

Book review: ‘Wait: Poems from the Pandemic’ reveals our anxieties, longings and loneliness

pressherald.com/2021/12/05/wait-poems-from-the-pandemic-reveals-our-anxieties-longings-and-loneliness/

By Dave Canarie

December 5, 2021

“Wait: Poems from the Pandemic” features the work of 55 Maine poets and 10 Maine artists, sharing their diverse perspectives on the seemingly interminable COVID-19 pandemic by exploring themes of fear, loss and isolation, as well as a hopeful longing for a return to “normal.”

The anthology, edited by poet and South Portland resident Jeri Theriault who teamed up with Agnes Bushell of Littoral Books to launch the project, has three parts, each addressing a separate way Maine poets encounter the pandemic: Body, Home and World.

Local review

“Wait: Poems from the Pandemic”

Collected and edited by Jeri Theriault
Littoral Books, \$22

The Body section of “Wait” considers the many ways the pandemic threatens our bodies and lives. The invisible nature of COVID-19’s menace – one of its many unnerving qualities – is the focus of Jeffrey Thomson’s “How We Survived.” Thomson sees the virus’s surreptitious attack mode as a modern version of the Trojan Horse of Greek mythology, “a molecular can opener that allows the virus to crack open and enter the cells of the host.” Thus, seemingly life-sustaining air becomes a platform for spiked intruder molecules carrying illness and death.

In “Arc of My Covid Poem,” Sharif Elmusa uses the language of COVID to describe “a cytokine storm of fear” induced by the pandemic. The accelerating molecular storm that COVID-19 sets off in our bodies is a microcosm of the fear-tempest brought on by the pandemic. COVID-related anxieties cause feelings of isolation and loneliness, leading Mihku Paul to observe in the poem “Going Viral,” “We huddle, embrace our lonely selves, yet / fear to touch the hand of another / fear to breath shared air.”

The overwhelming nature of the pandemic is the focus in Ellen Goldsmith’s “April 2020,” a meditation on how the heavy snowfall “on this 25th day of sheltering in place,” has left a “landscape transformed / as if I traveled to another continent.” The snow stands in for the



Image courtesy of Littoral Books

changed reality of life for people blanketed by the pandemic.

In spite of it all, optimism persists, as described in Megan Vigeants' "Symptomatic," which creatively proposes replacing the letter "t" in "symptomatic" with the letter "h," transforming the dreaded diagnostic "symptomatic" into "symphomatic," a more hopeful and beautiful word that brings to mind a symphony instead of a disease.

The Home section of "Wait" explores recurring themes of pandemic-induced isolation, as people shelter in place and try to endure quarantine. Pam Burr Smith calls this our "monkish isolation," in the poem "True Statements from My Life, February 11, 2021," while Ellen M. Taylor reflects on the intersection of isolation and vulnerability: "We are all alone, together. Sheltered, our / vulnerability exposed" in "Quarantine Sonnet Two, Virtual Choir."

The pandemic has disrupted home life for many – including those with family members in healthcare facilities or in remote locations. David Moreau's "In Florida" describes how the pandemic cruelly prevented an in-person goodbye with a seriously ill parent living out of state, while Betsy Sholl's "Oh Death" describes the surreal finality of a Zoom "visit" with a dying patient.

Parents worry about whether they are doing everything possible to protect their children, a concern Meghan Sterling voices in "OCD is Now Good Hygiene": "How I try to keep this house clean, to keep this bug / from landing and making itself at home. / Everyday watching my daughter, waiting to see / if symptoms will come." Addressing the unrelenting fear of a microscopic invader, she writes, "The house is haunted with the possibility of germs."

In the third part of the collection, "World," Robert Carr's "On the Gold Star Highway" tells of being outside the isolation of home and driving on the turnpike while "Traveling in a life that's lost / all shape."

Even when escaping the confines of home for a walk in the woods, the pandemic looms, as Jenny Doughty illustrates in "Limits": "Let out of lockdown for a while, we walked / to a small round pond, ochre brown and mucky, empty apart from families of ducks / for kids to feed with crumbs while adults talked / of masking, isolation, washing hands, / the boring parts of keeping us alive."

"Wait" concludes with Claire Hersom's uplifting "Inertia," which assures readers that "hearts will break, then they'll mend / and joy will limp up the lane again waving / its tenacious promise of hope."

This is the fourth volume in the Contemporary Maine Poetry Series, published by the innovative Littoral Books. The anthology, which is enriched throughout by artwork that visually confronts the pandemic, offers a meaningful way for readers to process the pandemic as it endures, and will be an invaluable resource for those trying to understand it long after the pandemic has receded from the headlines.

Dave Canarie is an attorney and USM faculty member who lives in South Portland.

© 2021