



Photograph of Peter Campion © Euan Kerr

TOM YUILL

THE SWEETHEART OF THE RODEO: AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER CAMPION

PETER CAMPION IS ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING AMERICAN POETS to emerge in the past decade. He was born in 1976 and grew up in Massachusetts. He received a B.A. from Dartmouth College in 1998 and a M.A. from Boston University in 2000. He held a George Starbuck Lectureship at Boston University, which was followed by a Wallace Stegner Fellowship and a Jones Lectureship at Stanford University. He then taught creative writing at Washington College and Auburn University, during which time he was a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellow and a Joseph Brodsky Fellow at the American Academy in Rome. In 2011 he began teaching in the M.F.A. program at the University of Minnesota, where he is currently an Associate Professor and has served as Director of Creative Writing.

Campion's poems have appeared in such publications as *AGNI*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, *Poetry*, *Slate*, and *The Yale Review*, but he is best known for his three major collections: *Other People* (2005), *The Lions* (2009), and *El Dorado* (2013). *Other People* focused on intimacy and distance between the self and others by examining the relationship between communal and private experiences. In one poem, for example, a man wakes up in a hotel room to discover that the voices coming from neighbouring rooms resonate with his own dreams, and in another a woman living alone beside the ocean believes that she can hear the voices of the dead speaking to her through the sound of crashing waves. In his review of the collection, former U.S. poet laureate Robert Pinsky wrote that "Campion's ghosts are characteristically mysterious yet mundane, familiar yet—*other*," and it is this "closeness of the uncanny to the quotidian" that most clearly characterizes his work.

The Lions extended Campion's interest in the relationship between the self and others by examining the tensions between the personal and the po-

litical. The title poem, for example, described Campion's disturbing connection to the American political system, which was embodied by Robert McNamara (former U.S. Secretary of Defense under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, who played a major role in escalating the Vietnam War), and another described a haunting dream that reflected his desire to escape American society. Campion said that he "wanted to get more of the actually quite exhilarating things that we see around us in the media culture into the diction, into the imagery, maybe even into the structure of some of the poems," and this technique of combining intimate, personal experiences with reflections on contemporary society has since become a signature aspect of his work. As Alan Shapiro wrote, "These elegant passionate poems explore the way we live now in America at the beginning of the twenty-first century: our capacity for love and violence, our hunger for both truth and self-deception, our estrangement from and our connection to the natural world." James Longenbach similarly praised Campion for creating a "space where the single soul collides with the roiling world," and Ron Slate asserted that "Campion's voice is essential to the telling of the struggle of our time." *The Lions* thus established Campion's reputation for combining highly idiosyncratic poetry with political critique, and it received the 2010 Larry Lewis Reading Prize awarded by Virginia Commonwealth University.

El Dorado similarly reflected Campion's engagement with contemporary society through its references to big-box stores, airport lounges, highways, and the urban landscapes of Cleveland, Chicago, Boston, and Los Angeles. Like *The Lions*, it also dealt with political issues, such as the economic crisis, and the impact of new media technologies, such as the ubiquity of televisions, cell phones, and car radios. Jonathan Farmer described this collection as "reckoning with the uniquely privileged state of being privileged in America right now, as well as the ethical and intellectual burden it requires of anyone who chooses to live fully aware."

In addition to his poetry, Campion has also published a monograph on the painter Mitchell Johnson and has written essays for several art catalogues, including *Terry St. John: Studio Figures and Landscape Paintings* (2007), *Kim Frohsin: Figures with Edges* (2008), *Siddharth Parasnis: The Architecture of Emotion* (2008), *Suhas Bhujbal: New Paintings* (2009), *Ira Barkoff: Recent Paintings* (2009), and *Painterly Painting: The Next Level* (2009).

The following interview was conducted over e-mail in September 2017.

Tom Yuill: Your first book, *Other People*, resists the trend towards metaphor-speak or what Steph Burt once called “avant-garde word salad.” Rather, your verse is pared to its muscular base and figured into a really dazzling array of forms that remain logically connected to the subject. Can you talk about how you wrote those poems?

Peter Campion: I floundered around for a while before writing the poems that would go in that book. I was fortunate to have read the modernists as a teenager—not that I understood them. And I read earlier poems, too. But I had no idea about contemporary poetry—or at least no connection with it—until I was about nineteen and came across poets like C. K. Williams, Robert Pinsky, and Anne Winters. Those poets write with lyric intensity, and yet they take back some of the territory that poetry ceded in the last century to fiction and the essay. I didn’t want to imitate these writers, but I experienced a tremendous feeling of possibility when I read their work. Everything around me seemed to have aesthetic potential. I was still writing plenty of lousy drafts, but I was off to the races.

You mention form. I’m not sure why—it may be some hard-wired personal preference—but I’ve always loved what’s sometimes called “formal poetry” (a redundancy). I wanted nothing to do with “new formalism,” which seemed to me stodgy and dull, but I thought that Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, Thom Gunn, and James Merrill are surely contemporary writers, and they have the whole depth of poetic history at their command, so why shouldn’t I aspire to the same? And I found the best poets of the next generation—people like Tom Sleigh, Alan Shapiro, Jim Powell, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, and Rosanna Warren—and saw that same depth in their work. For me, this isn’t necessarily a matter of writing rhyme and metre—sometimes, sure—but of cultivating dimension and range.

Several years after these discoveries, when I had most of the poems in *Other People* but the book still wasn’t coming together, something wonderful happened. I saw the Todd Haynes movie *Far From Heaven* (2002), which was his tribute to the 1950s melodramas of Douglas Sirk. I’m not even sure if the movie holds up—it may not—but it knocked my socks off, especially the colour. Every shape and hue was vivid, surprising, and yet necessary. I went right from watching that movie to revising my poems. We had this tiny workspace in our apartment in Berkeley, California—it was just a closet with a window—and I holed up in there and finished the book. I think the idea

that movie sparked was a version of the old modernist belief—expressed by visual artists as well as writers—that each constituent part of a composition must have its own vivacity even as it must contribute to the whole. For me that’s where the metaphors abide, and not necessarily in overt subversion of conventional phrasing and idiom, though I can admire that, too. So, it’s gratifying to have you mention the *logic* behind the description in those poems.

Yuill: That last comment also seems to reflect your interest in visual art. Can you talk about the connections you see between poetry and painting?

Campion: I was so lucky to get involved in art writing when I was starting out in my early twenties. It’s something I’m passionate about regardless of its relation to poetry. It’s enlightened self-interest: I get to meet artists, visit their studios, and learn about their practice. Best of all is looking at paintings in a gallery or a museum with a really superb painter and listening to him or her discuss what you’re both seeing. I remember hearing Deborah Rosenthal describe a Claude Lorrain in the Met in New York and—boom!—the whole world of neoclassical French landscape painting opened up for me, then and there. (And Claude Lorrain was a painter I already admired, and thought I knew!) Something similar happened when I got my friend Mitchell Johnson to talk about tone in the works of Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot. But there also is a deep connection between visual art and poetry. For one thing, they are bound up in each other’s histories. When William Carlos Williams was inventing his version of American modernism, for example, he had the examples of people like Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, and Marsden Hartley close at hand. Like those painters, he wanted to make art that derived from local, American realities and yet had its own formal life apart from its representational function. That particular example has been profound for me.

Yuill: I’ve talked about your book *The Lions* in terms of Martin Heidegger’s idea of being as force, and I recall you discussing a connection with Robert McNamara that ties in, doesn’t it? The power applied during both WWII and the Vietnam War, and his role as a functionary and mobilizer of such power, clangs around in this book about force. It also seems to be about power marshalled to dominate—about lions. Does the book seem to you to

take this as its subject? If so—or if not—did you aspire to write such a book, or did you find that what you were writing was getting into this territory and follow the golden thread, as it were?

Campion: More the golden thread, though, strangely, I wrote that book very quickly. This was during the first years of the Iraq and Afghanistan fiasco. Lots of poets were writing topical poems, and I don't like topical poems. But there was no way not to write with a feeling for how these events changed the whole tenor of contemporary life. Let me describe this on the formal level. The way I apprehend significance has to do with layers. I often use a musical analogy to describe such significance and how I want to render it in a poem. When I'm listening to an ensemble I admire—last night, for example, it was jazz guitarist Jonathan Kreisberg's album *Night Songs* (2009)—I hear the bass line serving its fundamental purpose, supplying the rhythm and harmony, and I realize that it's also surprising and beautiful in its own right, as are the drums and the piano accompaniment. Same with a poem like the one you mention: I want it to include my thinking about politics as well as my worries as a father, my daydreaming about sex, and my childhood memories. Formal elements like voice, line, phrase, sentence, sound, and metaphor similarly interact as facets of the central action. If I can find a way to braid all these instrumental parts, as it were, so they suggest the depth and dimension of significant experience, then I'm up and running. In the case you mention, that long poem "The Lions," the impetus again was a movie—Errol Morris' *The Fog of War* (2003)—which, incidentally, I think is a tepid, mediocre movie, though it served my purpose. In the poem, watching that movie triggers recollections about my family and its connection to twentieth-century history—McNamara was my mother's godfather—as well as a long remembrance of one strange evening of my childhood in the 1980s on Cape Cod.

Yuill: In poems like "Boston: Red Hair" your technical successes complement beautifully the poem's humaneness. I'm thinking of the image of red alphabet soup and the "electric fire" at the end, for instance. Such poems are written from the point of view of a speaker who, by this point in *El Dorado*, your third book, is a familiar, vulnerable, candid, but wise character. When you work on your poems, do you regard the voice in your lyric poems as a character or make formal decisions with that in mind?

Campion: I mostly don't think of my voice as that of a character or even a "speaker," as we say in workshops. For me, a "speaker" is the right word when we're discussing a dramatic monologue, like those famous ones I love by Robert Browning or Frank Bidart. On the other hand, I'm not naive about these things. I don't think of poems as personal testimony or something. All poems involve invention, at least if they're any good. We lie sometimes to tell the greater truth. So, I don't think of the voice as a character, but I do want that voice to be dramatic. At times, I want to risk saying something wrong, even offensive (something that I find my students, in the current academic climate, are deathly afraid of), because that voice represents not my own hard and fast "views" about the world but rather one consciousness trying to come to the truth. My guide for all this remains Robert Frost—I have in mind his letters to John Bartlett about "the sound of sense" and "sentence sounds." When I'm writing, I want to hear the spoken voice alive in the grammar.

Yuill: What about narrative? In an earlier interview you once said that narrative came quite naturally to you, and you even wondered why you didn't become a fiction writer. You also said that you were particularly fond of the "matrix of possibilities" that narrative offers, which allows you to "discover something that you wouldn't otherwise." How do you incorporate narratives, or narrative techniques, into your poems?

Campion: I think "plot" is about more than just narrative; it's also the logic of the parts in motion and their overlapping functions. Eudora Welty once said (I'm paraphrasing) that every story is really two stories, and the challenge is to find the story beneath the story. That calls to mind the old idea of the "double plot" in Shakespeare—King Lear is the story of Lear and his daughters and Gloucester and his sons. In this regard, narrative resembles metaphor: it asks us to consider at least two, different elements in concert. Narrative can therefore prove more inclusive and more unsettling than those writers know who've swilled some watered-down poststructuralism and scoff at "narrative." It allows us to bring anything at all into that set of possibilities. Imagine some crucial event going on in your home—some family crisis or great joy or something—and then imagine what might be going on in the house of a neighbour—someone you don't even know. To imagine some form that includes both—that's narrative thinking. At least, that's what

it feels like for me to read the novels of Charles Dickens or George Eliot. I want to write a poem that can accommodate those different possibilities and still pursue one, central, necessary action. In the last few years I've been doing this by bringing various voices into my poems—writing poems that have more than one speaker.

Yuill: When I read poets whose poems have characteristics different from my own, or from my favourite poems, my response varies. Sometimes I think, “Well, I don't have much interest in doing that, but I know how and I think he did it really well here.” I've never had any interest in writing a David Blair poem, for instance, but he's an old friend and I love his work. What about you?

Campion: I'm sure that my own tastes sometimes prevent me from appreciating excellent poems that differ from those tastes. But I try to wander from my comfort zone and keep an open mind. As a critic I've certainly been forced to do so. Even if you end up with a negative opinion, you need to have surrendered yourself to a work of art to evaluate it honestly. When I was coming up, my pantheon of twentieth-century poets consisted of writers like Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Philip Larkin, and Robert Lowell. Although I loved Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, I admit that the second generation of experimental modernists, such as Robert Duncan, George Oppen, and Lorine Niedecker, felt a little odd to me when I began reading them. But I love those poets now. Same with the New York School poets, especially Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler.

Yuill: Among the poets I hear a lot are those who use social or political melodrama, and sometimes over-sentimentality, to try to intensify the importance of their poems. I'm reminded then of Czesław Miłosz calling politics the sex-appeal of literature. He was talking about temptation: irresistible because poetry cannot shirk responsibility to life, but dangerous because poetry cannot—absolutely cannot—shirk responsibility to poetry. Who do you think writes political poems well, and what are your favourite literary works that you think of as political?

Campion: I want to be a wag and answer “Ezra Pound.” Of course I think his politics were often loathsome, not even worthy of being called “politics,”

but his ability to render the various layers of political experience—from the global to the minutely personal—remains *nonpareil*. Lowell seems to me an obvious answer and a good one. And then there's C. K. Williams. I was fortunate to become friends with him during the last years of his life. I think he wrote some tremendous political poems, and I think his later work hasn't yet been properly appreciated. Of course he was lionized during earlier periods of his writing life—he wasn't short on awards or prominent publications—but critics began to turn on him in the late 1990s. When his *Collected Poems* came out in 2006 there was a thoroughly stupid review in *The New York Times*. But the work outlives all that. We're still coming to terms with it. I am, anyhow. Another poet I'll mention, because she's not well enough known, is Anne Winters. She has a fierce and capacious political sensibility, and yet her poems are never merely topical, never sententious.

Yuill: In *Other People*, *The Lions*, and *El Dorado* you attain something like Bishop or Pinsky's level of deftness in poems set in "normal" settings. Do you find yourself lately writing about personal life, your children, and so forth?

Campion: I haven't been writing all that much about my children recently. I went through a divorce three years ago, and it still feels like the central event of my life. I can't not write from it, and yet what could be more a cliché of contemporary American poetry than "middle-aged, white, male poetry professor gets divorced?" So I'm approaching the topic obliquely. I hope that, in the book I'm working on right now, I've become more raw by choosing a tack that's less overtly autobiographical. The larger challenge for me has been to write about the way all our lives are made and undone by the twists and turns of love. That's normal and yet cataclysmic, too. All of the best subjects verge on cliché: love, family, seasons, flowers, animals, birds, art we admire. You can imagine a platitudinous kind of poem deriving from any of these subjects, but that's just a challenge, and I like a challenge.

Yuill: Your new poetry is wonderful, and thanks for letting us include "Sitcom Set." This poem has the lithe intelligence of much of your work: sinewy cadences and meaningful, surprising connections between a central image and what it invokes—between the "sitcom," the "set," and the speaker's emotions and memories. Can you talk about what inspired your use of the

poem's central image as a touchstone for so much feeling? Are the virtuosities of John Donne and Ben Jonson on your mind these days?

Campion: Funny you should mention those two poets. Jonson seems to me a model when it comes to scoring the speaking voice on the page—especially when I'm working with a metrical, rhymed form, I try to keep in mind such examples. Jonson's described as a poet of the "plain style" because his voice is so direct. He sounds incredibly natural. And I suppose his diction can be "low," at least in the epigrams. His naturalism is so strong, though, that it allows an effect very much like ornate, high style. The voice has such lucidity that it can go anywhere and throw off any weird aside or humorous quip. There are some lines from his poem "To My Book" (1616) that I love:

Thou shouldst be bold, licentious, full of gall,
Wormwood, and sulphur, sharp, and tooth'd withal;
Become a petulent thing, hurl ink, and wit,
As madmen stones; not caring whom they hit.

In Donne you have almost the same thing, but the opposite way round: he piles metaphor upon metaphor and becomes very showy with his erudition—Jonson can, too, if in a more classical manner—but you'll follow him anywhere because he never lacks what Frost called "the sounds of sense"—something I mentioned earlier, but which is also instructive here. The voice just falls into lines and sentences. He also roughs up the metre in an interesting way. In his book *The Founding of English Metre* (1961), John Thompson (a wonderful scholar and Lowell's close friend) explains that Donne employs the same irregularities you find in Thomas Wyatt, but since he's coming two generations later, after the intervening years of Philip Sydney, who was a wizard of codified, metrical precision, his roughness feels intentionally retro. His lines are like pre-stressed jeans. This drove Alexander Pope crazy, so he reset some of Donne's poems into more regular metres. Ha!

I could yammer about those poets for hours, but you asked me about "Sitcom Set." The poem was inspired by seeing television sets playing from inside houses that I passed when I was out walking. I got to thinking about the "sitcom set"—that perennial living room with the central sofa and so on—and how it provided a kind of ready-made hominess—at least it did in the 1980s when I was a kid and we watched sitcoms every night. So the

poem becomes an oblique way to write not only about divorce and broken families—I grew up in one, and now my kids are growing up in one too—but also about how, for all its impressive and beguiling qualities, modern technology tends to reveal the same old dilemmas of human desire in ways that can be poignant, even sad.

Yuill: We’ve been friends since graduate school at Boston University, and we’ve both been teaching ever since as well as writing poetry. Does teaching influence your writing?

Campion: People like us who make our living teaching creative writing are supposed to resent the question “can writing be taught?” But it seems perfectly valid to me. I don’t know about you, but every time I start a new poem I’m right back at the beginning all over again, needing to learn. I’ve gleaned some techniques, methods, tricks. I also have my own rules of thumb about sentence structure, phrasing, line architecture, and so on. Even if you’re not writing narrative, you learn how to check the briefcase at the counter in Dallas and pull it off the carousel at LAX. But when I’m writing, all those things seem less brain surgery, more wilderness medicine. I want a poem to be inevitable and surprising—a vector for thought and feeling—and am often *not* sure how to achieve this. If I were certain all the time, something would be wrong.

All this creates a strange situation for a teacher. I’m old-fashioned and believe, as Isaac Babel’s mother once told him, “you must know everything.” You need to know the history of the art and feel it in your being. So, I can teach technique and the history of poetry, which perhaps makes me sound like some authoritarian bore, but the truth’s that such knowledge comes from appetite—a form of love that feels to me a lot like obsession—and not from obeisance to tradition or whatever. Students need to have that energy coming from within. If they do, I can guide them.

I think that’s the kind of teaching you and I benefited from back in Boston. The enthusiasm of the poets we worked with spilled over any institutional structures. Nor was there any “school” of writing poetry in one certain way, though people certainly weren’t shy about expressing their opinions!

That’s all to say, no, I don’t think my teaching influences my writing. But my having been—and still being—a student surely does.

Yuill: We've both been teaching at various universities for many years now, and institutional needs and possibilities can come into the picture—for the professor, if not necessarily the poet. I find the power of universities to be incredible, as they have the resources to change thousands of lives for the better. Even the grounds, evoking idyllic visions of the past, are created ritual spaces. On the other hand, students are panicked about a draconian student loan system, and many at some schools are being encouraged to treat college as a trade school in order to be sure they have a first job waiting right after graduation. Of course, when they want a promotion later on, they'll get another degree, or so they tell me. Arts education, of course, is designed to teach them to teach themselves, and Pinsky used to say that it is underrated in terms of its practical value. What do you tell your students?

Campion: You describe the situation well. I think the most important thing is simply to be honest with students. When I talk with our incoming M.F.A. students at the University of Minnesota, I tell them that their degree alone is unlikely to get them a job. Most often, they already know that, and they're on this path because they're obsessed with making art. Sometimes the most rewarding teaching for me is with undergraduates because of that power to change lives. Even students with no desire to become writers can become lifelong lovers of poetry—not to mention better critical thinkers—from taking a good course. At the moment, I'm teaching an upper-level undergraduate course called "American Poetry from 1900." There are thirty students, and they're terrific. We just discussed Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens last week, and tomorrow we begin on William Carlos Williams. I'm experiencing my own initial excitement about this poetry all over again, and it's heartening to see how much these students are hungry for this kind of education—an education in the arts that's both not what they get in their statistics classes and rigorous, exacting, not the usual smarm about "creativity, community building, blah, blah, blah."

And I do agree with Pinsky's statement: arts education is underrated and does have practical value. What else are we doing as we go through our lives, attempting to understand the world and make the right choices, but reading, evaluating, asking critical questions, and attempting to render some shape from our experience that's dynamic and just and worth it?