

More Praise for What Had Happened Was

"What Had Happened Was is a daring poet's debut. First and foremost, I want to praise Therí Alyce Pickens's collection for its unflinching attention to the nuances of—and everyday sorts of elaborate formal play embedded in—African American vernacular. It's truly refreshing, and energizing, to see the dynamism of Black linguistic expression live a full life in contemporary American poetry this way. It's all here. Love and loss, theory and autobiography, the ordinary and the transcendent."—Joshua Bennett, author of Spoken Word: A Cultural History

"Few debut poetry books are long awaited. Without a doubt, What Had Happened Was is. When you work tirelessly and patiently to master your art—with skill, wisdom, and an abundance of imagination—it reads like this."—Hayan Charara, author of These Trees, Those Leaves, This Flower, That Fruit: Poems

"In her constantly surprising and deftly built poems, Therí Alyce Pickens enacts a poetics that refuses binaries, attends to and extends the power of Black art, and centers a body navigating illness. Pickens seamlessly moves through and braids memory, history, pop culture. The language is precise and remarkable; it will engage and entangle you in marvelous ways—as will the formally inventive poems and the structure itself. Pickens has written an electric first book. The poems are still sparking in my mind."—Eduardo C. Corral, author of *Guillotine: Poems*



What Had Happened Was



DUKE

DUKE

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Duke University Press
Durham and London 2025

What Had Happened Was

Therí Alyce Pickens



© 2025 Duke University Press All rights reserved Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞ Project Editor: Liz Smith Designed by Dave Rainey Typeset in SangBleu Republic by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Pickens, Therí A., author. | Pickens, Therí A. What had happened was (Poem) Title: What had happened was / Therí Alyce Pickens. Other titles: What had happened was (Compilation)

Description: Durham: Duke University Press, 2025.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024024169 (print)

LCCN 2024024170 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478031499 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478028284 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478060505 (ebook) Subjects: LCGFT: Poetry.

Classification: LCC PS3616.1276 W44 2025 (print) |

LCC PS3616.1276 (ebook) | DDC 811/.6—dc23/eng/20241105

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024024169

LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024024170



long story short

this is for anybody

who would be one

of my little friends

DUKE

Variety, multiplicity, eroticism are difficult to control. And it may very well be that these are the reasons why writers are often seen as *persona non grata* by political states, whatever form they take, since writers/artists have a tendency to refuse to give up their way of seeing the world and of playing with possibilities; in fact, their very expression relies on that insistence. Perhaps that is why creative literature, even when written by politically reactionary people, can be so freeing, for in having to embody ideas and recreate the world, writers cannot merely produce "one way."

Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory"

What good is any form of literature to Black people?

What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what "everyone" is saying, doing, thinking—whoever "everyone" happens to be this year.

And what good is all this to Black people?

Octavia E. Butler, "Positive Obsession"

I like to use poems as what-if machines and as time-traveling devices, and I'm grateful to have had the chance to do that with this project. I learned a lot, and I hope you learn something too and then go tell someone else about it.

Eve L. Ewing, 1919

I put a hunnit percent in every line I drop.

Lil' Kim, "Quiet Storm (Remix)"



CONTENTS

	2	On This Day
	3	The Amateur Gardener Considers a Time of Death
	5	On March 12, 2020, Breonna Taylor
	6	On Losing; a Hypothesis
	7	Customary Calculus for Chronicity
	9	Getting Dressed
1	10	Depression, Jacob Lawrence, 1950
	11	If Lyndon B. Johnson hadn't had his heart attack
-	12	Remember the episode of Bones when
	13	Ode to Checking My Shit
	15	Anatomy of Soap
-	17	my lover says (my mind)
-	18	I found out I have something
-	19	Ursa Corregidora and Mary J. Blige
		Contemplate Life without Children
	THA	т
2	22	Dispatches from the Pediatric Floor
2	23	Collar Is What Hangs around the Neck
:	25	I am watching a documentary about food, again
2	26	Corona Poem
2	27	T
2	28	On sex
	29	Palimpsestina
	31	The Amateur Gardener Contemplates Trauma

THIS

32	Apostrophe to Inspiration	
34	Chronically Ill	
35	On recompense	
36	I tell her some of her ancestors must have	
	snitched on Harriet Tubman	
37	What You Don't See When Ben Vereen Guest S	Stars
	as Will's Father on <i>The Fresh Prince</i> , May 1	994
	MIND YOU	
40	What Had Happened Was	
	& THE THIRD	
56	Variation on a Theme	
57	Potential Ode or Elegy Out My Window	
58	Neighborhood Watch	
59	Coming Home	
61	Ranunculus	
62	It was just before Thanksgiving	
63	June 2018	
64	Ursa Corregidora Goes to Junior High in the 19	990s
65	Some Suicides Are Slow	
67	I got into a Twitter beef with Lolo Jones	
	over a blind white girl	
68	What Cliff Should Have Told Theo on the Pilo	t of
	The Cosby Show, September 1984	
70	Antony and Cleopatra, dir. Simon Godwin,	
	National Theatre, 2019	
72	my lover says (he doesn't remember)	
73	I meet a man with a stutter	
<i>7</i> 5	Let Me Holla at You Right Quick; or Notes	
81	I Ain't Forget about Y'all; or Acknowledgments	

DUKE

THIS

D U K E

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

On This Day

You were told to delay my birth with chicken noodle soup. In April that year, they caught the Beauty Queen Killer. Ronald Reagan still had not said HIV/AIDS. Vanessa Williams had to give up her Miss America crown. I would later become a pageant girl. Those aren't contractions, said the man lying next to you. My Little Pony was on sale and the radio played "Do They Know It's Christmas?" too loudly. Diahann Carroll and Joan Collins were on the cover of Jet magazine in January and Bill Cosby was in August. I would wear "Jet Beauty of the Week" tees as a joke. You spent thirty-two hours in labor and then underwent a cesarean. That summer, the Olympics were held in LA and the Soviets didn't come. They were still angry about 1980. The Apple Macintosh computer went on sale for \$2,500. I bought mine for a song. Tina Turner and Prince topped the charts with doves and absent love. It was a Sunday. Big Mama Thornton, Benjamin Mays, Julio Cortázar, and Michel Foucault all died. And I would inherit thunder from them. Jane Austen would have been 209. In English, I would be the only one to laugh at her jokes. I have an education and was introduced properly at 10:37 a.m. in Orange, New Jersey. It was foggy with 97% cloud cover and a high of 43 degrees.

DUKE

The Amateur Gardener Considers a Time of Death

with a line from Medora C. Addison's "The Days to Come"

my skittering eyelashes are the first to tell me I am awake

the flicks of movement, lashes a small curtain opening to fresh sky

I can hear the fan as it turns its labored breathing

like the sound of sifting lentils ritualized music

today I'll uproot and replant peppers and lemon balm

the greedy squash and tomato plants steal the light steal the soil

a small rhythm of dig pat dig when uprooting lemon balm I see the tomato has asserted itself

roots tethered to its softer garden mate puncturing the soil

the strings tear jaggedly zippering away I try a gentle uncoupling

for its own good the lemon balm may die

for their own good the peppers may die too

I home them in this new earth scoop the soil near

rub the fissures between their old soil that is what they knew

and their new home which is to say the place I hope

they will grow because my hands have their limits

and no amount of fretting will make the roots feel less radical

over drizzling rain the fan still going it is shushing the air

the shower tinkles like a piano on a defunct fuse box it is stringing me along

back toward the house where now I shall store my soul with silent beauty

DUKE