Manifesto in couplets, with the not altogether ironic title “Reforming Health Care,” concludes by observing, “in the final absence of a cure, the need in all of us for someone’s care.”

The poet found Harvard Medical School “in some ways, very disheartening,” and took a year off to study creative writing at Boston University, where he evolved his pellucid formal style. After earning his M.D. in 1992, he took a medical residency in San Francisco, where—before the current “triple cocktail” treatment regime—“we had nothing to offer other than compassion” to gay men dying of AIDS in his care. Alternative Medicine looks back to those years—“Remember when it seemed miraculous/that most of our close friends weren’t dead? We feared/their blood...We cried/at patients’ funerals.”

These lines commit themselves at once to wide intelligibility—all the poems make sense the first time through—and to traditional ways of arranging words: pentameter quatrains, sonnets, a sestina, two double villanelles. Campo, who grew up fully bilingual, speculates that his pages’ clean shapes reveal his “immigrant mentality”: “to master these forms is becoming truly an English speaker.” Stanzas here address his second-generation identity: “We never learned to swim in bitterness/to us, the river’s water’s flow is free.”

Campo makes a point of listening to his patients: their voices and their own writings inform his poetry, as they informed his book of essays The Healing Art (2003).

“We doctors are famous for interrupting patients,” he explains; his work could help them speak. And yet the patients’ voices often tax the doctors’ temperaments; sick people need a kindness and a patience that their physicians cannot always provide.

“Can’t you just be happy I’m gonna die/and give me my damn prescriptions?” asks one; another was “sure she was infected with a virus...We feared/their blood...We cried/at patients’ funerals.”

Much of Campo’s writing—and some of his medical practice, too—seem designed to say to readers and nonreaders, the sick and the well, that we are not alone. Nor is Campo alone in his stylistic goals: fluent and sociable, versatile within his forms, he has something in common with the poet and translator Marilyn Hacker, and with the late poet Thom Gunn. “The kinds of poetry that I am writing,” Campo says, “I do hope will reach people in the hospital, people who are not necessarily poets themselves.” And yet that hope comes hand in hand, throughout Alternative Medicine, with the poet’s own need to explain hope and grief, life and death, memory and desire, to himself: as Campo puts it, “A doctor writes because he must, because/not one of us can stop the final cure.”

~STEPHEN BURT

OPEN BOOK

Annals of Anxiety

of The Atlantic (and an incorporator of this magazine). In a self-revealing, funny, and unsparring act of exposing one’s dark fears to the light of day, he has drawn on his personal experiences to address the history, etiology, and science of a broad topic in My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind (Knopf, $27.95).

From the vivid opening:

I have an unfortunate tendency to falter at crucial moments.

For instance, standing at the altar in a church in Vermont, waiting for my wife-to-be to come down the aisle to marry me, I start to feel horribly ill. Not just vaguely queasy, but severely nauseated and shaky—and, most of all, sweaty. The church is hot that day—it’s early July—and many people are perspiring in their summer suits and sundresses. But not like I am....In wedding photos, you can see me standing tensely at the altar, a grim half smile on my face, as I watch my fiancée come down the aisle, a grim half smile on my face, as I watch my fiancée come down the aisle to marry me, I start to feel horribly ill. Not just these thoughts instantly makes me sweat even more. My best man, standing a few feet behind me, taps me on the shoulder and hands me a tissue to mop my brow. My friend Cathy, sitting many rows back in the church, will tell me later that she had a strong urge to bring me a glass of water; it looked, she said, as if I had just run a marathon.

The wedding readers’ facial expressions have gone from registering mild concern to what appears to me to be un concealed horror: “Is he going to die? I’m beginning to wonder that myself. For I have started to shake...I feel like I’m on the verge of convulsing. I am concentrating on keeping my legs from flying out from under me like an epileptic’s and am hoping that my pants are baggy enough to keep the trembling from being too visible. I’m now leaning on my almost wife—there’s no hiding the trembling from her—and she is doing her best to hold me up.