

**‘the ghosts who don’t know what year it is’:
A Review of Tracy K. Smith (ed.), *The Best American
Poetry 2021*, New York: Scribner Poetry, 2021, ISBN
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This volume is not actually an anthology of the best poems published in 2021, but the year before, so the title is in this sense somewhat misleading. As guest editor Tracy K. Smith puts it, *The Best American Poetry 2021* is a ‘chorus of voices assembled [which] consoled and quickened me as I lived my own version of 2020’ (‘Introduction’, xxiii). 2020, then, “‘a year like no other’”, as Smith says, with all its ‘tragedies, violations, griefs, and grievances’ (xxi), many of which resulted from the arrival of COVID-19, the virus estimated to have caused over 6.5 million deaths globally since it first emerged in December 2019.¹

A hundred years earlier, another global pandemic claimed many millions of lives. The so-called ‘Spanish Flu’ or 1918 Pandemic caused by the H1N1 virus is said to have resulted in as many as 50 million deaths worldwide.² Perhaps the best-known example of the 1918 Pandemic’s impact on modern anglophone poetry is W. B. Yeats’s poem ‘The Stare’s Nest by my Window’, in which it has been suggested the poet records his experience of going into quarantine in the lines ‘We are closed in, and the key is turned / On our uncertainty.’³ Like Yeats – whose lines relate to a local Irish context as much as they may be said to connect with a broader, international frame of reference, including the 1918 Pandemic – many of the poets represented in *The Best American Poetry 2021* do not refer to COVID-19 directly. Yesenia Montilla’s ‘a brief meditation on breath’ is one exception, with its stark description of the poet walking ‘38 blocks to my father’s house with a mask / over my nose and mouth, the sweat dripping off my chin [...]’ (114). References to the COVID-19 pandemic occur in other poems in the anthology, too, but nowhere as directly as they do in Montilla’s meditation.

¹ This is the figure given by the World Health Organization on its ‘WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard’ in October 2022; available at <https://covid19.who.int/> [accessed 11 October 2022].

² See the article by Douglas Jordan, with contributions from Dr. Terrence Tumpey and Barbara Jester, ‘The Deadliest Flu: The Complete Story of the Discovery and Reconstruction of the 1918 Pandemic Virus’, on the website of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States; available at <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/reconstruction-1918-virus.html> [accessed 11 October 2022].

³ See W. B. Yeats, ‘The Stare’s Nest by My Window’, section VI of ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’, in W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poems*, ed. Timothy Webb (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 139. The idea of Yeats’s poem as a response to the 1918 Pandemic was developed by Joseph M. Hassett, in ‘W. B. Yeats, the Spanish Flu and an Experiment in Quarantine’, *The Irish Times*, 21 November 2020; available at <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/wb-yeats-the-spanish-flu-and-an-experiment-in-quarantine-1.4412485> [accessed 21 October 2022].

Despite the editor's insistence that 'the despair of 2020 was different' to any other year in recent or modern history, in other words, the poems gathered in *The Best American Poetry 2021* are often not centred on the experience of the pandemic as such.⁴ Instead, many of them offer new perspectives on the 'fragile social systems' that have for several centuries determined, and continue to influence, our sense of what it means to be American (xxi). If the year signalled in its title is somewhat unclear, there is no doubt at all that this is an anthology of *American* poetry.⁵ These are poems not only written by poets who identify as 'American' and which were first published in American magazines,⁶ but it is also a book that affirms throughout its contents a belief in the cultural and historical distinctiveness of the American experience. It would be absurd to expect an anthology of American poetry to include poets from Ireland or Romania or anywhere else, of course, especially in those countries' national languages, but the *Best American* volumes also participate in a yearly insistence on the exceptionalism of anglophone poetry from the United States that is summarised in series editor David Lehman's quotation of E. B. White in his 'Foreword' to the 2021 volume.⁷ Lehman quotes White's claim that New York City is 'like poetry' and, moreover, that '[t]he island of Manhattan is without doubt the greatest human concentrate on earth, the poem whose magic is comprehensible to millions of residents but whose full meaning will always remain elusive.' ('Foreword', xiv)

The *Best American Poetry* series, appearing annually since 1988 and overseen by Lehman with a high-profile guest editor every year, is published by Scribner Poetry, an

⁴ For an example of an anthology that focuses on poetic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, see *Poetry and COVID-19: An Anthology of Contemporary International and Innovative Poetry*, ed. Anthony Caleshu and Rory Waterman (Swindon: Shearsman Books, 2021).

⁵ The impulse to unpack the title of this and all volumes of this kind is inspired, in part, by David Foster Wallace's interrogation of the title of *The Best American Essays 2007* in his introduction to that volume. Wallace's 'Deciderization 2007 – A Special Report' is reprinted in his *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York, Boston, and London: Little, Brown, 2012), 299-320. Many of the points made in this piece about the title of *The Best American Poetry* series are similar to those made by Wallace in relation to *The Best American Essays*, but a larger project might take account of other annual volumes too, such as *The Best American Short Stories* and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, also published by Houghton Mifflin (although the publisher ceased publication of the latter volume in 2019).

⁶ The poems selected for inclusion in the *Best American Poetry* anthology every year are drawn from magazines and journals and not from books published the year before. Details about the magazines with their editors' names and websites are given in a list at the end of the anthology, which undoubtedly increases submissions and subscriptions. It should be noted, however, that most of the magazines from whose pages poems are chosen for inclusion would already be considered top-tier poetry publications in themselves, such as *The Atlantic*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *The Southern Review*, *The Yale Review*, and so on. It is worth noting, too, that the seventy-five poets selected for inclusion in *The Best American Poetry 2021* are drawn from less than half that number (thirty-four) separate publications. Shane McRae's 'The Hastily Assembled Angel on Care and Vitality' was published in two journals, *The Yale Review* and *The Baffler*, in 2020 and 2019 respectively, in addition to being selected for *The Best American Poetry 2021*. McRae acknowledges this in a note to his poem, but the editor(s) do not comment on this triple endorsement of his work. See McRae, 'The Hastily Assembled Angel on Care and Vitality,' in *The Best American Poetry 2021*, 109-10 and 195.

⁷ Interestingly, Margaret Atwood and Paul Muldoon, a Canadian and an Irish poet respectively, have also featured in the series, as well as others who are not generally recognised as 'American' writers. Muldoon edited *The Best American Poetry 2005*. It should be mentioned, of course, that anthologies celebrating and, indeed, affirming national literary cultures exist outside of the United States too, and there are probably as many exceptionalisms as there are nations willing to make claims for their own cultural distinctiveness.

imprint of Simon & Schuster, a global company with a revenue of nearly a billion dollars *per annum* and several other imprints and media enterprises in its portfolio. It is terrific to see contemporary poetry supported in this way, but the commercial aspect of the venture cannot be overlooked, not least because of the way that the series promotes one nation's poetry at the same time that its imprint boasts administrative and production hubs around the world (London, Toronto, Sydney and Delhi), in countries where poetic culture is as rich and varied as it may be in the United States. What is at stake here, then, is the global promotion of American poetry by an American multinational corporation with its base in New York City. There are largescale economic decisions involved in the annual production of the *Best American Poetry* anthology and these are related, in complex and troubling ways, to the promotion of poetry written in English in the United States as 'the greatest' demonstration of the art form's possibilities in the contemporary moment. These are not just the best *American* poems from 2020, but the volume suggests that these poems are also better than poems to be found anywhere else in the world each year. The project, then, speaks to the persistence of American exceptionalism in the nation's self-formations, notwithstanding the ways that racist violence and political turmoil have enveloped the country in recent years. To be fair, both Lehman and Smith acknowledge this in different ways in their prefatory essays to the poems included in *The Best American Poetry 2021*, and many of the poets included also address those concerns, but the project is nonetheless packaged in a way that promotes a version of the United States that is at odds with how the nation is often perceived on the international stage. To adapt a line from Ama Codjoe's poem 'After the Apocalypse': 'American's king [has] inevitably change[d] and inevitably stay[ed] the same.' (31)

There are, of course, many ways to read an anthology and ultimately what matters for most readers is the contents and not the surrounding apparatus. There is a lot of supporting material in the volume; some might even say there is too much. In addition to a 'Foreword' from the Series Editor and an 'Introduction' from the Guest Editor, there are extensive 'Contributors' Notes and Comments', a list of the 'Magazines Where the Poems Were First Published' and 'Acknowledgments'. All of this is immensely useful to scholars and students of poetry, but it reinforces the point that most of the poets selected for inclusion in the volume year on year are also academics of one kind or another, from directors of creative writing programmes to professors of poetry and literature.⁸ There are exceptions, but reading through the apparatus, and especially the notes written by the contributors to accompany their poems, creates an uncomfortable feeling of proximity to the authors and their lives that can get in the way of the poems themselves. It is a little like what happens when you attend a poetry reading and the author's introductions to their poems are longer than the poems themselves. Sometimes this can be illuminating and, indeed, moving, but the page or so given over to Billy Collins's CV and accompanying comment on his contribution, 'On the Deaths of Friends', or Rita Dove's long note (with postscript) on her poem 'Naji, 14. Philadelphia', are over the top (34-5; 178-9; 59; 182-3). Jericho Brown's brief comment that his poem 'Work' 'is the result of my having been commissioned to write a poem in response to the 2019-2020 Romare Bearden exhibit at the High Museum in Atlanta, Georgia, where [he] live[s]' puts the work squarely back in the reader's court,

⁸ As Jay Deshpande, a teacher at Columbia University, writes in his poem 'A Child's Guide to Grasses': 'College / towns are also settlements // of the mind: they trim the world // away.' And further in the same piece: 'I am still // most at home on a campus' (43-5).

to make of as they will, without the overdetermining direction of the author needling them to appreciate the personal crisis or social intervention the poem was intended to articulate (16-17; 174). If they are any good, the poems should be able to express these things on their own terms. Shouldn't it be clear, for example, that Chen Chen's poem 'The School of Eternities' is 'simultaneously a love poem, an elegy, and an ode to a supermarket' without the author having to point it out? (22-6; 176) What is it about poetry that seems to invite this kind of meta-commentary from many of those who write it, a desire to over-explain the formal devices and thematic concerns of their work as if the reader would not otherwise get it, or perhaps just not get it in the way the author intends?

It could have something to do with the perceived difficulty of the artform. Reviewing Herbert J. C. Grierson's anthology *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the Seventeenth Century* in 1921 in his essay 'The Metaphysical Poets', T. S. Eliot famously wrote:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results.⁹

Eliot's words have as much significance a hundred years later as they did in the 1920s, but the extent to which poets in the 2020s are 'difficult' in the way that Eliot or other Modernists might have seemed to their first readers is debatable. On first reading, a poem like Nicole Sealey's 'Pages 5-8 (An excerpt from *The Ferguson Report: An Erasure*)' presents formal challenges that may be unfamiliar to many readers of poetry, especially those outside the academy (132-8). Sealey's poem offers an important comment on the 'complexity' of the current historical moment, especially in the United States, in relation to the pervasive and related problems of violent racism and toxic masculinity, but one has to wonder if its social and political message could only be expressed by erasing passages from the report on which it is based. The effect is powerful and the meaning is clear, but the process that is still present to the final text on the page distracts, in a way, from the poem's central message. Susan Briante's 'Further Exercises' addresses similar issues by inviting the reader to imagine poems that could be written in response to certain formal challenges (13-15). In the second section, for example, we read: 'Write a poem as an acrostic of the name of a person you love who is most vulnerable to US government policies.' (13) Many of the poems in *The Best American Poetry 2021* seem to take up this exercise, in a way, by exploring the impact of political and social policies on the lives of those they love in the United States today. For example, there are powerful poems on the experience of immigration and travel by Su Cho ('Abecedarian for ESL in West Lafayette, Indiana'), Adam O. Davis ('Interstate Highway System'), and Dora Malech ('All the Stops'), as well as several searing poems on the contemporary political climate by, among others, Henri Cole ('Gross National Unhappiness') and Kwame Dawes ('Before the Riot') (27-8; 36-8; 100-101; 33; 39-40). All these poems have important things to say in terms of their engagement with the contemporary moment, but in formal terms they often fall short of the kind of radical inventiveness that Briante's poem suggests may be lacking from early 21st century poetic discourse. Briante may be wrong, of course, but it is a pity *The Best American*

⁹ See T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 289.

series does not do more to seek out and promote writers on the margins of the culture, outside of the respectable academies and magazines.

There are many challenging poets from the fringes of the contemporary poetic *avant-garde* who are not represented in an anthology like *The Best American Poetry*, and there are many ‘little’ magazines published today that operate under the radar of such gatherings, but the ‘complexity’ of the world often appears to be simplified rather than complicated in the poems collected in Smith’s anthology. Narrative, autobiography, and lyric memoir are the modes that predominate in many of the poems, giving voice to what we are urged to read as sincere and truthful recollections of lived experiences that may well be ‘true’ and ‘real’ but as poems fall flat because they do not have the kind of multi-dimensional density that makes a poem like ‘The Waste Land’ as compelling today as it was when it was first published in 1922. This may sound elitist or mean-spirited when one of the main functions of an anthology like *The Best American Poetry* is simply to make the artform more widely available to readers who might not otherwise buy poetry books or magazines. A century from now, though, if such things still matter or even exist, will a single poem in *The Best American Poetry 2021* still be read? It is hard to imagine very many poems having the power and influence of Eliot’s masterpiece, a poem which was also born out of the poet’s personal experience and his sense of the social and cultural upheaval of the first decades of the twentieth century. Eliot’s poem would not have fit any kind of *Best American* agenda, not least because of the international, collaborative, multi-lingual, and genre-defying elements of its overall achievement.

Some of the poems in Smith’s anthology do, of course, have interesting and important things to say about the contemporary moment, but is this what allows them to be presented among the ‘best’ seventy-five poems published in the United States in a single year? One would not be so troubled by such a question – one might not even be tempted to ask it at all – were it not for the fact that it is posited so clearly and loudly by the editors of the *Best American Poetry* series. In his poem ‘After Tu Fu’, Christopher Buckley, writes:

I fold my poems into small paper boats
and send them down the night river...
who knows, really, if life goes anywhere? (19)

Who knows, really, if poems like this go ‘anywhere’ either beyond anthologies such as *The Best American Poetry 2021*? Where *do* they go? ‘America, have you noticed how well you stretch / the imagination?’ asks the speaker in Camille T. Dungy’s ‘This’ll hurt me more’, but reading through the contents of *The Best American Poetry 2021* one looks in vain for poems that really go anywhere beyond the immediate circumference of their authors’ experience or knowledge (60).

Maybe it is too much to expect them to go any further than that. As the late James Longenbach puts it in a poem of his included in Smith’s volume:

A book is the future
You dream
Of reading it, and once you’ve finished, it’s a miracle, you know the past. (96)¹⁰

¹⁰ Longenbach, also a great critic of modern and contemporary poetry, passed away in July 2022.

Longenbach's poem stands out in the anthology for its awareness of the need to see beyond itself while acknowledging the ground from which it has come. Replete with references and allusions to poets he admires and loves – Elizabeth Bishop, James Wright, Delmore Schwartz, and others – it is also a poem that gestures toward the possibility of advancing the art forward, one word at a time, as the poet makes their way in the world:

Of ghosts pursued, forgotten, sought anew –
Everywhere I go
The trees are full of them.

From trees come books, that, when they open,
Lead you to expect a person
On the other side:

One hand having pulled
The doorknob
Towards him, the other

Held out, open,
Beckoning
You forward – (95)

Perhaps this, too, is ultimately what an anthology like *The Best American Poetry* seeks to achieve: the offering of a hand, an invitation to move 'forward' in the world into a larger and, possibly, clearer understanding of oneself and others. In this sense, questions about when poems are published or what poets have to say about their work – critical questions of the kind interrogated here – may fade into insignificance as reality passes from view and the imagination takes over. As Longenbach puts it in the third section of the same poem: 'I walked down Hugh Street to the harbor, though when I say I *walked* I mean imagined: I hadn't been there yet.' (94, emphasis in original)

There is a lot more to be said about each of the poems included in *The Best American Poetry 2021* than has been said here, and in themselves each of the poems selected by Smith for inclusion makes its own claims on our attention, just as they did on the editor. It is also a positive thing, and worth noting, that the 2021 volume, like others in the series, allows younger poets, some of whom have not yet published a book, to rub shoulders, as it were, with established and, indeed, major figures. However, there are those who would say that the speakers of poems are rarely the poets who made them, and poems are seldom reducible to the contexts of their composition. These are critical truisms, many times tested and contested, but too often here a sense of the poets themselves and their circumstances intrudes on the presentation of the poems as they are assembled. 'I am asking you to touch me' writes Ada Limón in the final line of her poem 'The End of Poetry' (92), but physical connection cannot be granted to the poetic subject in itself. For all of their affirmations of the body, of community or felt reality, in whatever forms they take, poems exist too in the realms of the spirit, outside of society if not history. To read poetry is to 'play basketball with the ghosts who don't know what year it is', as Darius Simpson writes in 'What Is There to Do in Akron, Ohio?' (143) Not knowing what year it is, poems are in an important sense always already prior to and beyond the years in which they appear in print, no matter when (or where) that may have been, 1922, 2020, 2021... This, finally, is what makes their collection in anthologies the random experience it has always been, because they lead us – if they are

worth reading at all – out of place and time, towards ‘[t]he Peace which passeth understanding’.¹¹

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¹¹ See T. S. Eliot, ‘Note’ to line 433 of ‘The Waste Land’, in *The Waste Land*, ed. Michael North (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 26.