

Preface

I FIRST HAD THE IDEA FOR THIS ANTHOLOGY in January 2017, when the “Muslim ban” and the proposed border wall between the United States and Mexico were novel and disturbing news items, and the frequency of police brutality headlines across the country showed no sign of lessening. That winter, as xenophobic acts and divisive rhetoric reached their then-peak, I was afraid that as a country we might forget, or future generations might never see, what it looks like to truly—and with humility—“welcome the stranger.” It seemed to me that the gesture of being not just a neighbor but *neighborly*, that is, the gesture of hospitality based solely on and earned solely by proximity (and not necessarily based on cultural or ideological symmetry), was the gesture we were missing.

While I had an inkling that my vague nostalgia for a golden age of the more harmonious American neighborhood was likely based in cultural myth, I knew that in my lifetime I had experienced a tangible shift in tone when it came to local and national leaders’ vision of a country strengthened (or not) by its cultural heterogeneity and ideological variation, and committed (or not) to its citizens’ freedoms. I felt an almost desperate pull to compile a book of contemporary American poetry, fiction, and essays imagining and witnessing the neighborhood. I suppose the idea was to pin down some set of images and stories in which such grappling happens constructively, kindly—some attempt to both record and envision how “we the people” *could* be.

But we live in the real world, with gentrification and “lost dog” posters, late-night assaults and new-baby meal trains, spray-painted swastikas and block parties. At certain times, to be a neighbor means to reach out with warmth and aid, out of solidarity; at other times, the intense proximity of neighboring with its predictable trespasses (or perceived trespasses) provokes fraught vigilance and even violence. The title of the book, *Welcome to the Neighborhood*, is meant to have a double tone, both sincere and sarcastic, implying both offers of casseroles and shrugs of non-sympathy to newcomers. While I briefly considered editing a collection that represented only ideal neighborly encounters, I soon realized that such a controlled approach would be the literary equivalent of a gated community—a bubble of denial—when the very mode I wished to celebrate was a mode of openness, curiosity,

and engagement with complexity and discord. Such a collection would also be overly limited, both in its literary depth and in its ethnographic, reflective, and civic usefulness. American ambivalence about other people takes root close to home, after all, before it ripples out farther. What could we learn about the country as a whole, I wondered, from examining the smaller site of the American neighborhood as seen through literature? What is this character, this simultaneously imagined and embodied, sealed-off and invaded, community? These “contain[ed] multitudes”? This “we”?

I shifted my editorial attention to choosing pieces that reflect various points in the human cycle(s) of harmonious and conflict-filled coexisting. I was especially drawn to pieces that, as Emily Dickinson encouraged us to do, “tell it slant,” or approach the theme in an unexpected or nuanced way. It became clear over time that this book itself was a “neighborhood” of sorts, and that the editorial process was a form of world-building. I began paying special attention in the later stages of submission reading to collecting pieces that rounded out some of the less-represented experiences of the neighborhood, especially experiences of estrangement. My hope is for the pieces here to open up possibility—to encourage curiosity about whom we live among and how we go about it. Some of these poems, stories, and essays will warm and feed us, yes, but many will rattle us out of what we think we know.

There are seekers: “We woke in the parked car aslant in the field Cory’s grandmother had found for us to sleep in” (Christine Schutt); “I’ve been searching to find that net again, that [. . .] citizen body” (Liz Stephens). There are activists: “I don’t police // my protection” (Leora Fridman), skeptics: “*Why should I help this creep?*” (Dinty W. Moore), and enthusiasts: “Even my bitch-ass neighbor a gift” (Jill McDonough); “Praise the 606-pound squash at the county fair” (Daniel B. Johnson). There are women who crave solitude: “She wanted a little room for thinking” (Rita Dove). There are cautious women alone at night: “I tell myself I will wave” (Ladan Osman). There are animal neighbors: “I see Candy / squirm out of his collar again” (Fred Marchant), criminal neighbors: “no one thought that my neighbor would become a serial killer” (Katrina Vandenberg), and hustlers-turned-altruists: “I tell him I have no cash on me, but when I get out of the shower I see that he’s shoveled it anyway” (James Miranda).

I have attempted to cast a wide net aesthetically with this multigenre collection, to the extent that a narrative-leaning theme can cast widely, and I have intentionally selected pieces by authors whose backgrounds and identities reflect the diversity of this country. The anthology call went out on general social media pages for creative writers and I received submissions that way; at the same time, I solicited writers whose work I knew and admired. Pieces were chosen for thematic relevance, precision of craft, and complexity of tone and argument. The result is a mixture of

emerging and highly established authors, each of whom I am proud and honored to showcase here.

I am writing this one year after the release and box office success of *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, the Fred Rogers documentary; less than three months after the synagogue shooting in Fred Rogers's actual neighborhood, Squirrel Hill; one month after a girl died in border patrol custody in New Mexico. The question of how to live peacefully and ethically with one another remains urgent. I am grateful to Ohio University Press/Swallow Press for making room for the literature here that both answers and raises it. This book is full of flawed and vulnerable characters, just like us—just like our country. What these poems, stories, and essays assert, however, is a refusal to retreat to separate, self-reinforcing corners: these are imperfect narrators and authors with the courage and discipline to stay engaged, be wrong, and keep learning.

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March 3, 2019