

Poetic exile

Landscape with human figure

Rafael Campo

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Landscape with Human Figure is the fourth book of poetry by Rafael Campo, a Boston internist who teaches at Harvard. This is above all a collection about identities: Campo is a physician and a Cuban American, but he also reveals himself as a traveller, a gay man, a son, brother and lover. As a writer, he is preoccupied in these poems with exposing how notions of self and community complement, coalesce with, or conflict with one another. Themes of exile and of being an ever-observant outsider run throughout.

Campo is a formalist whose skilled use of poetic structures (rhymed couplets, sestinae, sonnets) at times serves his purpose, as in "Love Poem Written Especially for You." At other times his use of poetic conceits is somewhat laboured,

as in "Poem for my Familiar" (about his dog, Ruby). When his themes become politicized, as in the least successful series in the collection, "Quatrains for a Shrinking World," he strays onto a soap box: "but I am merely Cuban, dark and small / as any from a hundred nations which / exist for others' domination" ("Writers in Exile"). Where Campo shines is in his talk of love, including erotic man-to-man love in "October Afternoon" and "Your Black Eyes" ("the red light of dawn injured us a one"). I'd be hard pressed to find an image more tender than the teetering cube of Jell-O fed to a man by his wife in "The Couple." Fraternal love is celebrated in a toast "For My Brother's Wedding," where — perhaps with both pleasure and envy — the reader gets the sense that no

better gift could have been given on that joyous day. Physicians will be particularly moved by Campo's weary but respectful regard for his patients in the series of "Phone Messages on Call." They tell of the times we are catapulted into the lives and suffering of patients we barely know, through the portal of a beeper or the ring of a phone. These wonderful narratives, told in rhyming couplets, smack of the impossibility of our work. So many obstacles: HIV infection, poverty, physical abuse, drug addiction.

The collection ends with an unfortunate add-on: "Questions for the Weather," a tribute to those killed on September 11. It seems somehow undercooked in a collection that is so otherwise richly textured and flavoured. *Landscape with Human Figure* reminds us all of how we navigate senses of the self, in the face of loss and change, with astonishment and sometimes joy.

Allan Peterkin

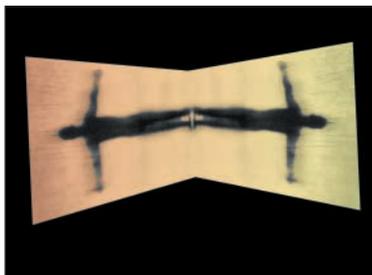
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Room for a view

I witness

Five-thirty a.m. I answer a stat page to the emergency department. Peering down the long row of curtained gurneys as I enter, I see a steady flow of nurses and physicians going in and out of one in particular. At the end of the gurney, protruding from the curtain, I also see well-muscled calves, feet wearing high-tech running shoes. What has happened is easy to surmise: an early-morning heart attack, followed by cardiac arrest. I am correct. The EKG strips all show ventricular fibrillation, which has already proven resistant to three countershocks and high doses of lidocaine. The ampli-



Fred Sebastian

tude of the fibrillations steadily decreases as, for the next 20 minutes, the drill continues: bretylium, amiodarone, epinephrine, compressions and ventilations. Repeat.

The rhythm of the code is continuous and steady, but the rhythm of the heart, it becomes apparent, is now gone forever. Near the end, the man's spouse — unable any longer to stand this waiting, the painted cinderblock walls of the family room closing in, perhaps — enters, accompanied by a nurse. *I want to be with him*, she proclaims through tears, finding a seat in the corner. I continue to

feel for a femoral pulse, but perhaps she, not I, should lay her hand upon this warm body. She watches from the corner. Finally, when there is nothing more to do, nothing more that has not already been done many times, when it becomes clear that all I have left to treat is the body of a man who has died, the code is called. The woman stays with her husband's body, and I go to tell their adolescent children that their father has died.

They stop me in the doorway, before I can enter, before I can sit down with them, their eyes and their voices arresting my progress, their eyes and their voices quavering with grief and fear that I know I cannot relieve. I stand at midpoint in the doorway, half in, half out. Words tumble from my mouth,