

# **In the Night Field**

Cameron McGill

Augury Books • Brooklyn, New York

*In the Night Field*

© 2021 Cameron McGill

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FIRST EDITION

*for my mother, and for my father*

*The piano stands there in the dark  
like a boy with an orchid.*

-C.D. Wright

44.6336° N, 86.2345° W

Michigan open your dark umbrella  
your benzedrined night sky

Give me the mind slipping from my hands  
gravel roads beyond county lines & the rain's understanding  
Where I am full as a pupil & miniature  
in the moonlight I have come home

This house in cloudshadow is language  
is I empty my pockets & my life  
There are twelve rivers inside my body  
I drown in eleven of them One  
brings me to you

I keep a small light where the madmen can't  
touch it The dogs can't touch it

The dock's thin arm reaching to the lake drops the moon like a yolk  
I let go the dark that you would come  
take me by the hand to a field  
I wait now among a stand of pines  
so that anywhere I go will be a clearing

40.1164° N, 88.2434° W

I think of youth as one long summer  
incorrectly Mornings the gray of a horse's pink tongue  
Farmers calling in the corn from Thomasboro  
surrounded by harvests tall as men gaunting doorways  
of train stations sunburnt & matchless at Logan & Water

I've grown away  
slowly like a fingernail Where is my sister  
in her torrential blond Running skinny in the yard  
with the neighbor boy who'd later hang himself

How I didn't try to love him  
who torpedoed by sadness & psychiatry chased me home  
yelling all his mind at the street  
The decrepit limousine our lives had been

Here is a promise the length of my body  
that you will take me like a silo of smoke leaving  
the cigarette in my father's hand

The dreams I had forgive me  
When spring's tornadoes came we raced  
with paper to the basement  
& drew them

## MOONFLOWER

I think of you where the forest swallows light,  
where crosses on the highway are religion's limits.  
The deer carcass calls to the crows.  
Tires on wet pavement scatter them  
to what lent-purple light is left in the west.  
They settle in eaves like vowels from the dead.  
This awful forest, home to dark engines—  
to those who speak in hoarded consonants,  
to *Spring*, which isn't Latin for *things un-die*.  
What are you growing in me, God,  
where your green apron darkens?  
Did I always close to the sun  
before there even was one?

44.6336° N, 86.2345° W

This is not a nightmare this is how the world looks  
in a forest at night phantasmagoric  
in the canopy The sound of sleet ticking  
on bark that quakes like tuning forks  
in the crowns of pine Crowns like the heads of waves  
seen by no one

but my father & me  
In the four o'clock dark a fluency of branches  
swimming at the window means I wake in blue  
The room a vanity with rain on it

Downstairs he rises with his cough  
His small lamp hung in the dark Who smokes must be  
talking to himself There is a freighter skulking full of ore  
pounding sleepknots to Charlevoix

This distant country called me home  
Why have I only brought it adjectives

I try to sleep  
She is not next to me I cannot put my hand on her back  
I have only a stormful of trees in the dark



## AFTER WORK

My father split his attention  
with an icepick. Crushed four fingers  
of a tumbler, lit ten cigarettes  
like birthday candles, blew them out.

He offered me the olives—each round  
bitter, salt and ethyl on my tongue—a truce  
without words. I understood

what was agreed upon  
those nights when two  
unlikely things were forced together—  
I slipped the slick red hearts from their cavities.  
I was a kid; I was helping.

44.6336° N, 86.2345° W

Morning expands one rib at a time  
speaks through the pinktops of pines    On the porch  
I write to a friend whose mother has passed  
Blue fog is a doe that startles  
at my cough    I drink black water from its eye

This isn't about halfdreamt things  
The veil over the lake about to boil a man  
It's too quiet to answer anything but the tonguecolors  
of the east    fernlight slices from a mandoline

My words are bad acreage  
I think of taking my friend's grief    holding it  
above my head & wading out    It is clear I can see the sand  
I tell myself this is helping    this is what the heart looks like working

Each step    the outbreath  
There is a boat & a man moving his line  
To the still dark he's throwing    longer & longer threads

40.1164° N, 88.2434° W

I don't care what you say the moon  
was a fishhook catching the lip of an orange slice  
I wore over my teeth The stars  
porchlights on strange & unnamed mountains  
pulled at the stitching of dogwoods or my mouth

which spelled the corduroy of peeling paint  
on a First Street balcony I dreamt  
large wrecks rising slowly from the Great Lakes  
satellites hot & sinking  
in the grand marble halls of train stations

I used to think street names took you there—  
Colorado Paris Ashley I believed this  
as hot air balloons lifted over Champaign as I watched  
for the pulling of the chaindownfire & the rise  
of lanterns in the dark to Europe  
Thomasboro Rantoul Everywhere

a green ocean of backyard My mind  
like the spine of a splayed book I was young  
the way a glass of water bends a spoon  
The way aphids in moonlight are more blue  
Any way

## COUNTING DOWN THE ERA

The Space Race reached my body  
in the *Challenger*. A classroom in Champaign.  
America in the sun and ten times headed for the moon  
from the Cape. That birthday candle thrusting in blue cake,  
pushing earth away for seventy-three seconds.  
We had just counted down. We had all counted down.

How it fireworked wrong and came apart like sun-  
light daggered through the trees and windows of a house  
where months before at our kitchen table  
my mother on the phone using a strange voice, and me hearing  
only her questions, the answers changing her face,  
hung up and said her father had died.

I watched for correction—  
my sister running in the yard,  
clouds like chandeliers through the trees.  
She existed in the garden, in dogwoods, through the sprinkler,  
and in sundown on poplars at the incline of the road.  
Her hair like house lights coming on over the fence.

My mother and I existed, and the fly on the table  
existed in a darkness that cracked and splashed  
its wet-blue-life, speckled pink like robins' eggs  
dropping from the pines.

The footage of her face kept happening—  
surrendering to her sadness made it mine.  
Then nothing, except my sister

walking to the house not knowing anything  
about dying, and my fear in beginning to understand it,  
so that I knew it later in that classroom  
when there was nothing again. And nothing fell.

Surely no one had survived but us.  
There was a teacher on the mission, they said.  
She would have been the first. A long silence—  
till mine, with hair on fire and a voice swallowing  
all of the Atlantic, told me to turn it off.

41.9740° N, 87.6782° W

I'm less the buildings I used to live in  
& more the strangers passing in their windows—  
the woman dancing with her baby holding him high  
a man carrying laundry to the bedroom with a beer

I return your shadow  
to where I found it in me beside chimneys  
on Damen Avenue in an alley piling breath into January

I live in too much silence—  
there needs to be someone in the car the room the bed The world  
in its heartbreak of mastery wants me undone

To come here knowing nothing  
should want to speak except the wind & frost on the grass  
in shadows of trees on Winnemac This all starts to sound the same—  
the city the block  
my assurances The deficits they make of memory

Yesterday I met the woman I'd lived with for years  
My remembering a bath  
her knees islands in the cooling water I'm afraid  
describing things ruins them That's not true It was me  
who asked what the body wanted & didn't  
listen for the answer

# DRUNK WITH ZODIAC

*for Cyd*

Taurus charges in the dark like Oregon,  
horns the width of this beer with a moon.

I forget where I live, keep repeating your name.  
Its gray dissolve in rain at night is fair.

Paradise Ridge fogged in breath, my bad health  
and the pines' ice-lungs. Orion is a butterfly

turned on its wing, pinned against boredom  
and black paper. Our bodies cut askew,

shiver up and to the west, ricocheted  
and charcoal-burnt as maps. The myth

of beasts unseen, animations on the night:

Fronds of bracken hung like hair  
of the subway cellist, legs spread and hugging;

the boxer's head thrown back,  
nose bloody gushing stars; the young

woman breastfeeding who's fallen asleep;  
gaunt man seated, finger raised, recalls

certain beauty of youth; your birthmark  
like a thin fox torn across the sky.

And what of that shooting one—my twin  
whose streak shirks blur—the runner

giving chase, whose feet cannot be seen.

46.7324° N, 117.0002° W

It's no use trying not to die in this dream  
Streetlights the gold chargers  
on my kitchen table My family surrounds me like statues  
in East City Park Their eyes pockmarks on the sidewalk  
filled with rainlight & the sleepcrawl of branches

A man smokes in his doorway downwind  
on Blaine arm swinging like a singlechain thurible  
Everything the size of a cathedral His eyes  
bedsprings lonely bodies fall onto in dark basements  
Face translucent raw as newborn rabbits

I know myself by the things that scare me  
Veins humming in my hands are raised  
dark roads I have been holding  
tight onto everything

The night is numbered  
in a forest of sharps & flats  
in a register climbing wet mirrors Inside me  
a silo fills with rain  
I sing into it



## About the Author

Cameron McGill is a poet and songwriter from Champaign, Illinois and the author of *Meridians* (Willow Springs Books). His poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Grist*, *Raleigh Review*, *RHINO*, and *Western Humanities Review*. He has released seven albums, most recently *The Widow Cameron*. He teaches at Washington State University, where he serves as co-director of the Visiting Writers Series. He lives in Moscow, Idaho.