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Poetry for a Pandemic

Richard Levine

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the hands of White women who have been coined with the name “Karen.” These “Karens” try to justify their privilege to police Blacks as an attempt to right a perceived wrong or investigate whether Blacks should be in the same spaces as them. From saying a Black family was not allowed to have a barbecue in a public park, to a Black college student being awakened by police because a White fellow student called them because she sleeping in the dorm lounge (the White student thought she did not belong there), to threatening to call the police because a black child was selling lemonade without a permit, to a White woman calling 9-11 to say an African-American man threatened her in Central Park, when he asked her to put her dog on a leash. Wilderson asks, if such events have no triggers, as in these Black people were not doing anything out of the ordinary nor were they engaged in unlawful activity, then how can we make sense of anti-Blackness? His answer is anti-Blackness is part of the human condition. This please without purpose is then taught to the next generation and the cycle continues.

However, as these instances of Karens asserting themselves in situations where they should not and the killings of unarmed Black children, men and women are shown, there has been a more vocal awareness by Whites and non-Whites alike that there is a problem. Yet, Wilderson believes White people are afraid of the evil their tribe commits, which is why there is often a silent majority. The anti-Black violence, both overt and covert, they see at the hands of their fellow Whites is too close for comfort and some find it difficult to criticize them. The faces of these perpetrators remind them of their

relatives and friends, and this terrifies them because it could be someone they know.

The strength of afropessimism is it allows Blacks to speak openly about their internal rage, which used to be discussed among other Blacks only. *Afropessimism* arrives during this current cultural reckoning which has empowered many Black people to speak of the daily injustices they face. Outlets like “Black Twitter,” Black celebrities and non-celebrities alike, are speaking of their racist experiences and holding people accountable for their actions. Black people are trying to live unapologetically Black lives, meaning embracing their culture and celebrating themselves. Athletes from school aged to professionals now feel more comfortable to speak their truths and have people listen and hopefully believe them. Wilderson contends the response by some Whites and junior partners to afropessimism is feelings of guilt, resentment and/or aggression. Wilderson explains this is not about their feelings and the focus should remain on the suffering of Blacks. *Afropessimism*, does not, offer any tangible solutions outside of destroying the world as we know it. Being that this cannot happen, Black suffering will endure.

I was not prepared for the rigor and deep reflection this memoir requires. All of my training in government and politics did not nor could not have prepared me for this work. Similar to how Wilderson felt in his Cultural Studies Project class, my philosophy and theoretical courses only scratched the surface and ill-prepared me for the theoretical mental weightlifting needed to fully embrace this book. I was taught politics, how governments function and who gets what when and how. I was

not trained on whose lives are enhanced or how the political system greases the wheels of death for others. I found myself wanting to reject the main premise of the book as I read it. I was relieved that the author acknowledged that agreeing with his claims is not a prerequisite, instead, his desire is for honest engagement with his work.

The weakness of the text is the need for the author to address countries in Africa or the Caribbean that are overwhelming Black. Can afropessimism exist in nations where race is not an issue? As a Nigerian, my mom says she never knew she was Black until we moved to America. It would have been helpful if the author spoke about these specific countries where people do not experience anti-Black violence. I enjoyed reading the text but walked away from it thinking, perhaps I am not experienced enough, too naïve, or maybe I have not lived in the United States long enough to be an afropessimist.

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POETRY FOR A PANDEMIC

Richard Levine

TOGETHER IN A SUDDEN STRANGENESS: AMERICA'S POETS RESPOND TO THE PANDEMIC

Alice Quinn, ed.

Knopf

www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/667935/
208 Pages; Cloth, \$27.00

If Wallace Stevens were alive today, he might well write “Seventeen Ways of Looking at a Pandemic,” the additions to his baker’s dozen for viewing blackbirds being for the Horsemen of the Apocalypse – *sword, famine, wild beasts, plague*. Alice Quinn, editor of the anthology *Together in a Sudden Strangeness* (2020), gives us eighty-five views, or more precisely eighty-five American poets looking at how the COVID-19 virus has changed our lives. The title is drawn from Pablo Neruda’s poem “Keeping Quiet.” “The poems in this anthology were gathered quickly,” Quinn says in her introduction, “within forty days, beginning March 27.” The pandemic and the developing protocols were still very much “a sudden strangeness” to us all at that time, so the poems look and feel like fresh prints in unmarked snow. By necessity, they were made more of first impressions, imagination, and discovery than of knowing. And looking out the window offered by each poet/poem, we can see tracks leading away, approaching, circling, all impressions of our own uncertainty. For all their

diversity of form, focus, objective, and personality, each poem feels alive and wrestling toward some as yet out of reach understanding. It seems akin to the research into the COVID virus that we read about so hopefully in the news. The scientists, like poets, begin in observation and arrive at conclusions that nonetheless often pose more questions than answers.

Good writing is often characterized as making the ordinary extraordinary. And while the writing here is consistently fine, many of the

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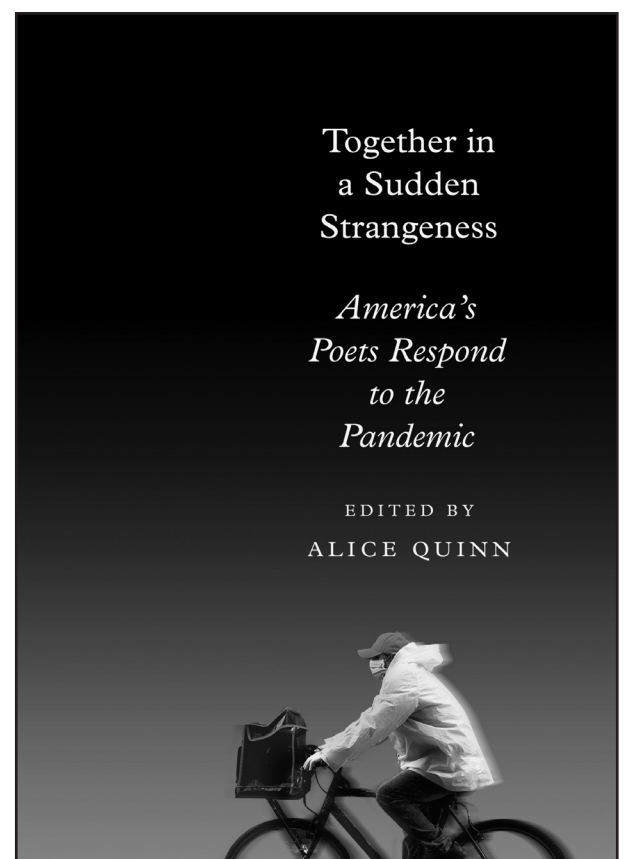
anthology’s poems strive to express a longing for the ordinary to again be ordinary, or as least the way our lives were. “I want to go back to who I was,” pleads Dennis Nurkse, in “Conversation Behind the White Curtain.” “The house with a beehive in the pines, / the brook breaking all night over stones. / ... I want to go back to being a body. A voice with eyes.”

Similarly, in John Freeman’s “Cards,” a man calls his wife to a window to “see a couple across the way / playing cards at their dinner table.” Watching, he envies their casualness, their contentment, the seeming ordinariness of their lives; “oh, I see them most nights” his wife tells him. “They / eat dinner and then move over to play cards. They laugh / and laugh.”

Together in
a Sudden
Strangeness

*America's
Poets Respond
to the
Pandemic*

EDITED BY
ALICE QUINN



In Joshua Bennett’s “Dad Poem,” a father-to-be is deprived of the always extraordinary yet ordinary experience of seeing your tadpole-sized child’s first sonogram image. “*But I’m the father,*” he insists, when a nurse bars him from following his wife to the examination room, saying “No visitors allowed.” Alone, he appeals to his as yet

Levine continued on next page

unborn child, “What can I be to you now / smallest one, across the expanse / of category & world catastrophe, / what love persists / in a time without touch.”

In “The End of Poetry,” Ada Limón also acknowledges the absence of touch as a characteristic of our pandemic lifestyle. There is perhaps a hint of Wordsworth’s “The World is Too Much with Us,” in the twenty lines in which she inventories the earnest but inadequate ways we try to occupy or distract ourselves from our sheltered-in lives. Seventeen times she cries, “Enough,” in response to all the efforts to evade boredom and the frustration of experiencing too much closeness and remoteness at the same time. Even language, or perhaps especially language, fails to get at the problem, until, in line twenty-one, she asserts: “I am asking you to touch me.”

In the villanelle “In My Heart I Cannot Accept it All,” Susan Kinsolving advances and defends the idea that we can and must restore the ordinary to the ordinary. “Forgive yourself for thinking small // ... it’s the little stuff that brings delight: / a book, a drink. Keep thinking small.” But in the final lines of the closing quatrain she reverses from pep-talking us, to begging for approval of her own attempts to reclaim the normal in her own life: “Forgive me please. I’m thinking small. // My heart cannot accept it all.” The struggle to accept that we are in the grips a deadly pandemic, is at the heart of many of the anthology’s poems. In the face of suggested or mandatory mask-wearing, these poems bravely try to unmask the raw fear now in residence in our most routine actions and gestures — shopping, for example.

“Whenever a doorbell buzzes / a man and a woman freeze in place.” This is the scene Billy Collins conjures in “Sequestration,” in response to a home delivery. “No one wants to touch the package / left on the welcome mat.” The ironic juxtaposing of fear and “welcome mat” is another example of “little stuff that brings delight.”

A home delivery makes fear and gratefulness strange bedfellows in Sarah Arvio’s “Crown Prayer.” Employing the spikey corona-like appearance of the virus, she says “the crown is sometimes a spikey / rolling you down to the end of life.” That is probably why, she, too, orders groceries to be delivered. But rather than “freeze in place” she “bless[es] the delivery girls and boys.”

Many of these poems were written as the virus first careened out of control, which coincided

with the approach of Easter and Passover. Perhaps that’s why God, or at least questions about his role, crop up in some of the collection’s poems. “Eight people died / on my block in Brooklyn / last week.” So begins Edward Hirsch’s “Eight People.” It’s short lines and calm tone are almost eerie; they could be the voice of a trauma survivor. He admits “I didn’t know / what it meant / to be living / at one remove.” In the end, he wonders “if God, too, / had gone into hiding / and sheltered in place.”

While reading the anthology a member of my family tested “positive” for the COVID-19 virus. Happily, it proved to be a false positive or passed through her by the time she took a follow-up test. But anyone who had contact with her recently was required to quarantine. That changed

The poems strive to express a longing for the ordinary to again be ordinary, or as least the way our lives were.

my proximity to the virus and the way I read the poems. It made me realize that, with the exception of one poem by a medical doctor, perhaps the most common ground the poems share is that none of the poets had contracted the virus or had been in a hospital to see COVID patients being treated.

The poems were written, after all, by those experiencing the pandemic from an apparently safe and healthy distance. But my family’s close encounter made me hunger to read vantage points from that war zone, and I found several walking in the shoes of those who could venture beyond where “No visitors (are) allowed.”

“I stepped out of a killzone shaped like a bedroom / then went home to sleep in my garage.” This stark one-sentence image rushes us into the world of “An American Nurse Foresees Her Own Death,” by Amit Majmudar. “This hand that sponged the fever off a body / waves at my kids through the living room window.” Majmudar’s title invokes Yeats’s “An Irish Airman Foresees his Death,” and his contributor’s note suggests he is no more an ICU nurse than Yeats was an airman. But Yeats’s force of imagination makes us believe a pilot flying sorties in a war might think “I know I shall meet my fate / Somewhere among the clouds above.” Majmudar is similarly convincing in opining “I ghost the perimeter of my own life.” And

then, using repetition to render the dire sing-songy: “Nurses I know are nursing nurses / through never-ending fevers // ending them. That will be me soon, / one or the other, or one then the other.”

In “Two Days in March,” from *Corona Sonnets*, John Okrent, a Tacoma, Washington family doctor writes, “Home from clinic, I throw my clothes / straight in the wash and jump in the shower / before I touch my wife and daughter.” In addition to this precaution, to prevent his bringing the infection home, his wife labors to keep their child from seeing “What I bring home with me: mortality / and an empty thermos. 160 new positives in King County. // ... This may be the end / of irony.”

For balance, I should also note that the anthology includes notes of levity and moments approaching lightheartedness. In Ron Koertge’s “Elder Care,” a supermarket plays a ’60s hit parade — “Mashed Potato Time” and “The Loco-Motion” — during each morning’s “Seniors First Hour.” Along the aisles, the seniors “move a little faster / like robbers in our masks and gloves.” Koertge also notices how the music makes “Some of us start to smile / We sway above out sturdy shoes. We inch closer / ... In case somebody ... wants to forget / why we’re here and dance.”

I close quoting from the anthology’s opening poem, “How Will This Pandemic Affect Poetry?” by Julia Alvarez. Like her title, the poem is comprised of questions. She begins playfully “Will the lines be six feet apart?” And in considering sheltering in and other restrictions of our COVID lives, she asks: “Will poems be the only safe spaces where we can gather together?” Alvarez closes on a note we can only dream could be true: “What if this poem is the vaccine already working inside you?”

Richard Levine, a retired NYC public school teacher, is the author of Richard Levine: Selected Poems (2019), Contiguous States (2018) and five chapbooks. He is an Advisory Editor to BigCityLit.com. www.richardlevine107.com.

RECOGNIZING SEDAKOVA

Keith Kopka

THE POETRY AND POETICS OF OLGA SEDAKOVA: ORIGINS, PHILOSOPHIES AND POINTS OF CONTENTION

Stephanie Sandler, Maria Khotimsky, Margarita Krimmel, and Oleg Novikov, eds.

University of Wisconsin Press
www.uwpress.wisc.edu/books/5603.htm
376 Pages; Cloth, \$79.95

Olga Sedakova might not be a household name in contemporary American poetry, but her impact on Russian and European literature, poetry, translation, and poetics makes her one of the most influential global voices of the twentieth century.

Sedakova’s work has been translated into more than seven different languages, and she has received awards from all over Europe, including Germany, Italy, the Vatican, and in her home country of Russia. Despite all of this international praise, Sedakova remains relatively unknown in the United States. However, there has been a push recently to make her work more available in English and criticism has followed. The essays contained within the anthology *The Poetry and Poetics of Olga Sedakova: Origins, Philosophies and Points of Contention* are clearly meant as a companion to the work of Sedakova rather than a substitute. Editors Stephanie Sandler, Maria Khotimsky, Margarita Krimmel, and Oleg Novikov have taken the time to painstakingly gather and curate a diverse grouping of significant responses to the catalog of this living master.

This collection of essays is organized thematically. Each of the three sections is dedicated to a different aspect of Sedakova’s life and work. Varying essay topics work to contextualize Sedakova’s writing in relationship to larger philosophical ideas, such as freedom and phenomenology, as well as ethics, childhood, and even theology. By grouping these essays thematically, the editors are able to create a well-rounded picture of an author and thinker whose poetry and prose that not only has a philosophical impact but also explores the ethical responsibility of that impact.

Although the purpose of this collection seems to be specifically focused on writing in response to Sedakova rather than Sedakova’s own

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Correction [06.10.21]:

Minor typographical errors have been corrected from the print version in this electronic version.