

# A READER'S COMPANION

for

Joseph Campana's

“The Book of LIFE”

Tupelo Press (2019)

## Biographical Note

Joseph Campana is a poet, arts critic, and scholar of Renaissance literature. He is the author of three collections of poetry, *The Book of Faces* (Graywolf, 2005), *Natural Selections* (Iowa, 2012), which received the Iowa Poetry Prize, and *The Book of Life* (Tupelo, 2019). His poetry appears in *Slate*, *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *Conjunctions*, *Guernica*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Colorado Review*, while individual poems have won prizes from *Prairie Schooner* and the *Southwest Review*.

He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Houston Arts Alliance, and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. He reviews the arts, books, media and culture regularly for *The Houston Chronicle*, *CultureMap*, *The Kenyon Review*, and other venues and is the author of dozens of scholarly essays on Renaissance literature and culture as well as a study of poetics, *The Pain of Reformation: Spenser, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Masculinity* (Fordham, 2012).

He teaches at Rice University where he is Alan Dugald McKillop Professor of English.

## Author's Commentary of Two Poems from "The Book of Life"

"A Shirt Loves a Body, *December 7, 1953*" and "Chanel No 5"

Sometimes poems begin with an idea or an image or piece of language gently knocking on the doors of your conscious perception. They begin, one way or another, with fascination. I was fascinated by movie stars and celebrity cultures but often of ages past. It's not really surprising that I would become captured by *Life* magazine when I encountered it. For the central decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century *Life* was central to how America viewed itself. And so, for better and for worse, revealed in its pages, alongside extraordinary photojournalism and news features and ads for products we scarcely now recognize, was a set of aspirations or fantasies about what it would mean to see America every week, once a week, in its entirety. It's an impossible aspiration. At times it's a flawed aspiration. And yet *Life* is also iconic. It's hard not to take notice of an icon when it beckons.

After the publication of my first book of poems, my mother called me with an incredible offer. She worked for decades for the Johnstown Public Library, a beautiful Carnegie building in my hometown in upstate New York. It's no exaggeration to say I grew up in that building. Libraries suffer from the weight of their own bounty. Year by year there are more books, more magazines, more materials to shelf. Year by year there's less and less space to spare. So in these years before nearly everything became digital, the library had a problem with its collection of *Life* magazines. They no longer had room, and my mother called to offer them to me. There were, of course, too many to take, but I asked her to pull certain issues: some published in the weeks of birth of my family and friends, some about important national and world events, some with movie star covers, and some at random. The genesis of this project says something about me as well. I was raised in a library by a mother who read to me when I was young. And so, although my mother was never a reader of poetry (except, perhaps mine!), I think of all of my poems as gifts from my mother.

A box of these magazines moved with me over a couple years and then finally I dove into them and did not surface for some years. The process of discovering and then being immersed in that archive I tried to document in the opening poem called "Envoi," a term for a dedicatory or introductory poem. Poets used to write these to introduce their books, sometimes even beginning them with phrases like "Go little book." So, *The Book of Life* tries to introduce itself and its project in this way in that poem. But the bigger questions that arise when the poet immerses himself in historical documents of this variety are "what to do with them?" and "how not to drown?" What developed quickly in the process of writing was a method for approaching the issues. Each poem might read in a strikingly different way—might even be in a strikingly different shape—but each poem would, to the best of its ability, not be afraid of its materials. Everything in each poem comes from the issue of *Life* I was immersed in, and my tactic was to try to convey in vivid and at times ecstatic detail the feeling of the "now" each issue conveyed even as it had already passed into recorded history.

“A Shirt Loves a Body, *December 7 1953*” was not the first poem I wrote, but it did arise from the significant selection of the issue of *Life* magazine published in the year of my mother’s birth. On the cover? An image of Audrey Hepburn with a telephone to her ear. She sits in profile, her head turned to meet the gaze of the viewer. She wears only a simple white men’s dress shirt. Audrey Hepburn was not only the star of the silver screen but she was also the star of my first book of poems, *The Book of Faces*, which is all about how we fall in love with icons. What an uncanny coincidence: my mother and my favorite movie star all caught up together with me in the uncanny eddies of history. And so, it is also a poem about love, about what the body does when it loves, which is not unlike how clothing does when it hugs a body:

A shirt loves a body the way  
 a bracelet kisses a wrist, kisses  
 the tender flesh stretched over  
 tendon and vein: a whole world  
 thrumming just below. Fingers  
 love motion the way the flesh  
 loves the deep electrical twitch  
 of the body involuntary, satisfied  
 with itself and one at last with  
 a music that loves to fill a room  
 the way a piano loves Liberace  
 and Victor Borge.

What does a poem about mothers and movie stars and love have to do with any of the other things that arise in? Liberace, Victor Borge, or Chrysler? Or how about “toasters, deep fryers, coffee / makers, and electric razors?” The poem collects and catalogues and describes and tries to love everything it found—and found of interest—in the issue of the magazine. Such things may seem like consumer trash, and certainly I found myself fascinated by the culture of advertising in *Life*. Clearly, I’m not the only one—why else would a television show like *Mad Men* captivate so many if we weren’t in fact fascinated by the rise of a certain image of consumerism in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? And how lovable was this dark center of the century in the wake of the depravities of WWII and already encountering those of two more wars to follow. There were blackouts and political crises and nuclear tests. There were the assassinations—Gandhi, two Kennedys, Martin Luther King.

Maybe that’s why the poem needed to be about love. Not just because it began with my mother but because so many hard things were documented in *Life*. That is what life and that is what *Life* was about: how to love the hard, dark things of the world with all your heart. When we love,

the body becomes a letter  
 that would tell you precisely how  
 a body loves if only you could  
 read it. Slack-jawed, wide-eyed,  
 open-mouthed: the body one great

aperture.

Or so we hope—that we might be so open to the world. And yet the world is also what we are also, always leaving, which is why we’re always also like this mother, loving “the way a mother cradles the child / she sees she can no longer hold.” A shirt loves a body, yes, but it also must surrender the body. Sometimes we are ourselves alone.

There’s a line from “A Shirt Loves a Body” that toys with an advertising campaign. Of the many consumer goods catalogued in *The Book of Life* and in *Life*, more generally, what’s more exquisite than perfume?

Chanel No. 5 loves Chanel No. 5  
and wears nothing else to bed.  
Naked, at last, it is finally itself  
alone, vapors free in the night  
air and practically fire now,  
loving itself purely, the way  
everyone loves useless gifts,  
along with all other forms of  
generosity indifferent to duty.  
Imagine that: someone loved  
you enough not to care

Chanel No. 5 was that fragrance purportedly exquisite enough that you could wear nothing else to bed. And so I was thinking about the richness of scent, of the way some scents give us the feeling of something beyond ourselves. But I was also thinking of a little family tradition.

At a certain point in my life, when I could afford to, I began to buy my mother Chanel No. 5 for Christmas or Mother’s Day. I remembered, as a child, that it was a scent she loved. And as I wrote this book, I remembered, too, a poem I had written some years earlier. The middle section of *The Book of Life* is, in fact, built of poems written in the wake of *Life* magazine. They are about my life, a life I lived after that first glorious print run ended in 1971. And they were largely written before I realized they would be part of this project. As I assembled the book, the patterns of resonance were powerful and unmistakable. The poem “Chanel No. 5” is a perfect example. Here is, you could say, another poem about love. I think here about how my parents met, about how people fall in love in the complicated ways that they do. In matters of love, it isn’t always clear why we do what we do, so we focus on the how:

I don’t know when she first tasted  
the scent of this number, dragged  
from a port where my father stationed:  
seeing the sights, fleeing his family,  
but mainly thinking of her, writing  
letters I think they never kept.

In the poem, “Chanel No. 5” is a kind of aspiration. It is, also, a commodity and a luxury good (“Now in the airport: shelves of the glittering, / bottles of essence of every number.”) It was an aspiration in the earlier poem to love the difficult and dark things of this world. Here it is an aspiration to love mystery, “to love what you can’t understand.” Since as humans we seem to understand so little about the marvelous and terrible world with which we collide, it seems we have a lot to love. And since we have thousands of years of poetry about love, we have guides and companions for this journey.