Reforming Healthcare

I try to think of what I’m thankful for.
Parade of misery comes through my door:
dysuria, depression, hemorrhoids,
a lung mass that proved to be carcinoid,
low back pain that I’ve tried to diagnose,
strange tingling sensations in the nose
that honestly I haven’t. What I do
so often seems frankly contrary to
my vision of myself as healer, noble
if undervalued shepherd to the feeble.

I try to think of what I’m thankful for.
As I examine someone’s painful sore,
I wonder if I’m thankful I’m not him.
Adderall, Oxycontin, Valium:

I wonder if I’m thankful that relief
might yet be possible, that in this life
there is suffering, yes, but there is peace.
The classic rash of lupus marks the face
the beautiful young woman I see next
has tried to cover with a scarf as best
she can. It’s not shaped like a butterfly,
I see when she reveals it; when she cries,
I don’t pretend it’s sweet music, or bleed
from some wound I can’t trade for hers. Instead,
I grasp at last what I’m still thankful for:

not the disease that lets me comfort her,
or my unexceptional abilities
however insufficient they might be,

but in the final absence of a cure,
the need in all of us for someone’s care.

—Rafael Campo

POET AMALGAMATE

Standing in front of the crowd in Scaife Hall, Rafael Campo poses the question, “To which community do I belong?” Campo is a Harvard-educated physician and an award-winning poet, a son of America and of Cuba. As a doctor, he is a member of a highly respected profession; as a gay man, he is a member of a socially disregarded community. He reminds us: just as a person cannot be easily categorized, neither can health nor illness be simply defined.

As a visiting lecturer in the Medical Humanities series of Pitt’s Center for Bioethics and Health Law earlier this year, Campo shared some of his poems with the campus community. Through his poetry, the reader steps away from health as hard science and toward health informed by the broader human experience. Campo struggles with questions of identity and ethics until, through verse, he ultimately arrives at empathy. He has been doing so since he was a medical student.

Poetry, according to Campo, is “the purest, clearest drug of all, the essence and distillation of the process of living itself.” —Susan Wiedel