

OFF RADAR: 'Wait: Poems from the Pandemic'

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By Dana Wilde

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"The COVID-19 crisis may be the weirdest event in my lifetime," was my thought during the first months of this whole pandemic mess. It got weirder as one incredible point of view kept informing us that it was almost over and another, credible point of view that it was likely to get worse. The scientists turned out to be right, as usual.

Now we seem to be on the downslope, here in North America anyway. If you've gotten the vaccination, death is no longer waiting still and silent as a ringwraith at the end of your driveway, maybe willing to let you pass by, maybe not. It will be easy to forget exactly what that's been like. But luckily, we're getting testimonies to remind us, and "Wait: Poems from the Pandemic," edited by South Portland poet and artist Jeri Theriault, is a collection of them.

Three sections group subject matter by "Body" ("how the body might function in the enclosed space of COVID-19"); "Home" ("the ways we are living our quarantined lives"); and "World" ("beyond quarantine's walls"). Within these pandemic territories are quite a number of poems about the routine; a seemingly universal preoccupation with feelings of confinement; a sense of dreamlike paranoia; elegiac reflections on death and suffering; and here and there a welcome sense of humor.

Most of the poets take the tedium of quarantine very earnestly. Craig Sipe's "Another Four Weeks Quarantine" offers a bleak picture of another sleepless night in confinement ("I mix us a drink at two, // and then two more"). Several poets get fixated on trash: Samaa Abdurraqib makes meticulous description of "Trash Day. Day 9" in her neighborhood; Adrian Blevens makes a memorable tune about "the dump in Oakland during COVID at the dump" (including an internal rhyme with "Trump"). Marcia F. Brown's "Quiet Dance" is one of the most patiently evocative poems of domestic quiet in the collection, defying tedium the way a cat circles down again "as if finding a whole new world / in the exact same place." Similarly in Elizabeth Tibbetts's "Week After Week," a quiet panegyric to Dr. Shah.

In contrast to these pictures of patience amid domestic trial, Lala Drew's "I hear them talking through glass" offers what feels like the dark paranoid side of the isolation: "there is a clicking / outside the window / a sort of hectic / swarm. Cackling / cackling // it consumes." In Steve



"Wait: Poems from the Pandemic," Jeri Theriault, editor; Littoral Books, Portland, Maine, 2021; 124 pages, paperback, \$22.

Luttrell's "Behind the Mask": "a manic fear." More subtly phantasmagoric is Leonore Hildebrandt's "Rabenmutter," which begins:

There is less and more – fewer handshakes, fewer hugs.

More faces hidden, more fear of the other.

There is too much work, and not enough.

Our helplessness shelters where it may.

The poem then unfolds into a recollection of "a woman called Raven"; motherhood; the contrasts of home life, gardening, the worse things that must be happening in the world outside; and disturbing, dreamlike, motherless isolation and the places it can go.

There are number of expected reflections on suffering and death, including among others, "The Tally" by Wesley McNair, "On Death" by Betsy Sholl, and "In Florida" by David Moreau, in which the speaker's mother has Alzheimer's and cancer and his "Dad is terrified of Covid." Just to name a few.

Luckily it's possible, and probably necessary to keep a sense of humor in adversity. Meghan Vincent's "Symptomatic" comes early enough in the collection to thankfully dispel some of the earnestly offered feelings of personal helplessness and disarray; the word, she shows, can transform by orthographic morph into "symphomatic," a call to music and dance. And later on, Philip Carlsen in "Ars Covidica" discovers that his "poet's license lapsed," leading him on a long song and dance about how to regain it. Finally he spots two cardinals in his yard and just the cliché "feathered friends" helps him get his lift back.

Among the book's color reproductions of visual art, Celeste Roberge's image of two boots made of seaweed standing on a stony shore, "Seaweed Will Be Lapping at Your Doorstep," is similarly a breath of humor. Like several of the artworks, I'm not sure exactly how its obvious theme (climate change) is related to the pandemic, but the feeling is well-taken. The book's cover image, "No Isolation #1" by Kifah Abdulla, of a bent, seated figure partially covered with day marks, is strikingly evocative and pertinent, as is his black and white sketch "No Isolation #2."

Here in Maine, the wait seems to be approaching some kind of end, thanks to the vaccine, to those who have taken it, and to those who wear masks. In large parts of the rest of the world, not so much: More people died from COVID in the first five months of 2021 than died from COVID in all of 2020. It is a weird, weird time. "Wait: Poems from the Pandemic" provides some glimpses of it. It and its Littoral Books companion volumes "Enough!: Poems of Resistance and Protest" and "A Dangerous New World: Maine Voices on the Climate Crisis" are available through local and online book sellers, and from Littoral Books' website.

Off Radar takes note of poetry and books with Maine connections the first and third Thursdays of each month. Dana Wilde is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. Contact him at [\[email protected\]](#)

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