

# More and Better Trouble

Heather Bowlan

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A review of

*We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics* edited by Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel. Nightboat Books 2020

*We Want It All* is a big, unwieldy, overflowing book—in this particular moment, there is a need for excess to respond to excess; to the smug American Horror Story of overblown, overglossed oppression and hatred. As *We Want It All's* editors, Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel, state, “Our aim in the present collection is therefore both to register and to amplify this tendency” to write against these excesses of power. They identify eight separate “overlapping strategies and concerns” in this anthology, acknowledging they are far from comprehensive, among them explorations of the ecological and the historical, collaborative exchanges and serial poems, satire and lyricism.

These are all useful points of entry, particularly in their showcasing work by specific writers the reader may know (or not), but it's the spillage, the unexpected tendrils or tangles of connection, that is perhaps where many readers will find their way into engaging with this collection. There's an urge with an anthology of this size to open to a random page, then another, and see what sparks fly between the individual pieces and authors. “The queered map I want to see has a minotaur at the center,” writes Aeon Ginsberg in “Against Queering the Map” and there's something to be said for following the labyrinth's twist and turns in the hopes of encountering some beautiful monsters.

For this reader, it's the moments in these texts that stutter or skip or otherwise draw attention to the formal limitations of any writing that are most exciting and point to the potential of a trans poetics in fostering challenging and compelling art. Take Cam Awkward-Rich's “Everywhere We Look, There We Are,” which emphasizes, repositions and so renegotiates the meaning of some of the more peculiar and striking language in a newspaper account of Doc Trimble's arrest: “self-named privileges,” “bluecoat,” “appendages” all appear in the poem, but so does the supposedly less charged language surrounding these terms, as seen in the section of the poem with various iteration of “im fine” stretching across and down the page.

Put this up against the simultaneous nod to and rejection of the darling or sentimental in Hazel Avery's “piss sister”—a concrete poem that at first glance, and given the intimacy of the poem's arc (embrace the pun!) might be taken for a curled tendril of hair:

i fear there is  
something in us  
that lets us be  
sisters that lets  
us be useless  
sisters a kind

But as the poem returns to again and again, “it is not/a pretty thing.” There's a wonderful challenge in both of these poems to resist easy interpretation, and similarly a rejection of any urge to universalize experience (of these trans/gender nonconforming writers—or anyone).

This challenge is extended through poems grounded in hyperspecificity, which appear throughout the anthology. For example, there's the conversational and slightly breathless negotiation of intimacy in "The Color of Joy is Pink" which comes alive through details like:

We'd get into more and better trouble  
That way than in the Brooklyn Volunteer  
Accountability Corps where the creeps  
Just walk off regardless into the forever of us  
and the particular vulnerability of "you never read the books I like/even when I buy them for you twice."

Or Ray Filar's piece, "You've heard of Ritalin...," which weaves together pharmaceutical background on stimulants, academic theory, and a narrator's personal experience of navigating the UK's National Health Service for hormone therapy.

In my bag I carry: methylphenidate, ibuprofen, paracetamol, cigarettes, propranolol, anti-indigestion drugs, anti-diarrhoea drugs. In my desk drawer: valium, tramadol, G, a packet of 2CB that I'm not taking because last time it was unpleasant and the neighbours wouldn't stop playing music while I was trying to experience a state of complete internality.

The exhaustive level of detail in recounting the many (often redundant) steps in that specific process (which earns its own comparison to a labyrinth, as do so many journeys for medical care outside of the "normal") reads as a confrontation of the erasure and indifference expressed and reinforced by the medical bureaucracy.

There's an urgency in the fragmented, almost semiotic quality of Cody-Rose Clevidence's poems, in particular "Pollinate; by hand." There's plenty of wordplay happening in and around the brackets, bars, and semi-colons, a kind of performance of unburdening or shedding (using these symbols points to these walls or limits, but doesn't take them down):

2 get a grip  
on [[ oneself, like that—  
[show me] own hive  
aswarm in sunlight, own hive,  
my hand, palm up [o sting]

More than anything else, anthologies like this raise questions—about our aesthetics, our expectations of writing's purpose... An anthology means, if the editors have been thorough and prioritize inclusivity as they have here, that there will be plenty to love and plenty to feel indifferent about and plenty to roll your eyes over, depending on your tastes—whether you love a certain type of delicately opaque lyric, or a litany of facts and/or bodily functions and/or daily minutiae, or typographical experimentation, or heartfelt declarations of self-love and self-loathing, there is something here to linger over, to savor and even to overindulge.

Heather Bowlan is a writer and academic consultant living in Philadelphia. A former editor for BOATT Press and *Raleigh Review*, her poetry and criticism have appeared in the anthology *Feminisms in Motion*, the journals *New Ohio Review*, *Nashville Review*, *Day One*, *Interim*, *the Ploughshares blog*, and elsewhere. She has received an Academy of American Poets Award and fellowships from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and the Vermont Studio Center.

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