

we'd sip the bitter tea from twisted roots,
we'd listen to our grandmothers' advice.
We'd understand the moonlight's whispering.
We'd exercise by making love outside,
and afterwards, while thinking only of
how much we'd lived in just one moment's time,
forgive ourselves for wanting something more:
to praise the memory of long-lost need,
or not to live forever in a world
made painless by our incurable joy.

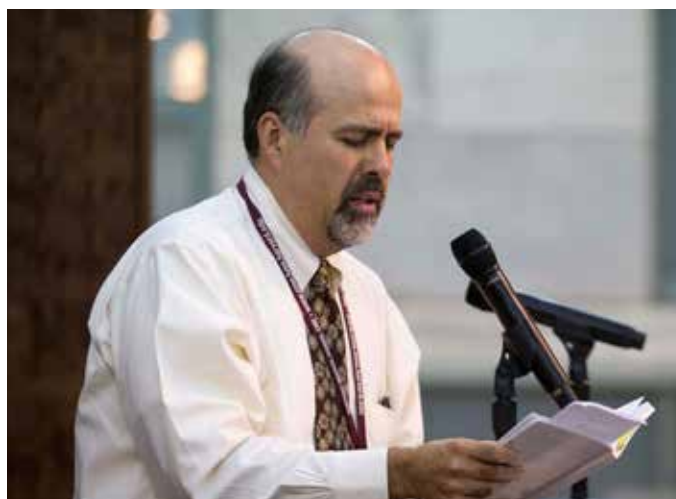
RAFAEL CAMPO (B. 1964):
BACKGROUND AND BIOGRAPHY

Rafael Campo is a Cuban-American poet, essayist, and physician who teaches and practices medicine at Harvard University Medical School. As the title of one of his poetry collections, *The Healing Art: A Doctor's Black Bag of Poetry*, suggests, Campo is an advocate for the value of poetry in healthcare. The poem "Health" is from a collection titled *Alternative Medicine*.

ANALYSIS OF "HEALTH"

The blank verse poem opens with the speaker jogging on a treadmill, "that exercise in going nowhere fast," which sets a playful, ironic tone that carries over to the rest of the poem, suggesting we may read it as tongue-in-cheek. Since the term pandemic is typically used in reference to disease, a "health pandemic" sounds like a contradiction in terms. The idea of pervasive health for everyone (pandemic means, literally, all people) is both a goal few would challenge and a situation impossible to achieve for any but the smallest population. The details continue the playful tone with wordplay: obesity, which makes us larger, will be "writ large no more" and Alzheimer's (a disease whose effects include memory loss) will be "forgotten." The line "we could live carefree *again*" (emphasis added) should alert us to more irony in Campo's tone since the historical record does not suggest any time when people actually lived "carefree."

As the poem imagines "living carefree," it includes alternative methods of healing to Western medicine, including consulting shamans, praying to relics of saints' bodies, and herbal medicine. The final detail



Poet and physician Rafael Campo reading from his work.

of universal health is the ability to forgive oneself for "wanting something more" in a life without need or pain: the memory of need and even the end of immortality "in a world made painless by our incurable joy." The last line returns to the wordplay of health as a pervasive disease and presents joy as incurable in a world without needs, cares, and illnesses. The nostalgia of "liv[ing] carefree again" is mirrored by a new nostalgia, for the cares that give definition to joy.

The last poem in this guide, "Health" might remind us of Victor Frankenstein's assumption that living without the possibility of illness—and perhaps even living forever—represents human perfection. The speaker's attitude toward that impossibility—and perhaps, his own healthy choices—is a bit skeptical, but his endorsement of the idea that mortality makes human life precious is not further developed and may also be playful.