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Campbell McGrath

Cover photograph: self portrait of the poet

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BY CAMPBELL McGRATH

POETRY

THE ZEBRA LONGWING

Forty years I've waited,
uncomprehending,
for these winter nights
when the butterflies
fold themselves like paper cranes
to sleep in the dangling
roots of the orchids
boxed and hung
from the live oak tree.
How many there are.
Six. Eight. Eleven.
When I mist the spikes
and blossoms by moonlight
they stir but do not wake,
antennaed and dreaming
of passionflower
nectar. Never before
have they gifted us
in like manner, never before
have they stilled their flight
in our garden. Wings
have borne them away
from the silk
of the past as surely
as some merciful wind
has delivered us
to an anchorage of such
abundant grace,
Elizabeth. All my life
I have searched, without knowing it,
for this moment.

~ Campbell McGrath



That Florida Feeling: An Interview with
Campbell McGrath

By FSPA Chancellor Denise Duhamel

Duhamel: As you are soon to be 60—I just turned 60—are you embracing your status? In other words, do you feel as though you “have arrived,” given all your awards and accomplishments?

McGrath: Getting old, what a strange thing. Or, not strange at all—the most natural thing in the world! I certainly remember being a twenty-five year old poet, with all the enthusiastic ignorance of that time. But I think I enjoy the present mode even more. I am smarter now, understand the world and myself better, and, most obviously to me, I am so much better as a craftsperson—so much more able to assemble, disassemble, revise and reimagine my poems on the page. I’ve always wanted to write poems, that’s the end game for me, not anything external that those poems might “win” for me. So, receiving awards, recognition, all that, does not mean very much, except of course that it is those awards that have enabled me to stay on the path of poetry, rather than having to go to work as a carpenter or a plumber. Or a literature professor.

(Continued on next page)

Duhamel: Indeed! This is a “what if” question...but have you ever made a backup plan just in case? Did you ever think, if this poetry thing doesn’t work out, I’ll try _____? Didn’t you, for example, once work on a boat?

McGraph: I did work on a freighter, for a summer after high school. While I was in graduate school I worked as a dockmaster/carpenter at the 79th Street Boat Basin, which was a crazy job in a very weird corner of New York City. I don’t know that would have been a realistic long-term thing, but I enjoyed the experience. Teaching high school, or something equally unglamorous, would probably have been it.

Duhamel: As a maestro of poetic form and political/social/personal insight, can you tell us which comes first? Do you have a subject in mind and pick a form? Or as you try a form, does the subject introduce itself?

McGraph: You, Denise, are a much more formally inventive poet than I am. You have a playfulness and imagination with form that I rarely exhibit. But the question you are asking, really, is how a poem finds its own form on the page, how it identifies a line, a stanza, a syntactical and auditory spatiality. First, I think this is the essential drama or struggle of writing a poem, of a poem coming into being: the poem’s agon is the best way to put it. A thought pops into my head—oh, this tea cup I’m drinking from, it’s like a container holding all this steeped tea-water in it, just as each of us contains all the cultural resin and flavor of the time we have been alive and steeping in our society’s boiling cauldron—well, that’s the kind of thought that pops into my head, but is probably a bad example for most poets. Anyway, I have this thought—partly an idea, partly an image—and I sense that it wants to be a poem, but now: what kind of poem is it? A haiku—just that flash, steam rising from a cup of tea? Or a long meditation on history and cultural influence, in which I can embed all kinds of thoughts about American culture, which I love to do? Or—and this is where the poem ended up: a sonnet. So, yes, this is an actual example from my recent past. And this poem ended up as a sonnet because I just happened, as I was writing it in my notebook, to hear a few little rhymes—which drew the poem’s attention toward them. The process for me is organic. Poems are like little seedlings you need to nurture and encourage. Every poem has an “ideal” form, and my job is to discover it.

Duhamel: This is a brilliant way to explain your process, Campbell. Thank you. Though you have stuck to poetry as your primary genre (without much dabbling in fiction or nonfiction) you did contribute a libretto to “*Una Marea Creciente*,” one of the most amazing performances I have ever been to! Dance, music, and video overtook

(Continued on next page)

Faena Forum on Miami Beach for one night only in 2018. This was, of course, in the pre-pandemic days which seem far away now. Can you talk about that ephemeral experience and your willingness to jump into it? I remember you also contributed visual art to the piece.

McGraph: That was actually the second “experimental video opera” I have been part of, in conjunction with some colleagues at FIU: composer Orlando Garcia, architect/video artist John Stuart, and visual artist Jacek Kolasinski. For the 2018 event we were joined by choreographer Augusto Soledade and his Brazz Dance troupe. These are really multi-genre, multi-media artworks, and highly performative—language is peripheral compared to the music, visuals and dance. So it’s a challenge to create a libretto, to find words that will meld with those other media. What I’ve ended up writing, both times, are highly experimental poems, basically, with concrete poems, constructed and deconstructed fragments, syllables repeated in echoing sequences—finding musicality in language to match Orlando’s musical form. Fun. Liberating. And useful in pushing me out of my comfort zone. In fact, Orlando has another opera in the works, and I’ve signed on to write the libretto for a third time.

Duhamel: That is fantastic, Campbell. I have long admired not only your poems but your book-building strategies. I am thinking of *XX: Poems for the 20th Century*, in which there are one hundred poems, one for each year or *Shannon: A Poem of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* or even a book like *Road Atlas* in which the poems all unfold through travel near and far. I guess this is another chicken/egg question. Do you conceive of the idea first and follow through? Or, in the course of writing poems, do you see a pattern and expand upon it?

McGraph: Book building is in some ways analogous to poem-making: as the lines to the entire poem, so the poems to the book. Except that I do often “impose” a formal plan on a book, or conceive one in advance, which I almost never do with an individual poem. I like both kinds of books: those that are more organically formed from the poems one has been writing over a period of years; and a “master-planned” book that is a project in its own right. In fact I have tended to alternate between those two types of books over the course of my career, although that was not itself a master-plan, just something that evolved. Ideally, I like to have one of each type of book in process, since there is a kind of symbiosis between them. My projects tend to be large and can take me up to a decade to write—as was the case with *XX*—but not every poem I write is part of that larger project. So the non-project poems become a work of their own, and sometimes have a freedom and energy that can get drained by being too project-driven. Right now I have an “organic” book finished up, and a

big “project” book in the works, that will probably take me three or four more years to write.

Duhamel: Ooh! Now I am intrigued. Do you feel comfortable telling us a little about those projects? Is one of the books the sea level rising book? I remember you reading a gorgeous poem about Miami underwater, somehow even putting our wet apocalypse in perspective.

McGraph: The “project” book is about the North Atlantic Ocean. Living in Miami Beach, sea-level rise is not an abstract concern, it’s an everyday problem. Most of the country is way behind Florida in recognizing the immediacy and difficulty of the situation. And when I am not in Miami Beach, I am at the Jersey shore, in another house located on a barrier island. Not smart! So there is an elegiac level to the book, and an ecological level. Thinking historically, the book examines trans-Atlantic trade and migration, which is how the country came to be, of course, and is personally immediate to me as the grand-child of Irish immigrants. So it’s a big topic and the poems are incredibly diverse and I can’t say I have a handle on exactly what it will be when completed, but I have many finished pieces of the puzzle. The other book is called *The Radiance Archive*, lyric poems of various kinds, with mortality, death and loss at the heart of it. The book has an epigram I love, taken from a Rilke poem, that suggests the overall tone: “If it catches fire it’s real.”

Duhamel: I am looking forward to both of these, Campbell! Rilke is obviously a touchstone poet for you. Who are the others—and why?

McGraph: Whitman. Rilke. Basho. Those three are very inspiring to me in terms of their “vision,” their way of suggesting ways for poetry to engage with the world. In terms of language and voice, Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath have both been huge influences on me. Frank O’Hara helped me understand that I should be writing about ordinary American culture and everyday life. Tranströmer reminds me to include mystery in the poem, as does Anne Carson. Robert Hass has always been a touchstone in regards to how the mind and the body can (and should) work together in the poem. Coleridge’s “*Frost at Midnight*” is a poem I read over and over. Seamus Heaney. Louise Gluck. Of my own contemporaries (present company excluded), I get a lot of nourishment from Li-Young Lee, Vijay Seshadri, Kevin Young, Laura Kasischke, Tracy K. Smith. Right here in Florida we’ve got a bunch of inspiring poets, including David Kirby and Barbara Hamby, Richard Blanco, too many to mention really—although I will say that Heather Sellers’ forthcoming book, *Field Notes from the Flood Zone*, feels like an essential book of Florida poems. I’m not sure that a list this broad is very helpful. Basically, I have a lot of poets walking around the corridors of my brain, and these are some of those I’ve spoken with recently.

Duhamel: This is actually quite helpful indeed because poets are always looking for recommendations. Since this interview is for the Florida State Poets Association, can you talk a little about how Florida has informed your work? There is, of course, the obvious—your book *Florida Poems* comes first to mind. But as we are both transplants from northern states, did you ever as a young man imagine yourself living in Florida? And what have been its surprises?

McGrath: I grew up primarily in Washington, DC. And I knew nothing about anything south of DC until I got to Florida. For some reason, I went to Florida a good bit as a kid. To Disney World, to Cocoa Beach, and for a number of years we went to Key West for a week over Christmas. Not sure why, my parents just liked the feel of the place—and Key West was pretty wild in the 1970s. So, I liked Florida, it seemed mysterious and alluring, but I never imagined myself living here, and moving to Miami from Chicago was like landing on Mars. Everything was different. Not just the people and the architecture, not just the seasons and the trees and the flowers, but the light, the clouds, the air. And I love that Florida feeling, it has made me a happier person within my own skin. And I believe that's why people keep coming here, from Ohio and New York and Russia and Colombia and Haiti, even though it is all going underwater. Because Florida feels great.

Campbell at home...



Campbell holding Magnolia, his grandpuppy



Campbell holding fennel from his garden



Campbell and Elizabeth McGrath at home

BY CAMPBELL McGRATH

POETRY

THE ORANGE

Gone to swim after walking the boys to school.
Overcast morning, mid-week, off-season,
few souls to brave the warm, storm-tossed waves,
not wild but rough for this tranquil coast.

Swimming now. In rhythm, arm over arm,
let the ocean buoy the body and the legs work little,
wave overhead, crash and roll with it, breathe,
stretch and build, windmill, climb the foam. Breathe,

breathe. Traveling downwind I make good time
and spot the marker by which I know to halt
and forge my way ashore. Who am I
to question the current? Surely this is peace abiding.

Walking back along the beach I mark the signs of erosion,
bide the usual flotsam of seagrass and fan coral,
a float from somebody's fishing boat,
crusted with sponge and barnacles, and then I find

the orange. Single irradiant sphere on the sand,
tide-washed, glistening as if new born,
golden orb, miraculous ur-fruit,
in all that sweep of horizon the only point of color.

Cross-legged on my towel I let the juice course
and mingle with the film of salt on my lips
and the sand in my beard as I steadily peel and eat it.
Considering the ancient lineage of this fruit,

the long history of its dispersal around the globe
on currents of animal and human migration,
and in light of the importance of the citrus industry
to the state of Florida, I will not claim

it was the best and sweetest orange in the world,
though it was, o great salt water
of eternity,
o strange and bountiful orchard.

~ Campbell McGrath

BY CAMPBELL McGRATH

POETRY

A GREETING ON THE TRAIL

Turning fifty, at last I come to understand,
belatedly, unexpectedly, and quite suddenly,
that poetry is not going to save anybody's life,
least of all my own. Nonetheless I choose to believe
the journey is not a descent but a climb,
as when, in a forest of golden-green morning sunlight,
one sees another hiker on the trail, who calls out,
where are you bound, friend, to the valley or the mountaintop?
Many things—seaweed, pollen, attention—drift.
News of the universe's origin infiltrates atom by atom
the oxygenated envelope of the atmosphere.
My sense of purpose vectors away on rash currents
like the buoys I find tossed on the beach after a storm,
cork bobbers torn from old crab traps.
And what befalls the woebegotten crabs,
caged and forgotten at the bottom of the sea?
Are the labors to which we are summoned by dreams
so different from the tasks to which sunlight
enslaves us? One tires of niceties. We sleep now
surrounded by books, books piled in heaps
by the bedside, stacked along the walls of the room.
Let dust accrue on their spines and colophons.
Let their ragged towers rise and wobble.
Of course the Chinese poets were familiar with all this,
T'ao Ch'ien, Hsieh Ling-yün, Po Chü-i,
masterful sophisticates adopting common accents
for their nostalgic drinking songs, their laments
to age and temple ruins and imperial avarice,
autumn leaves caught in a tumbling stream.
As the river flows at the urging of gravity, as a flower
blooms after April rain, we are implements
of the unseen, always working for someone else.
The boss is a tall woman in a sky-blue shirt
or a man with one thumb lost to a cross-cut saw
or science or art or the Emperor, what matter?
We scrabble within the skin of time
like mice in the belly of a boa constrictor,
Jonah within Leviathan, pacing the keel, rib to rib,
surrounded by the pulse of that enormous, compassionate heart.
Later we dance in orchards of guava and lychee nuts
to the shifting registers of distant music,

POETRY BY CAMPBELL McGRATH

a clattering of plates as great fish are lifted from the grill,
seared black with bitter orange and lemongrass.
Orchid trees bloom here, Tulip trees and Flame trees,
but no Idea trees, no trees of Mercy,
for these are human capacities, human occasions.
Because it has about it something of the old village magic,
the crop made to rise by seed of words,
by spell or incantation—
because it frightens and humbles us to recall
our submission to such protocols—
for this do we fear poetry, for the unresolved darkness
of the past. Where are you bound, friend,
on this bright and fruitful morning—to the valley
or the mountaintop? To the mountaintop.

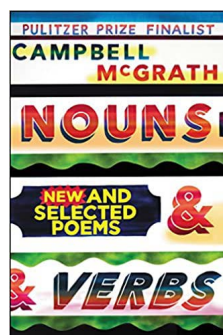
~ Campbell McGrath

THE KEY LIME

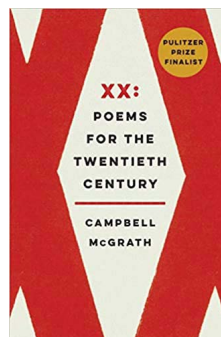
Curiously yellow hand-grenade
of flavor; Molotov cocktail
for a revolution against the bland.

~ Campbell McGrath

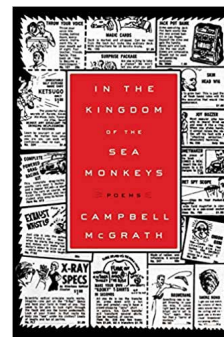
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ABOUT CAMPBELL McGRAPH

Born in Chicago and raised in Washington, DC, poet **Campbell McGrath** earned a BA from the University of Chicago and an MFA from Columbia University. McGrath writes predominantly free verse, documentary poems deeply engaged with American popular culture and commerce. Garrett Hongo has labeled his work as “ironic romanticism.” McGrath has written stellar long poems such as “The Bob Hope Poem,” a 70-page opus. He has also produced prose poems, haiku, and shorter lyrics. A poet of great intellect, McGrath’s subject matter ranges from history to the deeply personal, from Americana to globalism. In an interview in *Burrow*, he says, “So, you throw your mind out there toward a lot of experiences and voices and ideas, and some of them your poetry brain will be able to turn on and make sense out of and some it won’t. That’s just a larger thought about the multitudinous of it.”

McGrath’s many volumes include *Capitalism* (Wesleyan University Press, 1990), *American Noise* (Ecco Press, 1993), *Spring Comes to Chicago* (Ecco Press, 1996), *Road Atlas* (Ecco Press, 1999), *Florida Poems* (Ecco Press, 2002), *Pax Atomica* (Ecco Press, 2004), *Seven Notebooks* (Ecco Press, 2008), *Shannon: A Poem of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Ecco Press, 2009), *In the Kingdom of the Sea Monkeys* (Ecco Press, 2012), *XX: Poems For The Twentieth Century* (Harper Collins, 2016), and, most recently, *Nouns & Verbs: New and Selected Poems* (Ecco Press, 2019). His work has appeared in many publications including *The New Yorker*.

McGrath’s honors are many—a MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Witter Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress, the Academy of American Poets Prize, the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, and a Pushcart Prize. In 2011 he was named a Fellow of United States Artists. In 2017 he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry. He is a Philip and Patricia Frost Professor of Creative Writing and Distinguished University Professor in the MFA program at Florida International University in Miami. A father of two sons, he lives on Miami Beach with his wife Elizabeth Lichtenstein.

ABOUT DENISE DUHAMEL

Raised in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, FSPA Chancellor **Denise Duhamel** earned a BFA at Emerson College and an MFA at Sarah Lawrence College. Citing Dylan Thomas and Kathleen Spivack as early influences, Duhamel writes both free verse and fixed-form poems that fearlessly combine the political, sexual, and ephemeral. Introducing Duhamel for *Smartish Pace*, poet Karla Huston observed, “Her poems speak with a wild irreverence. [...] Duhamel experiments with form and subject, creating poetry that challenges the reader’s notion of what poetry should be. She presents what poetry could be as she fully engages pop culture, the joys and horrors of it, while maintaining the ability to poke fun at our foibles—and make us think.” In an interview for *Pif* magazine with Derek Alger, Duhamel stated, “At some point in my development as a writer, I became interested in putting it all in, trusting my leaps, embracing vulnerability in imagery.” Duhamel has published numerous collections of poetry, including *Kinky* (Orchis Press, 1997), *Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), *Two and Two* (Pittsburgh, 2005), *Ka-Ching!* (Pittsburgh, 2009), and *Blowout* (Pittsburgh, 2013), which was a finalist for a National Books Critics Circle Award. Her most recent volumes are *Second Story* (Pittsburgh, 2021) and *Scald* (Pittsburgh, 2017). Duhamel has also collaborated with Maureen Seaton on four collections, including *CAPRICE (Collaborations: Collected, Uncollected, and New)* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2015). With Julie Wade, Duhamel co-authored *The Unrhymables: Collaborations in Prose* (Noctuary Press, 2019). With Maureen Seaton and David Trinidad, she edited *Saints of Hysteria: A Half-Century of Collaborative American Poetry* (2007). Duhamel served as the guest editor of *The Best American Poetry 2013*. Duhamel’s honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her work has featured on *National Public Radio*’s *All Things Considered* and Bill Moyers’s PBS poetry special *Fooling with Words*. She is a Distinguished University Professor in the MFA program at Florida International University in Miami. She lives in Hollywood.