

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:
POEMS IN A PANDEMIC

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TIMOTHY LIU, MARK WALLACE, AND JILLIAN WEISE

*Together in a Sudden Strangeness:
America's Poets Respond to the Pandemic*

Alice Quinn, editor
Knopf, 2020
208 pages; hardcover, \$27

"Scenes from a Pandemic"
Scoundrel Time, 2020–2021
online, open-access

Just Us: An American Conversation

Claudia Rankine
Graywolf, 2020
360 pages; hardcover, \$30

Seeing the Body
Rachel Eliza Griffiths
Norton, 2020
144 pages; hardcover, \$26.95

Compression & Purity
Will Alexander
City Lights Books, 2011
100 pages; paperback, \$15.95

"Imaginary Safe House: HA&L Canadian Dis/Ability Poetic Issue"
Special Issue, *Hamilton Arts and Letters* 12.2
Samizat Press, 2019–2020
online, open-access

In Brazen Fontanelle Aflame
Ted Rees
Timeless, Infinite Light, 2018
136 pages; paperback, \$20

A Spell in the Pokey: Hugh Walthall Selected Poems
Aldon Lynn Nielsen, editor
selva oscura, 2018
105 pages; paperback, \$12.50

Introduction

MICHAEL THEUNE, REVIEW ESSAY EDITOR

Together in a Sudden Strangeness: America's Poets Respond to the Pandemic, a new anthology edited by Alice Quinn, gathers 107 poems by American poets in this era of COVID-19, attempting to capture the moment's ramifications and revelations. According to Quinn's introduction, the collection started taking shape very soon after social distancing practices were initiated in spring 2020, and—though it changed shape a bit later on—it assumed its form quickly, in just forty days, and was published, first, as an e-book (xvi). Though Quinn describes the gathered poems as “splendidly varied in style, tone, atmosphere, aesthetic approach, and intention,” her remarks focus at least as much on the poems' similarities: the tonal range—from “rueful and darkly witty” to “wistful” to “dread”-filled—is not *too* vast; a number of the poems, though they express a “critical anxiety,” still emanate a (in the words of John Clare) “hermit joy”; and “[m]any ... culminate in a cri de coeur, always individual, always that single poet's cry” (xvi).

This unity in multiteity, however, was disrupted—somewhat—when, as the anthology was going to press, “the country experienced another huge shift”: the murders, by police officers, of George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks, and the large-scale protests that followed (xvii). As a result, twenty-two more poems were added to the collection. The project, and so the nature, of the anthology changed a bit, but not much: many of the newly included poems “intensified the call to action expressed far more than embryonically in so many of the earlier poems” (xvii).

I don't intend the above to be—necessarily—a critique; rather, I mean it to be an accurate description—a description, though, that makes clear the need to closely consider this book. On the one hand, the effort, the intention, of Quinn's anthology seems, on the surface, admirable, even, frankly, fundamental: *of course* poets—including many good ones, just a few of whom include Stephanie Burt, Billy Collins, Cornelius Eady, Linda Gregerson, Brenda Hillman, Edward Hirsch, Yusef Komunyakaa, Li-Young Lee, Ada Limón, Eileen Myles, Sharon Olds, Carl Phillips, Claudia Rankine, Anne Waldman, Christian Wiman, and Kevin Young—are attempting to convey their responses to this time, and *of course* it is meaningful to share those responses: these poems might help their readers to better come to terms with this moment. And yet, on the other hand, in a time marked by amorphousness, mutation, inequity, contingency, and precarity, such a timely, well-crafted, *confident* anthology also obviously would have to miss the mark.

Desirous of further insights into this moment and our poetic responses to it, I asked the contributors to this review essay to use *Together in a Sudden Strangeness* as a leaping off point for a reflection on the task of poetry today, a reflection that would include a brief review of some work beyond Quinn's anthology, work that seems particularly significant now.

Quinn refers in her introduction to the “unexpected bounty” of her project (xvi). I feel similarly blessed. Each of the contributions below offers valuable critical insights and also generously points to additional resources from which to draw as my own understanding of and grappling with what is happening evolves. I hope and trust, reader, it does the same for you.

Poetical Bypassing

TIMOTHY LIU

This COVID-19 anthology, *Together in a Sudden Strangeness*, edited by Alice Quinn, reeks of privilege, and by this I don't mean White privilege *per se* but a more inclusive poetic privilege of the American ilk. Poets fleeing into their panic rooms, teaching virtually, Zooming with family and friends, masking up and slipping out to forage for food and toilet paper, then zipping back home to wonder when the

lockdowns will relent, the vaccines go round, and life resume!—all the while reading books and polishing their wonderfully angsty apocalyptic gems! Nothing wrong with that! What privilege rarely does is implicate itself, question its own solipsistic viral appropriation in these times of Uncertainty. What do we want from a book of pressed flowers in the Great Pause anyway while our brothers and sisters of color are bearing the brunt of the onslaught? Whom does such a book serve? Unlike most of the poets (I imagine!) who are gathered herein, I have actually read the book from cover to cover trying to locate an answer.

Forget the nepotism, the obvious mutual hand jobs. Forget the subjective lapses in good taste. Forget the poems marred by their archaic gasps of “O” and “Oh!” and that guttural insistence of *Ich-Ich-Ich!* Forget that this anthology could have been called *Global Climate Pandemic Collapse* or *Anthropocene Now!* or *Walking Dead Redux*. Why blame the Poets if we happen to be caught up in this trifecta of viral global greed gone fascistically amok? We’re all doing the best we can!

I think it was W. H. Auden who said, “Praise is the final thing,” so in that spirit, I offer up the names of seven brave tender shoots that rose up and beyond the frayed malaise: Jericho Brown, Linda Gregerson, Eliza Griswold, Edward Hirsch, Amit Majmudar, Sally Wen Mao, and Jeffrey Yang. If you’re going to write in the here and now, then, *Be Here Now*. Forget about your lonesome privilege. Extend your attentive gaze to the Grocery Worker, to the Eight Dead Folks on your Brooklyn Block. Or to those Batshit Crazy Bats from that Market in Wuhan swirling on Ming vases. Or take a walk from the Cemetery to the Prison to the High School and back again in a world emptied out of people, a world in which only crumbling buildings and tombstones remain, and do this without self-pity. Can you do that? What the best poems in this anthology do is take us out of self-indulgent ego-soothing narratives into some other nurturing space, however challenging.

Now to pick on one poem, I call out Jane Hirshfield (she can take it!) whose spiritual bypassing reaches new heights as the narrator congratulates herself for having “saved an ant” when she could “do nothing” else (62). You go girl! Enough on Alice Quinn’s wilting bouquet, a book I seriously wouldn’t have even bothered reading if this magazine hadn’t assigned it, not when this Mutating Urgency we

are all caught up in has called our attentions elsewhere.

Enter *Scoundrel Time*.

Enter *Scoundrel Time*'s "Scenes from a Pandemic" ongoing supplement.¹

The verse (and prose) gathered therein read like bulletins from the front where some bull running rampant in a china shop is suddenly caught by its here-and-now horns:

Fifteenth day under lockdown, twenty-second in self-isolation, and I had already lost most of my muscles. Not that I was a wrestler before that. Not even a fan of that violent sport ...²

*

They're dressing up cats on Facebook
and someone has taught a dog to play volleyball—
a natural, he always makes the return.
Bocelli and Orlenski transcend and console,
nepenthe for the quarantined ...³

*

The homeless man, whom I'll call Gerald, hunched on the end of my exam table, gingerly picking at the metal shield taped over his left eye. "It happened like this, see, I was out panhandling, and with this new ..."⁴

Fiction. Poetry. Nonfiction. Can you even tell which is which? Does it matter?

What matters to me is the Urgency underneath all that daily mind-numbing tele-blathered Word Crawl.

If Death is reported in Numbers like 2,324,794, might Life be best captured in our Narratives? But not just any narratives, nor journalism *lite*, pray tell, let alone *lyrically privileged* narratives.

Nor *poetically-bypassed* narratives!

I won't take up space here to reprint or discuss the four short poems of my own that *Scoundrel Time*'s poetry editor, Daisy Fried, so

1 <https://scoundreltime.com/category/scenes-from-a-pandemic/>.

2 Muhammad Sheeraz Dasti, "Kill All the Bats," <https://scoundreltime.com/kill-all-the-bats/>.

3 Virginia Beards, "April 7, 2020," <https://scoundreltime.com/april-7-2020/>.

4 Robbie Gamble, "Barriers," <https://scoundreltime.com/barriers/>.

graciously chose to run on June 18, 2020, but check them out! It's okay if you don't care for them! I just don't want to be blowing smoke here without putting my you-know-what where my mouth is.

Here's the thing. Write your own piece inside this ongoing pandemic. Forget polemics. Forget your poetics or even politics. Write something to test your mutating mettle. Swim your way through Uncertainties into the Great Unknown, you Holy Rascal, you!

I want to close by saying how during the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and '90s, which I somehow managed to live through, an anthology like *Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS*, edited by Michael Klein, saved my life.⁵ It took me completely out of *myself* and hurled me into a world of *others*. There was no lockdown then, nor sense of safety for those like me unable to flee from the Gay Plague. There *still* are no vaccines. The poetry gathered in that volume had an urgency that (mostly) disallowed any privileged poetical bypassing. So many of those contributors are now dead.

Pandemic Poetry, Public Policy, and Racial Imaginations

ANNA LEAHY

In the introduction to the anthology *Together in a Sudden Strangeness: America's Poets Respond to the Pandemic*, editor Alice Quinn writes, "As we were going to press with the original e-book and audiobook, the country experienced another huge shift" (xvii). Quinn goes on to say that the murders of Ahmaud Arbery in February, Breonna Taylor in March, George Floyd in May, and Rayshard Brooks in June "combined to alter the landscape of reckoning in our country in powerful ways. Ongoing protests here—and globally—prove how inescapable, necessary, and crucial this reckoning is" (xvii). As I am finishing this essay, the US Senate has voted against convicting the former US president of inciting insurrectionists in January of this year. Months after last summer's protests, many of those who stormed the Capitol displayed Confederate flags, nooses, and other white supremacist symbols. So, despite the election of a new US president and several executive orders

⁵ *Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS*, ed. Michael Klein (New York: Persea, 1992).

designed to increase racial equity,⁶ I'm wondering exactly what "huge shift" Quinn thought was occurring this past pandemic summer. I'm questioning whether reckoning is "inescapable."

Claudia Rankine's poem "Weather" is among twenty-two poems added to the anthology between the e-book and print versions, added after the "huge shift." In "Weather," Rankine writes of George Floyd's death and the need "to repair the future" (128). One of the weatherings embedded in this poem is the "chronic exposure to social and economic disadvantages"⁷ that can affect a person's health and life span: "Six feet / under for underlying conditions. Black" (128). Indeed, one recent study "showed that 34% of [COVID-19] deaths were among non-Hispanic Black people, though this group accounts for only 12% of the total U.S. population."⁸ Like police shootings of Black suspects,⁹ racial health disparities are nothing new, so I wonder not only when but whether this country will reckon with these statistics. While I think Quinn used *reckoning* to mean a settling of debt or a day when America will face judgment and be held accountable, the word can refer merely to adding up an amount or, in the case of police shootings and health disadvantages, adding up Black bodies at a greater rate than White bodies.

In her new book of poems, prose, and images, Rankine writes in the opening poem, "what if in a lifetime of conversations, what if / in

6 *Fact Sheet: President Biden to Take Action...*, *The White House*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/26/fact-sheet-president-biden-to-take-action-to-advance-racial-equity-and-support-underserved-communities/>.

7 Allana T. Forde et al., "The Weathering Hypothesis as an Explanation for Racial Disparities in Health: A Systematic Review," *Annals of Epidemiology*, 33 (May 2019): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annepidem.2019.02.011>.

8 "COVID-19 Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, updated December 10, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/disparities-deaths.html>.

9 "This study shows that the rate of fatal police shootings for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) is constant from 2015 to 2020. Further, BIPOC have significantly higher death rates compared with Whites in the overall victim pool." Elle Lett et al., "Racial Inequity in Fatal US Police Shootings, 2015–2020," *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 75.4 (October 27, 2020): 394–397, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/jech-2020-215097>.

the clarity of consciousness, what if nothing changes?" (9). In the next section, she suggests why there may not be judgment, accountability, or settling of debt around the bend: "What if you are responsible to saving more than to changing?" (9). *Just Us: An American Conversation* is a *tour de force* about the role whiteness plays in Rankine's life, from the white friend who "has to defend me all the time to her white friends who think I'm a radical" (93), to the white police officer who "cannot know himself as the embodied space of privilege" (141), to the "polite white people" discussing race and children at a dinner party (153).¹⁰ Rankine is reckoning with whiteness in *Just Us*, but is mainstream America reckoning too?

"Unless something structural shifts in ways that remain unimaginable," Rankine writes, "the life my [white] friend has is not a life I can achieve. Ever. Her kind of security, because it's not merely monetary, is atmospheric and therefore is not transferable. It's what remains invisible behind the term 'white.' It doesn't inoculate her from illness, loss, or forfeiture of wealth, but it ensures a level of citizenry, safety, mobility, and belonging I can never have" (189). Unlike money, this security is uncountable and therefore generally unaccounted for; with no easy way to measure for settling up, it seems above judgment. This safety and belonging that are part and parcel of whiteness may be why last summer's protests seemed a huge shift to the so-called mainstream even though the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, in response to the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, occurred six years earlier. What we call mainstream uses a white gaze, and last summer's shift was one of white attention rather than an alteration to societal structures.

I mention the gaze here also because *Just Us* is teeming with images: photographs, ephemera from archives, data visualizations, and so on. The text suggests we gaze at these images in multiple ways. As a poet myself, I'm especially interested in decisions about poetic form and sentence structure and also in the relationship between text and design. I'm drawn to Rankine's book not only because of what it

¹⁰ Rankine and my references to her writing capitalize neither black nor white. This style decision is something with which writers and editors are (or should be) grappling. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black," *The Atlantic* (June 18, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/>.

says but also *how* it says and *how* it means. The use of facing pages in conversation with each other and the innovative method for including reference points are especially elegant and evocative in *Just Us*.

Another elegantly designed book that includes text and image is Rachel Eliza Griffiths's *Seeing the Body*. As with Rankine's "Weather," Griffiths's poem "Flowers for Tanisha" appears in *Together in a Certain Strangeness*. The poem's dedication explains that Tanisha is a technician "who places daffodils on body bags in the hospital's morgue and in the refrigerated trucks that hold as many as thirty-eight bodies" (50; italics in original). Here, New York is a "city of blossoming against dead flowers" (49). In the midst of a COVID-19 surge, this poem calls for joy, healing, and "laughing again / inside our dreams" (50). "Flowers for Tanisha" describes one woman's expression of grief, and so too does Griffiths's latest book, as the poet grieves the death of her own mother. In fact, "Flowers for Tanisha" echoes the poem "About the Flowers": "There are calla lilies, long upon the mute lid / of my mother's name. A smudge of summer / beneath the scent of what is dead in me" (97). Grief is both personal and cultural, an experience both individual and shared.

Seeing the Body opens with a black-and-white image that combines two photographs of Griffiths so that she is holding hands with herself. The author's note on the facing page says, "The self-portraits in the section of this book entitled 'daughter:lyric:landscape' function as a map of the self and of the greater world in which I am both visualized and invisible, as a symptom of grief and identity" (15). The story is personal. Mother and daughter "microwaved / fluid in clear bags for her 'exchanges' because "Normal dialysis was too much" (36).¹¹ Her mother calls her by her nickname "through the quickening / of her death" (31). The self—the *I*—is ever present in these poems, but a poem's *I* is not an invitation for the reader to enter as if she were the poem's speaker. Or as Rankine writes, "why, even for a second, translate ease with each other into a state of sameness?" (189). The

11 "Black Americans comprise approximately 13% of the United States population but more than 30% of patients with ESRD [end-stage renal disease] in the United States." Jenna M. Norton et al., "Social Determinants of Racial Disparities in CKD," *Journal of the American Society of Nephrology*, 27.9 (September 2016): 2576–2595, <https://doi.org/10.1681/ASN.2016010027>.

greater world, which situates the Black human body as both gazed upon and erased, is just as crucial: “this poem against your temple, pressing / its hiss against your head. Yes, / America, you have done just about enough” (“Good America, Good Acts” 105). *Enough* is another uncountable unaccountability that becomes wordplay for *too much*. As the reader and as a white American, I am the *you*, and I have not done enough.

“Good America, Good Acts” opens, “Imagine it’s your daughter or your mother / or someone you’re sure you never met before. Imagine / if you cared to begin with” (104). I *do* care, I sometimes insist, but the limits of any imagination are racialized.¹² When I try to imagine my mother “on the Alabama floor saying *But I’m not doing anything to you* / & then you are doing something or nothing, perhaps / eating or ignoring her screams as police pray / their knees into her flesh” (104), it is too great a leap for my white imagination. Such leaps should not be necessary; empathy should not depend on who’s screaming under the officer’s knee.

In this way, Griffiths sends me back to Quinn’s expectation of inescapable reckoning, to the structural shift that seems unimaginable to Rankine, and to Ibram X. Kendi’s *How to Be an Antiracist*, where he writes, “The conviction that racist policymakers can be overtaken, and racist policies can be changed, and the racist minds of their victims can be changed, is disputed only by those invested in preserving racist policymakers, policies, and habits of thinking” (223).¹³ If America has done just about enough, as Griffiths suggests, and if something structural must change, as Rankine suggests, then policy is key to reckoning, as Kendi suggests. Surely, equitable policy is more reliable than an empathy dependent on leaps of imagination across disparities.

I’m writing an essay about poetry as if poems have to do with policy. Griffiths asks the reader—me—to “imagine what you deserve.

12 “What a white person could know instead is this: her whiteness limits her imagination—not her reader’s after the fact. A deep awareness of this knowledge could indeed expand the limits—not transcend them, but expand them, make more room for the imagination. A good thing.” Beth Loffreda & Claudia Rankine, *Introduction, The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race on the Life of the Mind* (Albany, NY: Fence Books, 2015), 13–22.

13 Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019).

What have you done?" (105). Rankine's *Just Us* and Griffiths's *Seeing the Body* leave me thinking about my own habits of mind as well as their personal experiences rendered on the page—and also the policies that shape how we live together in this not-so-sudden strangered-ness.

"This Being Earth & Mars & New Mars & Being"

SESSHU FOSTER

It's not easy to like anthologies. Go to them as we might a friend's bookshelves, to scan and peruse titles and authors that reflect someone else's idiosyncratic range of tastes and interests. We might not have chosen these titles, and yet, may find unexpected, new revelatory surprises—our perspectives and horizons may deepen. In *Together in a Sudden Strangeness*, I find the usual North American tropes and registers I like to disregard, poems so snug and ensconced in their own first-world problems that their preciousness performs itself in reiteration. And the usual Romanticisms, nothing wrong with those. Of course, also fine unanticipated bracing, moving poems.

"What if only poetry will see us through?" Julia Alvarez asks in the first poem of the book, "What if this poem is the vaccine already working inside you?" (3) Her poem, slung entirely in questions, charms like Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions*. Other poems offer partial answers—or, at least, replies. Jericho Brown's poem "Say Thank You Say I'm Sorry" (23) strikes me as a lithe ode to essential workers; Rigoberto González's "Desert Lily" (46) wafts the figure of the white dress into a heartbreaking lyric against the racism and inequality which now kills Latino essential workers at three times the rate of whites, more than thirty-five Latinos a day here in Los Angeles.¹⁴ In Whitmanic fashion the poems contrive solidarity and community, even—and sometimes especially—among the bereft, isolated, or excluded.

For seven years I coordinated a teen poetry workshop at Holtenbeck Middle School in East Los Angeles. Dozens of teens, some starting at age twelve or thirteen, met year after year from middle

¹⁴ Rong-Gong Lin II and Luke Money, "Latino COVID-19 deaths hit 'horrifying' levels, up 1,000% since November in L.A. County," Los Angeles Times, January 29, 2021; <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-01-29/latino-covid-19-deaths-up-1000-percent-since-november>.

school through high school. Kids wrote and shared, published and performed their work at Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center, KPFFK Pacifica Radio, the Boyle Heights' Annual Mariachi Festival, and venues across Los Angeles. Prompted originally by Rubén Martínez, who worked through California's Poets in the Schools Program, I was reluctant to take on the workshop. Already teaching full time, I served as department chair and union chair, while I wrote books and my wife and I raised three kids. In spite of my initial reluctance, this workshop (called "Poets Beyond Madness" by the students) turned out not only rewarding for all involved, but thoroughly instructive for me.

Poets have always made marvelous, extravagant claims for Poetry, but their declarations are not more impressive than my experience in a workshop where students used poetry to change their own lives. They manifested Osip Mandelstam's claim, "For the artist, his perception of the world is a tool and an instrument, like a hammer in the hands of a stonemason, and the only thing that is real is the work itself."¹⁵

These student poets lived nearby in tenements or housing projects (or in one case, in a garage) and rarely got a chance to leave the Boyle Heights neighborhood, but through the workshop they performed citywide and met their burgeoning peers. They were interviewed on the radio and in the newspaper. They won scholarships to summer performing arts programs at two local colleges and internships at UCLA. One student wrote an essay for a contest sponsored by the Spanish consulate that earned her a trip to Spain. Years later I wrote her a letter of recommendation for admission to an MFA writing program, and she teaches writing now. A decade afterward, as LA representative to the Mexico City Book Fair, I struggled through the crowd heading for the gates at the airport, lugging my big duffel bag on a broken ankle, teetering on crutches. Breaking from the lines, another of the former "Poets Beyond Madness" appeared and took the heavy bag off my shoulder and carried it to customs for me. She said she'd used her writing prowess to get a broadcast journalism degree and is now a television news producer in Miami.

15 Osip Mandelstam, "The Morning of Acmeism (parts I-IV)," *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p. 221.

Poetry has gone that distance with me, as well, even as I devoted thirty years of my work as teacher, activist, and writer to the communities of East LA. Throughout, I've been inspired by LA poets like the late Wanda Coleman who struggled through the semi-obscurity and semi-poverty of poetry to national recognition, and I remain inspired by Luis Rodriguez who doubled down on the success of his own writing to rededicate it to the service of peace and nonviolence in the Latino community—not only in his books, but through his Tia Chucha poetry press and Tia Chucha's Centro Cultural which serves as a gallery, bookstore and cultural venue in an underserved local community.

I'm always reading a spate of skinny poetry books (though my nightstand also holds the fat *Selected Writings of César Vallejo* and two chunky recent anthologies of African American and Indigenous poetries). I'm reading *Compression & Purity*, by LA poet and Afrofuturist Will Alexander. Well, rereading it, along with his *Across the Vapour Gulf*, one of the beautiful New Directions Poetry Pamphlets.¹⁶

I mention Will's books here for the same reason that I often give his books as gifts. Many of my friends, especially those who are well-read, may not have found his books in among the best sellers, or on those lists of the year's best, or on tables piled with the latest trending titles during a pre-pandemic wander through the bookstore. But their capacity for wide-ranging and close reading is exactly what gives eager readers the best chance to thrill at Will's pyrotechnic lexical flare, which he deploys with casual flamboyance in rare, exuberant, joyous registers unlike any other American poet.

These pandemic days, I've been going back to *Compression & Purity's* personal, funny, and poignant self-aware figures:

within this condition
I am more like a crow from crucial underwater fire
a crucial underwater crow
neither Chinese or Shinto
but of the black dimensionality of hidden underwater mass (25–26)

What is one of the singular functions of Afrofuturism except to perform visionary futures before our very eyes, bleary or glazed as

¹⁶ Will Alexander, *Across the Vapour Gulf* (New York: New Directions, 2017).

they are by pandemics viral, political, and violent? Will Alexander's poetry does so (through more than thirty books)—even with a laconic (laconic for him) delimited glance at his own subjectivity, as in this brief poem, "Amidst the Liminal":

In the cranial foundation
there are colours which erupt
into a blankness which reconnoiters
which re-erupts into ratio
into earthquake curricula
in which a form of flames spirals
frayed at its core by potential (86)

This weekend I'll drive 1,200 miles across a country which seems to have bungled the pandemic response worst of any in the world because selfish leaders posed individualism against us as communities, and let communities bear the brunt. I'll carry Will Alexander's poems with me for fresh, bracing gestures at horizons beyond this eroded and embattled landscape, as in these lines from "Water on New Mars":

it is a 100,000,000 years before my coming
I use no exterior crafting to withstand me
no nautical monology to sculpt my various geometries
to claim & disclaim my pointless hydrogen summas

I remain the greenish sonar heron
the combustible yeast...

this being Earth
& Mars
& New Mars
& being... (48; 60)

Why Aren't Out & Proud Disabled People In This Anthology? Where Are We?: A Review

THE CYBORG JILLIAN WEISE (CY/SHE/HERS)

THE CRIP TECHNOSCIENTIST AMY GAETA (SHE/HERS)

Sappho was disabled, and she shakes her head at this anthology. Harriet Tubman was disabled, and she shakes her head at this anthology. Pat Parker was disabled, and she shakes her head at this anthology. It could've been different.

It could've been an anthology aware that disabled poets started the "strangeness" at the beginning of time. There's nothing "sudden" about the "strangeness." But since this anthology declines to include openly-identifying disabled and D/deaf poets, I decline to read beyond the table of contents.

So I am reviewing an anthology I did not read. Or rather: I am not reviewing this anthology because I am not reading it.

Now, why. Over and over and over I am asked to care about non-disabled people and their opinions and poems and compasses and triages and policies and what amuses them at the movies and whether or not they think disabled people should get health care and when they think we should get to live a little longer, or perhaps just not live anymore, starting at 4 p.m. on a Tuesday. I can somewhat ignore all this nondisabled noise. But not during a plague.

So, obviously, you understand and empathize with me: I cannot read the nondisabled people's plague anthology. Likewise, if someone puts together an *Iron Lung Anthology* but forgets to include the people who used the iron lungs and instead includes the president of AARP, a couple of engineers, and a steamboat captain for I-don't-know-what-the-fuck-reason, I will not read that, either.

What might you read instead of this anthology? I quite like "Imaginary Safe House," with poems like "Throw a party for my life, my death," by Stephen Emslie; "I, the unspiritual," by Carla Harris; "Less sweet than chocolate or concrete," by Aimee Louw; and "THE LONELY LAWS] HMMMM [," by nancy viva davis halifax. Yes. Read this anthology.

I have nothing else to say. Now, Amy, you are kinder than I am. You have just adopted a cat named Lou who indubitably softens you. So what do you think?

Here's what I, Amy, think: Lou and I are concerned about ongoing and long-term social erasure.

Does the anthology have merits and talent? Absolutely. It is filled with some of the most talented and important voices in contemporary poetry.

Is this the anthology that I would recommend and teach in future literature classes on pandemics? No. I refuse to contribute to the erasure of disabled poets' talents and insights.

My upset especially arises from the context: disabled and high-

risk people should be the most prioritized during this pandemic, and yet, we have been the most ignored and left to die. And disabled and high-risk people living at the intersections of other marginalized identities have been rendered even more invisible. So, when I look at the volume's subtitle, *America's Poets Respond to the Pandemic*, I wonder: Who are these poets who define America, and why don't I see someone like myself? Why doesn't anyone in this book bring us disability wisdom? Where are the disabled poets?

Amy. This is such a good point. And it makes me wonder: How did the poets in this anthology *not ask any of these questions*? How did they agree to an anthology without asking, "Will there be disability representation in this book?" Without saying, "We are in a plague. This is a plague anthology. I want to be in an anthology where the people who have wisdom about disabling conditions, that is, disabled people, are my companions."

Starting now, I challenge nondisabled poets to ask these questions of the anthologies they blithely commit to be in. Back to you, Amy.

The thing about us disabled poets is that we are everywhere once you start knowing we exist. We are poets in the middle of a pandemic, so I am sure you see us. But, that does not mean that ideas about disabled and disabled experiences do not haunt the edited collection. But, I am not interested in even more explicitly nondisabled people talking about us.

What is the purpose of reading poetry during a pandemic, anyway? That's another essay, but it's a question worth asking yourself: what do you need? As a poet, and a disabled one at that, I don't write and read to console, to reveal, to entertain, to imagine a different future or anything like that. Certainly not here to inspire anyone. Ew.

I read and write poetry because I need wonder among and within endless mourning in the present, learning to survive, as Donna Haraway would say, in the muck of it all. So which disabled poets might you read during the pandemic? Eva Hesse. Yes, the 1960s postminimalist sculptor. And yes, Hesse was disabled, living with mental illness and later a brain tumor for the majority of her life. So, that's my first suggestion: think beyond poetry as text-based and instead stay open to what poetry may find you. Hesse's Accession series of sculptures found me again recently. Spikey, sharp metal boxes; smooth as ever on the outside, and richly complex on the inside. Exposed, yet safe.

Hesse's work sparks wonder in me, a wonder that says we can reshape our bodies beyond the symbolic meaning that society and culture have mapped upon them. In doing so, we may become sharper and softer than ever. We survive.

On the Fringes of Poetry and Pandemics

MARK WALLACE

Even in ordinary times, many people in the US wake up daily struggling for necessities: money, food, shelter from weather, a home free of physical danger, emotional needs like love or someone to talk to. These problems are compounded by dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality, which can make even simple recognition of one's humanity difficult to find.

How much worse all these struggles have become during the COVID-19 pandemic can be hard to fathom for those not experiencing them directly. What can poetry tell us about the fringes of American social reality during this pandemic?

Two recent books of American poetry that explore different kinds of fringe experiences are Ted Rees's *In Brazen Fontanelle Aflame* (Timeless, Infinite Light, 2018) and *A Spell in the Pokey: Hugh Walshall Selected Poems* (selva oscura, 2018). Both books provide insight into lives lived outside the bounds of conventional safety. Written before COVID-19, each still shows why such lives are especially endangered in current conditions.

I use the word "fringe" because it suggests not a romantic outside but social edges from which things can peel or be pulled off. Those always vulnerable fringes often sustain artistic practices very different than the ones promoted in mainstream contexts and institutions. I'm skeptical about the term "outsider" when applied to poetry or art, since it usually implies a romanticism of the outlaw: misunderstood, rejected, but remaining free and proud.

When *In Brazen* was published, Ted Rees had been part of fringe youth culture in the Bay Area for some years. That culture has many and changing names and connects many people, by no means all young. Many live in group situations and unconventional housing, sometimes in large numbers, like the artist collective and living space Ghost Ship, which burned down in December 2016 at the cost

of thirty-six lives. Often queer or trans, of mixed race and cultural backgrounds, frequently involved in radical political activity, the people of this culture live far removed in consciousness, if not distance, from conventional lives. The Ghost Ship fire is the most visible recent example of that culture's dangers but hardly the only one.

Although his book of mostly prose poems portrays this fringe culture, Rees does not do that through straightforwardly representational imagery but instead uses flamboyant, purposefully extreme language as a way of fighting back against an insistence on normalcy that often renders fringe lives invisible:

So as to better skiptrace moisture's corpse, you heave a slippery couch to the makeshift summit and settle into some *kalimotxo*. Beyond unctuous tide and squall of trade, the incarcerated juttings in murk, what progress has been marched. There emerges a frame of reference for the structure of this smoke, its frottage with our garments and exposed pores, a darling of the blank monolith set. (31)

What does it mean to say "stay home" to people who don't have housed spaces or share space with dozens of others who come and go and have limited incomes and possibilities? What does it mean to say "stay home" to people who have left homes where they were not welcome? Living in the safety of my stable salary paid by a university that requires me to work at home, I'm reminded by writing like Rees's that conventional cautions can feel hollow and contrived to those who do not participate in conventional comforts.

A Spell in the Pokey documents another kind of fringe experience. "Eccentric" used to be the polite way to describe individuals whose personalities made them ill-suited to American behavioral norms. Some of these people have struggles with mental illness. Others just seem too weird to those who insist on normality. Quite a few are artists or writers.

Hugh Walthall, who died in 2015, was an active part of the Washington, DC poetry scene of the 1970s and '80s that I myself was active in during the '90s and 2000s. But I'd never heard of him until I received *A Spell in the Pokey* in the mail, sent to me by scholar and poet A. L. Nielsen, who edited the book and rescued (slightly) Walthall from an obscurity he'll likely never escape. Nielsen's introduction gives readers insights into who Walthall was, a poet "born in Roswell, New Mexico ... right around the time the aliens were said to have crashed

and burned there,” and who lived in the rural environment of Deep Creek Lake, Maryland, before showing up in DC.

Although a New York School influence can be detected in their casual tone, Walthall’s poems, like those of John Wieners, are not shy about their assertions of difference. Often he writes from paranoid perspectives, the voice sophisticated and tongue-in-cheek enough to be merely a narrative persona, but intimate enough to suggest genuine familiarity with disturbed mental states. “A Secret Communication to John Hollander Using the Usual Code” opens this way:

1/21 (Blade to Cupcake)

Fluke, Crybaby, and The Twin were arrested.
The expense of training, then maintaining them
For three years just to cut them loose from warped
Particulars about Project Orange is
Ludicrous to my mind. Admittedly, they
Drained my ingenuity. It became
Too difficult to keep up their inflated
Reputations with the enemy. I had
To invent too many wacky escapades
For them to perform. Do you know how very
Dangerous and, yes, demeaning it is to
Control false agents? Am I a false agent? (31)

While Rees’s poems highlight the sustenance of communities and communalism, Walthall’s poems feature a narrator who knows many people but finds no settled connection to anyone, including family members, lovers, friends, and other poets. The trouble seems clear in “An Occasional Apostrophe,” which might be addressed to DC poet David McAleavey:

I was tired, cold, and already bored
Before I arrived, late.
David, I was there last night.
From the top of the stairs I heard
A pompous voice flirt with monotony.
Not yours, not yours, my darling.
So many lost & found souls
Snuggled grudgingly together made me blanch,
Or wanted to. I wanted to smoke,
Make eye contact with the Ashtray Woman. (32)

A Spell in the Pokey often features a narrator who longs for connection

but fears what it might require him to give up. For him, a community that accepts his idiosyncrasy, or that his idiosyncrasy will allow him to accept, can't be found.

What poetry and art can bring to life in a way that statistics and institutions often cannot are the vivid realities of the case that does not fit the pattern. Fringes are always more at risk than norms. I have been finding in the books by Rees and Walthall a way to engage lives and experiences easy to ignore even in less dangerous times. Now more than usual, our capacity for understanding and compassion is tested by how we react to those who do not have a clear place in the societies in which they find themselves.