

## “Silence = Death”

*Rafael Campo*

His worn-out T-shirt, black as mourning, black  
as countless deaths, surprises me—it screams  
a phrase I've heard so many countless times  
before, in words hot pink as countless  
fevers—heat of language, demonstrations,  
why does it still threaten me, I who held  
my patient's hand who died his wordless death,  
the respirator hissing in my ear  
the countless breaths he couldn't take himself.  
That was years ago, almost decades now.  
Today, I see his T-shirt and I think  
he isn't taking all his antiviral meds,  
the countless pills he piled on my desk  
to silence me, my T-cell counts and viral loads  
detectable at greater than one hundred thousand,  
the silent viral particles that swell  
to numbers more than even we will count—  
I pause, and shift a moment in my chair;  
I ask, “How many loved ones did you lose?”  
“I can't count them” is his response. “But one  
left me this stupid T-shirt when he died.”  
Then, we're silent, counting moments, death  
counting us in all its infiniteness,  
in all we know that words cannot explain.

