

Allison Cobb

After We All Died

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REVIEWED BY LOUIS BURY

The World Without Us

50. “A permaculture guru I heard speak once,” writes Allison Cobb in her 2016 poetry collection, *After We All Died*, “likened a house to slow release fertilizer as it imperceptibly crumbles back into dirt.”

49. The philosopher Eugene Thacker defines “cosmic pessimism” as “a drastic scaling-up or scaling-down of the human point of view” that morosely contemplates “the world without us.”

48. Journalist Alan Weisman’s bestselling book-length thought experiment, *The World Without Us* (2007), speculates on the fate of civilization’s infrastructure in a post-human world.

47. According to experts, the New York City subway system would flood within days of humans’ disappearance and Lexington Avenue would become a river within twenty years.

46. In the original Greek, the word “apocalypse” literally means “uncover” or “from hiding” (*apo* + *kaluptein*).

45. That is, an apocalypse is in a sense the revelation of what was there all along, invisible.

44. The contaminated soil is the apocalypse of the house, the flood the apocalypse of the civilization, the book the apocalypse of its author.

43. *After We All Died* opens with a tender catalogue of bodily self-forgiveness: “I forgive you coiled intestines lined in tissue soft as velvet”; “I forgive you golden seams of fat in semi-liquid state, encasing in your oily cells the poisons of the world.”

42. The catalogue then closes with a final absolution: “I forgive you every part performing all the intricate and simple tasks that make this mass alive. I forgive you all for already having died.”

41. The book’s animating paradox—“Maybe then, learning to be dead, something can live”—is a consummate piece of poetic logic: not strictly true, but truer than the actual truth.

40. Thacker: pessimism is “a poetry written in the graveyard of philosophy.”

39. Is it cause for optimism or pessimism that so much hope these days feels like it’s of the ain’t-got-nothing-ain’t-got-nothing-to-lose variety?

38. Thacker considers pessimism to be “the last refuge of hope,” a notion that gives me more hope than it probably should.

37. Another way to phrase my question about optimism and pessimism would be to ask what poetry can teach us about salvation and forgiveness.

36. When you’re already waterlogged, you may as well stay out in the rain and dance.

35. When you’re already in a sense dead, oblivion is just a way of life.

34. Cobb: “humans are slow release fertilizers too—how one soaks up poisons and leaks them back to the world.”

33. Reading and writing as attempts to regulate one's absorption and leakage of toxins.

32. By "regulate," I mean "vet," not "prohibit."

31. Cobb: "The German word for *poison* is 'gift,' same in Danish, Swedish, and Dutch, / from the Greek *dosis* for dose—a giving."

30. Lewis Hyde: "The art that matters to us ... is received by us as a gift is received."

29. Among poets, it's a point of pride—but, also, soreness—that poetry operates in a gift economy.

28. Among poker players, a "leak" is a hole in a player's game that consistently costs them money and about which they remain unaware, a kind of unintentional gift—a "donation," in poker slang—to their opponents.

27. If you want to know more about the world without us, you don't need to run sophisticated predictive algorithms or perform acrobatic philosophical speculations, you just need to look for the leaks and holes in the world that already is.

26. If you want a taste of the world without us, re-read a favorite poem until you can hear its footprint on your tongue.

25. Cobb: "Take the Devil, old accuser, inside for divine principle. Be undeceived, a mixed thing. Be clear, like a web, almost all hole. Be a way that is not at war."

24. Spicer: "There will be nothing left/ After you die or go mad, / But the calmness of poetry."

23. Whenever I'm in an eschatological mood, I try to remind myself that there's never been a time when humans didn't orient themselves in relation to an imagined end time, and never a time—at least not yet—when they've been wholly correct in their pessimistic fear.

22. Heidegger distinguishes between fear, which takes as its object someone or something, and anxiety, which isn't directed toward a specific person or thing but the world as such.

21. Which is it that's unbearable: climate fear or climate anxiety; our world's disappearance or our world as such?

20. The perverse appeal of back-to-the-wall predicaments—real or imagined, major or minor—derives from the clarity of purpose they bestow.

19. My favorite gaming moments occur when a play that would be reckless in a vacuum—leaving your defense exposed to push forward for an equalizer; sticking all your chips in the middle with a marginal hand—is actually, given the last-ditch circumstances, the safest course of action available.

18. In American football, they call it a Hail Mary pass: out of time and options, you fling the ball downfield as far as you can ... and pray for a touchdown.

17. I don't want to romanticize actual, as opposed to sporting, despair.

16. I do, however, want to distinguish between prayer performed as a last resort and prayer performed as part of a routine or ritual.

15. Both types of prayer express anticipatory grief, but the latter is more acceptant and grounded, less reliant on miracle.

14. Cobb, born and raised in the post-atomic thrum of Los Alamos: “Every day when I wake up I do a healing reiki meditation that [poet] CAConrad taught me, and I hold in my mind the images of all the women I know who have cancer... I hold them in my mind and feel the warm buzz between my palms. Then I apply the warmth to my own body, over [the lump in] my left breast.”

13. Early in this project, I developed the habit of reading a single poem immediately before writing each morning.

12. At first, the habit felt doing like calisthenics for my brain, but now it feels more like lighting a votive candle or dedicating my yoga practice to someone or something.

11. Last year I adopted a personal uniform for each season: chambray button down shirt + army green chinos for fall and spring; light blue oxford cloth button down + brown corduroys for winter; navy blue linen button down + army green linen pants for summer.

10. This sartorial resolution anchored me, in a good way, to my new daily writing routine.

9. In addition to being expedient and consistent, wearing a personal uniform is also an act of self-effacement.

8. Routine shades over into ritual when it starts to orient itself more toward death than life.

7. I once told a therapist that I feel most a man while getting dressed for a funeral and watching myself—silent and serious—button up my shirt in the mirror.

6. What I like best about the archaic and often awkward ritual of the poetry reading is the way it inclines toward sacrament.
5. When I heard Cobb read from *After We All Died* at the St. Mark's Poetry Project—located, as all poets know, in a church—she performed the poems with a vulnerability that felt like benediction.
4. Her tone of delivery sloughed off any sense of what the poet and scholar Chris Nealon calls “masochistic species-/ shame.”
3. Poetry means: “to live in the most fragile house, with the most fragile soul.”
2. Sometimes I notice all the citizens carrying around disposable coffee cups in the morning and marvel at my species’ ritualistic wastefulness.
1. Other times, I forgive everybody this creature comfort, myself included, as a form of end-of-life care.