

# Now & Then

David Mixner In a Collection  
of New & Selected Poetry,  
Physician Rafael Campo

by Noah Stetzer

**1994** is the year that Jeff Bezos founds Amazon. It's also the year that America

Online first offers a gateway to the World Wide Web. The U.S. President is William Jefferson Clinton and he's been in office for about a year; *And the Band Played On* author, journalist Randy Shilts dies at age forty-two from AIDS-related illnesses. Into this bifurcated scene, Rafael Campo publishes his first book of poems *The Other Man Was Me*. In that collection is the poem "Aida" where the poet reflects on his unknown, unmet neighbor he can hear through the wall. It's a moment before location-based dating apps allow us to peek inside the lives right next door to us. It's a moment before the Facebook wave ushers in a new form of sharing (over-sharing?). It's from *before*.

"Aida" begins with these two stanzas:

I've never met the guy next door.  
I know  
He's in there—mud-caked shoes  
outside to dry,  
The early evening opera, the glow  
(Of candlelight?) his window  
trades for night—

I think he's ill, since once the  
pharmacy  
Delivered his prescriptions to my door:  
Acyclovir, Dilantin, AZT.  
He doesn't go out running anymore.

Here we get a glimpse at some of

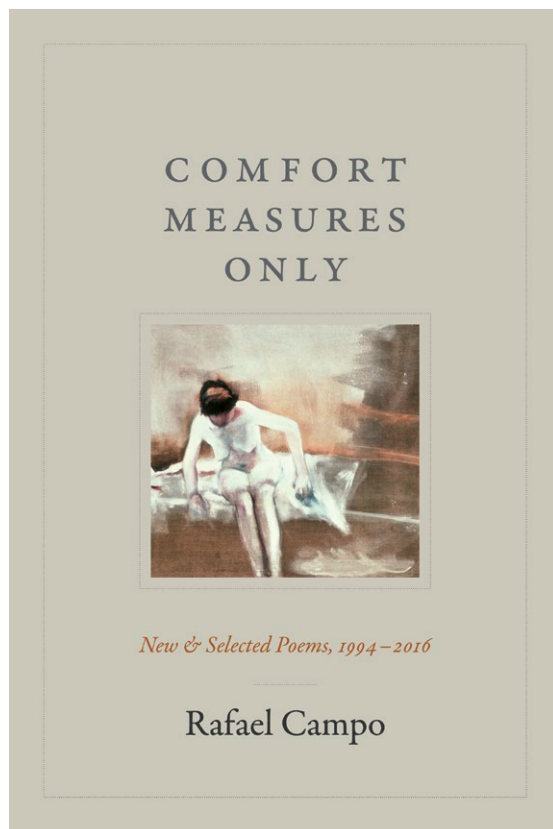
Campo's formidable skills with meter, rhyme, and line. The ten-beat lines keep a sturdy foundation without announcing themselves in awkward sentence constructions. Rhyme is another anchoring

a poem that has music in its concerns. Finally, Campo's choice to bookend one long seven-line sentence with two short ones—short ones that rhyme with one another—gives these stanzas a tight satisfying "introducing the facts" quality: everything we need to know going into this poem is here in these eight lines. The unknown neighbor, the opera heard through the wall, the nineties-specific HIV medications—and the poet's relationship to all that as witness, truth-teller, and lone chronicler. In 1994 AIDS becomes the leading cause of death for all Americans ages twenty-five to forty-four.

Rafael Campo's new and selected poems, *Comfort Measures Only: New and Selected Poems, 1994–2016* (Duke University Press), is a powerful collection of this masterful poet's work beginning with his first collection in 1994, including work from his subsequent five books of poetry, and culminating in thirty-one new poems chosen for this book. Born in 1964, Campo grew up in New Jersey and attended Harvard Medical School. Recognized for his poetry with awards from the National Poetry Series and Lambda Literary, Campo is also the recipient of the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship. And while his work often centers on themes about illness, the body, and his role as a doctor, you will also find poems about

his Cuban-American family and identity alongside poems that celebrate the erotic, love, and mystery.

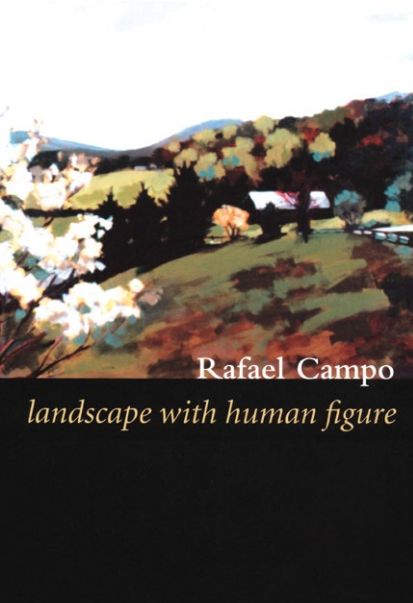
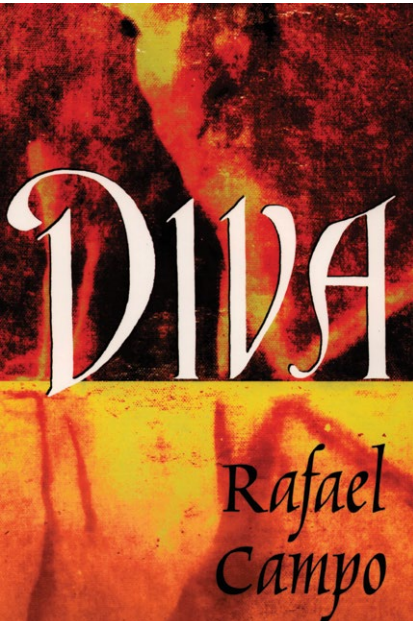
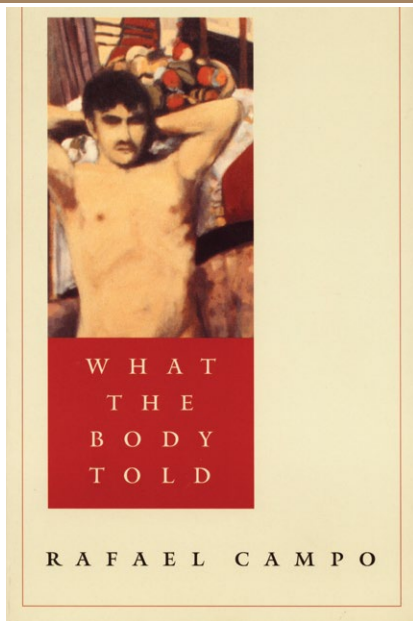
In the selections included under "from The Changing Face of AIDS" (from *Diva*,



aspect for this poem; the familiarity of repeated sounds offers up a kind of stability, something we can count on. And they both happen in the background, subtly deployed they lend a musicality to



PHOTO COURTESY DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS



2002) a poem of several parts, Campo addresses the changing conversation around AIDS and HIV that accompanied the new century. Here in the section “Elegy for the AIDS Virus” Campo’s poem echoes the sentiments that came with new drug regimens: “we vanquished you, with latex, protease / inhibitors, a little common sense.” And the poem echoes a growing sentiment that pushed back against evidence that while the new drug regimes were revolutionary there were still new infections and more deaths: “This elegy itself renounces you, / as from this consciousness you’ve been erased.”

This section is set against the section “Refinishing the Hardwood Floors” in which the poet hires a handyman living with AIDS to refinish the floors. Campo handles this interesting scene with an incredibly deft use of illustration. “I wonder which CD would better do / to drown their racket out” as if the racket is the reality of AIDS that needs covering over. Also this line, “a stranger in the house you and I bought” could almost be a way to characterize how HIV was beginning to be seen inside the relationship between two people. The scene ends, “I paid in cash, then rushed Dex out the door; / I felt so clean I cried, and couldn’t stop.” Campo’s use of “clean” catches your breath—sure the hardwood floors are like new but the burgeoning (and pejorative) use of “clean” to signify an HIV-negative status cannot be overlooked.

There is something revealing in reading a living poet’s selected works. One cannot help but consider how the poet went about choosing which poems from each of his earlier works made the final cut. The poems in this collection vary into celebrations of family and heritage alongside lush poems of love and the erotic. And always regardless of the poem’s obvious concern is the poet’s attention to the body in the poem; the doctor perhaps always at work at the hospital but also at the page. Campo’s careful and precise depictions of our mortality not only in harrowing moments of medical crisis but also in the ecstatic moments of human connection serve as testimony to our human condition.

With *Comfort Measures Only* on its eve of publication, I had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Campo by phone about his latest collection and its intersection with HIV/AIDS. I had at first thought to weave his answers into a full review of the collection but instead choose to re-

print his responses whole-cloth to share the powerful insights and the refreshing candor of this successful practitioner not only of poetry but also of medicine.

**Noah Stetzer: Would you talk about how you went about the work of selecting poems for this collection?**

**Rafael Campo:** I struggled a bit with what to include in this volume....as I started putting the poems together, I realized that the poems of mine that speak to the experience of illness—in particular HIV and AIDS—emerged as central to my lifelong project and engagement with poetry...and I thought, in particular in this moment—when we are struggling as a society, as a culture, as a nation to find healing in the midst of all this incredible divisiveness—it seemed to me that pulling together the poems that had to do most specifically or most perhaps literally to do with healing were the most important poems for me right now to include...and along with that I’m troubled that in recent years, with the advent of more effective treatments for HIV and AIDS, we have in some ways lost sight of what is still an ongoing health emergency and I thought by bringing together poems that specifically address HIV and AIDS that would also perhaps help call attention again to what in my mind is still a crisis

**Can you talk about how the change in treatments for HIV and AIDS has impacted your engagement with HIV/AIDS in your work?**

I find in the medical part of my life that, yes, there is much to celebrate in terms of these advances in treatment for HIV and AIDS and so there’s tremendous optimism and excitement and a sense of joy about offering these kinds of treatments to my patients; but the poet in me and the person who is engaged in the community with people actually living with HIV and AIDS still sees the impact on individual human lives that this disease still has and is reminded daily that there are new infections; there are still almost 40 million people on this planet who have HIV infection and many of them, most of them—unless we do more to make these treatments available to everyone more widely—many of them are still going to face some of those terrible complications and ultimately mortality from the disease.

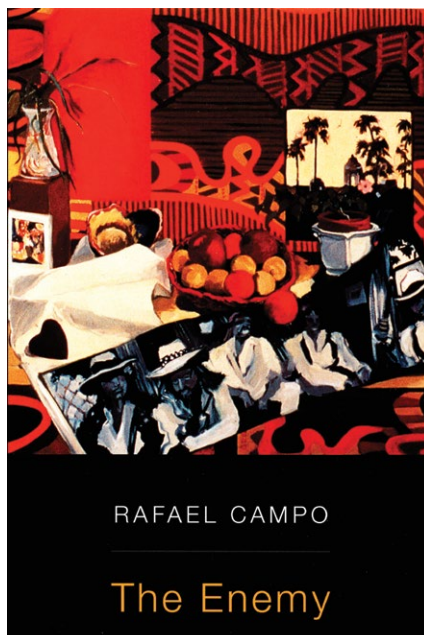
I always want to be present in the human experience of this condition and I think that’s how in particular my poetry

is so relevant in my day-to-day work in caring for people with HIV infection. People with HIV infection still struggle to find our voice, people are still marginalized, people are still made to feel voiceless and invisible, and there are new pressures I would say around that. There's still significant stigma, people I think underestimate how stigmatizing it still is to be diagnosed with HIV infection; but also there's a kind of silencing around now the treatments we do have for HIV and AIDS; you almost have to be on treatment, on PrEP, there are ways in which the experience of living with HIV and AIDS is still constrained or impacted by even these wonderful new treatments. And so you're almost not allowed to be sick anymore, that's I think really problematic as well. We can't erase HIV and AIDS from our memories. We can't pretend that it still doesn't exist as a health emergency in our country and certainly in many countries around the globe. So there's still for me that sense of urgency, that sense that we must give voice to this experience and help elevate, and make more visible, the experiences of people living with HIV and AIDS now in a much more complex way.

**Would you talk about the inclusion of medical and clinical language and situations within the poetic and lyric environment of your work?**

I've always been—even since my days as a medical student—fascinated by the language of medicine and some of those “medical-ese” terminologies are full of this kind of tension between the beautiful, the human, and what they can signal as artifacts of language...they have their own kind of inherent beauty but are also potentially distancing or markers of a kind of expertise. I love to kind of play in a sense with that tension and really expose that these medical terms—this medical idiom—actually does contain and can register human suffering, human emotion, beauty; that it can sing and reflect something essentially human about ourselves back to us.

I think that by placing that language in the context of poetry is one way of showing how it can actually do that—how it can sing—how it can speak for all of us. That it doesn't just belong to the doctor-authority figure who can sometimes “weaponize” it as a way of keeping patients at bay. I really love the idea of using that language in a way that empowers us all. I think that poetry itself is a call to community and by locating that kind of



**Alternative Medicine**



RAFAEL CAMPO



language in poems I hope to expose it as actually profoundly human itself.

When I reflect on experiences of my patients who on one hand feel like they need to master this alphabet soup of meds and all the technical language they have to contend with while at the same time they make something truly beautiful and human of it in how they grapple with it and how they speak it and how by speaking it ultimately own it themselves; that to me is a kind of joy—to recognize that and to contextualize that within poetry. It's a way of recognizing that very human struggle and I think poetry is just

the place to do that.

**Can you talk a little about the collection's title poem “Comfort Measures Only”?**

It is a kind of distillation perhaps of the kinds of gestures that I hope that the poems make in this twenty plus years of looking back. I think that some of the repetitions and the forms is a kind of calling attention to the recurring themes that are so important: related to mortality, related to the ongoing struggle to make sense of our—at times—troubled bodies. And at the same time, I hope that the poem—and I did write it with some of this intention in mind—that the structure of the poem and the rhythms and the rhyming and the so-called “formal elements” do provide a kind of reassurance or a kind of comfort.

I'm interested in the idea that poetry through organizing and harnessing language and making it sing—that it can actually be comforting to us, can help us make sense of difficult emotions, even contemplating our own mortality.

It's the comfort of language, it's a song that we sing to ourselves when we are trying to fall asleep at night, that kind of engagement with language is ultimately healing even in the most difficult moments such as at the end of life.

It's kind of ironic—this title for the poem and ultimately for the collection that I came to—it's medical jargon for what we provide for patients when usually they've [the patients] decided that they don't want any more medical interventions. They don't want any more painful procedures or treatments with side effects and so that's especially when we need poetry, is at those moments. We need its comfort and its reassurance that even at the end of life there's understanding and ultimately hope. I hope that poem conveys that sense of comfort and hopefulness even in that direst of moments.

.....  
For more information about the work of Rafael Campo, visit: [www.rafaelcampo.com](http://www.rafaelcampo.com).  
.....

Noah Stetzer is the author of *Because I Can See Needing a Knife*, a collection of poems published in 2016 by Red Bird Chapbooks. His work has received the 2015 Christopher Hewitt Award for Poetry and the 39th New Millennium Award for Poetry. Noah's poems have appeared in the *New England Review*, *Nimrod International Journal of Prose & Poetry*, *Green Mountains Review*, and *Bellevue Literary Review*. He is a 2014 Fellow from the Lambda Literary Retreat and a current work-study scholar at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Noah now lives in Kansas City and can be found online at [www.noahstetzer.com](http://www.noahstetzer.com).