

BOOK REVIEW:
When the Virus Came Calling: COVID-19 Strikes America

Reviewed by Michael Escoubas, Highland Park Poetry

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When The Virus Came Calling: COVID-19 Strikes America
Edited by Thelma T. Reyna
Golden Foothills Press, 2020
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“In order to write about life,” Earnest Hemmingway once wrote, “You must first live it,” I thought about that quote as I prepared to review *When the Virus Came Calling*. Indeed, the poets whose work appears within these pages, understand Hemmingway’s famous dictum. Editor Thelma T. Reyna’s thoughtfully arranged anthology offers valuable perspectives on the viral scourge which has gripped America and the world, like the tentacles of a giant squid.

Limiting the anthology’s scope to the American experience, 45 distinguished authors have produced a compelling collection coalescing around four dimensions: Invasion, Seclusion, Introspection and Realizations.

Invasion (January/February)

Gerda Govine Ituarte’s poem, “Bloom” is the perfect lead-off poem in that it asks an important question: What can poets do to make the world a better place?” While this question is always relevant, it seems especially so in the present moment. Ituarte’s desire is to:

let each of us as poets create
words that feed our souls
free our minds make us thankful
to be alive

In my personal life I have always desired to be a “difference-maker.” One of the ways we poets CAN make a difference is by facing issues head-on. Michael Haussler’s “This year’s Corona COVID-19,” does this. He’s been here before: “I went through this twice. / Fifty-seven Sixty-eight / A million dead each.” Speaking from experience, Haussler knows what this latest invasion is about:

How quickly distance
Becomes the new social norm.
Jacked into our screens.

If the Earth itself could weigh-in about the origins of Covid-19, what would she say? “Mother Earth Speaks,” by Judie Rae, skillfully uses personification to shake this reviewer to the core of his being.

Chronicling the many blessings given to mankind . . . then reviewing what mankind (“I”) have done with those blessings . . . suffice to say, I came away with a fresh perspective.

Seclusion (March)

Throughout this section, I was struck by the variety of responses to the hard reality of seclusion. With the world quiet, Michael Haussler’s personal essay reflects on Rachel Carson’s environmental masterpiece, *Silent Spring*. Carson, whose writing ability is equal to that of many poet’s, and it inspires Haussler to see the world’s beauty in fresh ways. The pandemic “pause” makes such “seeing” possible. He points out that the pandemic is not the only enemy we face.

Teachers write about relationships with their students and the challenges seclusion poses for education. These poems and essays capture something special about courage, perseverance, and love.

“Cold Vivid State I,” by GT Foster, lashes out at the social, economic, and spiritual suffering conferred on California when Governor Gavin Newsome shut down the state. I read this poem as applicable nationwide.

“Waiting It Out” by Martina Gallegos, does a good job of expressing the frustration shared by many:

In a dimmed-out living room
I can hear the rain outside
This goddamn virus
is making me feel sad
Staying home in self-isolation
depression is lurking in
Two long weeks cooped up inside
with only short visits to the garden
I try to tune out my feelings
and listen to the friendly rain
so I can keep at least mildly sane
till the virus can infect itself dead

Introspection (April/May)

Moving into the front lines of the battle, many poems describe conditions in stark military terms. The horror of “makeshift morgues,” bodies “wrapped in shrouds,” and a world “populated by spacemen in white hazmat suits,” form the landscape.

Nancy Shiffrin’s poem “My Doctor Calls” captures part of the collateral damage inherent in lockdowns: he wants to know:

why I missed my last appointment
do I have a fever
shortness of breath
gastric distress
muscle spasms

dizziness
do I need a video conference

In this section the poets look death in the face, contemplate the innumerable frustrations of lockdowns, as they invite readers to join them together, watching the world pass in plague-time. Your reviewer came away from this section feeling encouraged and supported through shared experiences.

Realizations (June/July)

Though not specifically stated, I definitely sensed strains of Bob Dylan's *The Times They Are 'a Changin'* as I identified with this last section of poems. Why would I channel one of the most influential poets/anthems of the 1960s? If this anthology does anything, it has challenged the way this reviewer thinks. New thinking, new realizations are hard to come by. The decade of the 1960s, dealing as it did, with war, assassinations, and racial tensions signaled that life in this country would never be, could never be, the same again. 2020 seems to have compacted a decade of change within the confines of a few short months.

On July 30, 2020, John Lewis wrote an essay for the NY Times. Thelma T. Reyna uses excerpts from Lewis' essay in her poem "Panoply of Gods." Reyna chose these lines as the poem's epigraph:

"Answer the highest call of your heart and stand up for
what you truly believe . . . the way of peace, the way
of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way."

Through the work of dedicated poets like those whose work appears in *When the Virus Came Calling*, the country we love will surely find that elusive more excellent way.



ABOUT THE REVIEWER:

Michael Escoubas is editor, contributing poet, and staff book reviewer for Quill and Parchment, a 19-year-old literary and cultural arts online poetry journal. This review was originally posted on Quill and Parchment . Posted May 1, 2021