks

Poems

**Campbell McGrath**

 HarperCollins e-books

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# BLUEBERRY

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## NOTEBOOK



Then the imagination withdraws, drifts across the table  
to investigate the glass flowers rolled in cloth tape.

It hovers, probes the petals, some like galaxies,  
some like figs or seashells. Dutiful and penitent,

it shimmers back across the gulf of air,  
without a metaphor, to doze away the afternoon.

Rain.

Unseasonably hot day.

Imagination is the builder, the worker bee,  
but inspiration is the queen.

And when she leaves me, where does she go  
if not back to the hive to gorge on royal jelly,

back into her cave of winds, accumulating  
density, growing richer and darker,

like mercury in the bloodstream,

like extravagant honey.



Ocean like beaten metal removed from the cooling pail,  
mark of the hammer and tongs, the smith's signage,  
grain revealed as by pressure of the burin in a Japanese print,  
substantial, bodily, color of agave, color of bitter medicine,  
translucent only when the waves rise up to break at the bar,  
fingered by sun to the texture of meringue or Verano glass.

Miami is not famous for its seashells. This beach,  
continually eroded, is held together by borrowed sand,  
graded by tractors at dawn, willed into place by the tourism industry.

But today, after a weeklong barrage of northeast winds,  
it resembles the famous shell beds of Sanibel,  
though these are mostly bits and pieces arrayed in sinuous drifts,  
the frilled lips and spooned-out tails of horse and queen conchs,  
sponge tubes, varieties of seaweed and uprooted coral,  
tiny broken elkhorn infants, torn fans, punch cards,  
serrated disks and tribal ornaments, teeth, dismembered ears  
and bleached stone knuckles of a skeleton seeking restitution.

And the eye, from its cupola of privilege, scanning the wreckage  
to seize upon the unbroken cylinder of an olive shell,  
paired lightning whelks revolving in the wash,  
purple scallop overwritten with calcified worm tunnels—  
how does it know to seek out only perfect forms?





Breakfast: two clementines and a blueberry yogurt while reading Neruda on the porch. The students are agitating for me to teach the Whitman & Neruda seminar, a class I have promised and failed to deliver for how many years now? “Ode to Criticism.” “Ode to Eel Chowder.” Read this week that blueberries have been determined to be a nutritional super food, a mighty antioxidant endowed with mysterious power to supercharge the brain and all but assure eternal life. Yes, but will they cure my aching feet? My policy is to ignore bodily afflictions for at least six months, but my days of running on the beach appear to be at an end. Temporarily, I’d like to believe. I am a good patient, performing all the podiatrically prescribed exercises and therapeutic routines—ice, stretching, a stupid boot I must wear to sleep like an antipodal dunce cap to passively stretch my plantar fascia, the tendonlike bundle of tissue that underlies the arch of the foot and bears upon it the body’s weight, anatomical detail of which I have resided in delightful ignorance heretofore. As a rule, you notice the plantar fascia only when it cries out in pain. And then, if you continue to run on it, for weeks, and even months, I suppose you get what you deserve. Swimming is better anyway—I should take a swim in the ocean! But school is in session—there is work to be done! Beautiful morning, sunny and cool, the archway hidden beneath cascading alamanda blossoms the color of Irish butter. No, I do not feel like working, or exercising: I feel like reading poetry. “Ode to Laziness.” “Ode to Walt Whitman.” Still cannot grasp Neruda to my satisfaction. There is about him something of the conger eel, I believe. And something of the plantar fascia. And something of the blueberry.



Latin cousin to Achilles,  
architectural upholder  
bearing its magisterial bundle  
beneath an imperial arch,  
rods around ax  
around  
axle and axis,  
staunch stanchion of the canonical self,  
aquiline and august,  
tensile, earthly, planted  
and wound in sinewed plaits,  
  
inverted hammock  
on which the body rests its burden  
like a red-faced tourist  
in the shadow  
of a coconut palm,  
  
only now is your grievance  
made known to me,  
only now do I hear your cry,  
unenviable membrane,  
faithful attendant upon my every stride,  
tender sole, antipodal to the soul,

pale mirror to the palm

---

of this hand,

only now do I honor your service,

and my dignity is hobbled,

only now do I learn to address you by name,

and the Empire

trembles.



Flocks of ibis on old tractors in cleared fields sliding to sawgrass,

cartloads of corn, or mangoes, or clean fill dirt,

orchards of citrus and avocado, shade houses of the enigmatic orchid growers,

dusty horses in a crude corral fashioned from cypress limbs where the canal is edged with sugarcane  
and banana trees by the freight tracks

hard against the *Casa de Jesus*,

convicts collecting trash along the roadside in their FLA CRIMINAL JUSTICE jumpsuits with the SHERRIF'S  
DEPT school bus on the shoulder, joyless troopers overseeing what appears to be a collection of high  
school kids caught with bags of pot in the glove compartments of their Trans Ams,

security towers around the Krome Immigration Detention Center, razor-wire reefs on which the rough  
boats of the *loas* bound for Lavilokan have run aground,

gravel quarry gouging the template, coral rock pits and barrows,

panel truck offering shrimp and stone crab claws from the Keys,

pickups selling roasted corn or watermelons, pickups heading into the fields loaded with campesinos

faces of the Maya picking pole beans in the Florida sunshine,

Krome Avenue: the Third World starts here.

Midwinter, and we have come to pick strawberries and tomatoes, flowers and herbs, our annual nod to hunting and gathering, a voyage into the remnants of agricultural South Florida, vanishing order endangered as the legendary panther. Sure enough, Rainbow Farms has been swallowed by exurbia, and we must head farther south in search of a passable field, crossing the canals where anhinga hitch their wings to hang like swaths of drying fabric beside the dye vats on the rooftops of Marrakech, tree farms and nurseries on all sides, freeholds of the Old Floridians or *ranchitos* run by cronies of long-deposed caudillos, ranks of potted hibiscus and parti-colored bougainvillea, bromeliads, queen palms, Hawaiian dwarf ixora. When we finally find a strawberry field it's late afternoon and many have given up, but there are still a few families in the rows, hunched *abuelas* with five-gallon buckets they will never fill today, and I wander out among them and lose myself altogether.

The strawberries are not fully ripe—it is the cusp of the season—yet the field has been picked over;

we have come too early, and too late.

Lush, parsley-green, the plants spread their low stalks to flower like primitive daisies and I seek the telltale flash of red as I bend to part the dust-inoculated leaves, spooking the lazy honeybees, but mostly there is nothing, the berries are pale, fuzzed nubs. Of the rest what's left are the morbidly overripe, fly-ridden berries melted into purple froth and those just at the bursting brink of rot—in the morning, if you bring them home,

these will wear a blue-green fur, becoming themselves small farms, enterprising propagators of mold

But here's one perfect, heart-shaped berry, and half a row later, three more, in the shadows, overlooked. Where has my family gone? Where is everybody? I find myself abandoned in the fields, illumined by shafts of sunlight through lavender clouds, bodiless, unmoored and entirely happy.

White eggplant and yellow peppers—

colored lanterns of the Emperor!

Lobular, chalk-red, weevil-scarred tomatoes—

a dozen errant moons of Neptune!

Vidalia onions seized by their hair and lifted

to free a friendly giantess from the soil!

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Snapdragons!

They carry the intonation of Paris

on a rainy day in May, granitic odor of pears,

consensus of slate and watered silk.

Elizabeth snips a dozen stems

with flower shears

scented by stalks of sage,

rosemary, flowering basil, mint.

From here the city is everything to the east, endlessly ramified tile-roofed subdivisions of houses and garden apartments, strip malls, highway interchanges, intransigent farmers holding their patchwork dirt together with melons and leaf lettuce—the very next field has been harrowed and scoured and posted for sale—already in our years here it has come this far, a tidal wave of human habitation, a monocultural bumper crop. And to the west is the Everglades, reduced and denuded but secure, for the historical moment, buffered and cosseted, left hand protecting what the right seeks to destroy. And where they meet: this fertile border zone, contested marginland inhabited by those seeking refuge from the law or the sprawl or the iron custody of the market, those who would cross over in search of freedom, or shelter, or belief, those who would buy into this world and those who would be rid of it alike in their admiration and hope for and distrust of what they see. And what they see is this: Krome Avenue. What they see is the Historical Moment caged in formidable automobiles gorging on fast food, definitive commodities of the previous century to be supplanted by what? The next Historical Moment, and the next, like a plague of locusts descending upon the fields, or the fields descended upon, or these fields, now, just as they are.

This may be the end of it, I suspect, the last year we make this effort. The kids are getting older and less pliable, the alligators in the irrigation canals pushed ever farther west, carrying into the heart of the sawgrass the reflection of a world grown monstrous and profound. If so, I will miss the scratched hands and the cucumber vines, ranks of hibiscus focusing their radar on the sun, the taste of stolen strawberries eaten in the rows, chalky and unwashed, no matter their senselessness here, in fields reclaimed from subtropical swamp, these last remaining acres empty or picked over or blossoming o



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