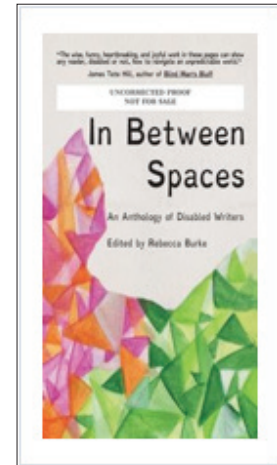


Rebecca Burke, ed. *In Between Spaces: An Anthology of Disabled Writers*. Stillhouse Press. 258pp.

*Reviewed by Ruth Hoberman*

Curb cuts, kneeling buses, closed captions, and audible walk lights were a start. But disability rights activists are now asking for more: representation. This means representation in positions of power as well as representations in the media that they have themselves created. "Growing up, I never read a book with a main character like me written by a disabled author," Rebecca Burke writes at the start of *In Between Spaces*, an anthology of work by thirty-three writers who identify as disabled. In solidarity with other underrepresented populations, Burke insists that publishing—long dominated by its "cisgender, heteronormative, ableist, and white supremacist history"—must make room for more diverse voices. *In Between Spaces* addresses ableism in particular: the assumption that bodies and minds differing from social norms or notions of health are defined solely by that difference, and that they therefore need "fixing." Look elsewhere, these writers collectively suggest—at infrastructure, attitudes, and institutions—for what needs fixing.



Burke and her fellow editorial board members at Stillhouse Press—a student- and alumni-run press affiliated with George Mason University—have sought out work arising from the spaces “in-between traditional diagnostic criteria and textbook definitions, where lived experience fills the gaps in our understanding.” Individual pieces are true to this aim: fiction blurs with nonfiction, poetry with prose; poems push the boundaries of form and genre. There are no straightforward narratives of diagnosis, treatment, and cure. Instead we get immersion in the minds of interesting, carefully individualized people.

What exactly is “wrong” with the narrator of “Mornings,” a nonfiction piece by Rhea Dhanbhoora, which opens the book? What struck me as I read was how much I wanted to be told and how thoroughly my desire was rebuffed. The narrator has problems with her legs. “But you’re not disabled,” people tell her. “Disabled is—like really disabled.” But her legs “just hang there limp, loose, on fire.” My impulse was to impose a narrative on her experience, one where the tension comes from sickness and the happy ending means cure. Her friends tell her, “you’re not disabled—everyone has back problems.” But that urge to deny or fix someone else’s reality is one of the problems this anthology seeks to expose and counter-act.

Many pieces point out the limitations of medical terms. Poems like “Health History,” “Galvanic Skin Test Response,” “Turner syndrome,” and “Bipolar II” undercut and complicate diagnostic labels. Kaleigh O’Keefe’s “Diagnostic Laparoscopy” echoes a medical textbook with its headings and bullet points:

*What will the surgeon find inside me? Blood and muscle*

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

- *inflammation*
- *scar tissue (to be expected)*
- *scar tissue (that wasn't expected)*
- *a box of Kleenex*

The list mingles likely things (“scar tissue”) with unlikely (“maybe that tampon I still don’t know if I lost on the dance floor or if it got sucked into the black hole behind my cervix seven years ago when I got too drunk at that lesbian music festival”). There’s a hint of rage in some of the imagined findings: “an old stone wall creeping through my guts” or “a bomb”. We learn so much about this person through her fantasies that what the surgeon does finally find— endometriosis—feels laughably inadequate.

Lili Sarayrah’s “pain(t)—by—number,” a wry nonfictional account of back pain, complicates the infamous 1-10 pain scale with a paint-by-number set. Immobilized by pain and the pandemic, Sarayrah seeks distraction in her paint set but finds instead just another facet of her bodily condition: “If my pain were a color, it would be like paint No. 19, a shade of orange like those traffic cones marking caution ahead.” The pain scale, of course, frustrates with its narrow range of options; so, too, does the world’s desire to label who she is: “I feel in-between a lot of the time. Specifically in-between cultures, jobs, and diagnoses.” Sarayrah’s essay ends tentatively, inconclusively: there is no definitive triumph, only “acceptance of the imperfection.” And most important is her own incalculability as a human self: “I put away my pain(t) and when we film my first wobbly steps, no one’s counting.”

No one’s counting because experience isn’t reducible to numerical formulae. That lovely ending made me think of Whitman’s “When Last I heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” in which the speaker, “unaccountable,” gets impatient with the lecture and wanders out alone to look “in perfect silence at the stars.” The people in these poems, essays, and stories are all insistently unaccountable: individuals conveying what it feels like to live inside a particular body or mind at a particular time and place.

Resistance to categories means also resistance to conventional endings. Wendy Elizabeth Wallace offers the reader alternative plot options as she narrates “Your Very Own Low-Vision Dating Adventure,” and Teresa Milbrodt, in “Cyclops Notes,” a fragmented account of visual impairment, writes, “Life means continually revising what is normal, embracing your tenuousness, wondering if the twinge in your elbow is temporary or permanent. Nobody is ever out of the woods. Life is all about the woods.”

There are many more writers worth mentioning than I can include here. But I’ll conclude with Latif Askia Ba, whose four extraordinary poems depict life inside a body with “crooked glowing limbs.” “On Gospel (a Meander)” is particularly innovative and powerful. Aligned on the page’s left margin is an account of “this body like an exile,/like a wound dumb luck carved into my neurons,/a wound only words can pass through.” Interspersed is an account of listening to “Aretha’s gospel/over and over” —an account aligned along the right margin. “Only the gospel can remedy/this confusion,” we learn: the confusion of a mind where

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

words from "Plato's Republic/and the Pali Canon collide with verses/of Patwah." The remedy: "She knows/one must bend to testify."

Ba's "Houses," the book's penultimate piece, epitomizes the anthology's ability to familiarize us with unfamiliar voices even as it defamiliarizes the familiar:

*Even houses are strange.  
They live in you.  
They're shaped of corners and doorways,  
parts of apartments and crammed lodgings —  
private as a pair of testicles.*

I thought of Philip Larkin's "Home is So Sad," but his houses are tame, "Shaped to the comfort of the last to go." For Ba,

*Houses cut you open:  
a jagged wood,  
a very bad word,  
a question.*

And when houses die, they leave behind an "inheritance" that captures the incongruities and beauties of this anthology: "a dying washing machine, a garden devoured by winter,/an old CPU, a bird unnamed by man."