Andrew Ridker introduces this collection as a response by poets to the felt sense of living in the Age of Surveillance, which came into focus in “the summer of Edward Snowden’s leaks and Chelsea Manning’s conviction”, and alongside the initial marketing strategies for Google Glass and the killing in Florida of an unarmed black teenager by a white neighbourhood watchman. Unsatisfied by official and media comment on these diverse-but-connected matters, Ridker sought illumination from poets, old and young, famous and less so, from varied schools and styles, and invited them to watch the watchers. Poets “are, after all, our professional observers”, he writes. “The interest in minutiae, the data of our daily lives, is their business”, and by tackling the undeniably topical issues of surveillance and privacy he aims to place beyond doubt the oft-questioned relevance of poets and poetry to the public sphere.

Sadly, the collection as a whole does not do that, and while there are plenty of poems here which engage interestingly with the Age of Surveillance, head-on or aslant, one could still leave it none the wiser about the momentousness of otherwise of the summer of 2013. Predictably, the poets engage with the many facets of surveillance with varying degrees of passion and disinterest, and while disquiet and urgency are sometimes registered here it can’t be said that the collection, or indeed any one poem, gets to the heart of the issue. Few find piercing words or memorable aphorisms that truly nail the experience of surveilled or surveiller, or help us to understand it better, although Jorie Graham’s Honeycomb, in which a writer working at her computer ruminates on what the NSA’s Prism programme can and cannot know or infer about her maps the emerging contours of a putatively new, post-Snowden, subjectivity. Max Hjortsberg’s Drone Poem, each of whose short, incisive verses are headed by what appears to be a grid reference, might possibly be articulating something as yet unfelt about the ease with which our locations can nowadays be pinpointed.

Several poems address the way that a shadowy awareness of one’s “data double”—of having been reduced by algorithms to a matrix of salient points, ready for targeting—can diminish a person’s sense of self. Amy King (p. 123), in what seems to be a comment on consumer surveillance and data-driven marketing moves from thinking “The way they watched me felt like love” to acknowledging that the process “smudges the details down/ wearing us the fuck, most pleasantly, out”. Dara Weir (p. 101) similarly connects “exposure” to “erasure” in any form of intrusive gaze:
It’s not so much that you spy on me it’s that your intention
has always been to erase me.
It’s always been difficult
To understand how your knowledge of me
Increases my invisibility.
The more you see the less I am there
The solvent you use isn’t apprehending so much it is
eliminating.

A clear contender for the best-in-the-book, Emily Abendoth’s Mugshot Movements, a history of detained people’s kinetic resistance to early police photographic technology, is not directly about the post-Snowden world, although it draws lessons that arguably remain germane to modern strategies of resisting surveillance:

Sometimes the gamest foil you need is your very own
body in recoil
Sometimes simply by whispering, an uncooperative
or ‘soiled’ voice
Can go blissfully undetected by even the choicest
of systems

Others are less sanguine about the ease with which “systems” can be avoided, evaded or spoofed: Jennifer Kronovet, for example, worries that our capacity for emotional expression will atrophy if we allow voice and word recognition software to influence how we write. Kent Shaw’s How the Database is Powering the New World Economy does not quite live up to its ironic title, but segues chillingly from innocuous household “to do” and “to buy” lists, whose trivial idiosyncrasies at least reflect something personal about us, to the vapid, quintessentially Modernist, inventory of the computerised database, chock with lifeless, objectified elements of fragmented selves. Paul Muldoon (p. 107), recalling a rural child’s experience during the Northern Ireland Troubles, derides the excessive border surveillance by British military watchtowers, “their scanners scanning our hillsides while we still try to scan a verse by Padraig Pearse”. David Clewell’s What If All Along We’ve Been Wrong About Tinfoil Hats is a wry take-down of all government assurances about the allegedly protective technologies they foist on us. The final poem in the anthology contrasts watching Coppola’s dismal-but-great surveillance movie The Conversation with the rich, beautiful moments in our lives when we “lower our lenses and drink the primordial air” of intimate human experience, but unless this is intended ironically, it is far too upbeat a note on which to end a largely sombre book.

Not all the poems hit the editor’s intended mark. The meaning of Surveillance is stretched too far in a poem about a child’s mute witness to domestic violence. Angels is more about a mature capacity for recollection in tranquility, finding a moment in which the true fullness of an otherwise harried life becomes apparent; the guiding metaphor of angels watching seems like a contrivance to get the poem included in the book. But Angels at least tries to be on-topic: there are poems here whose meaning is so recondite that no beholder’s eye could ever fathom a connection to surveillance. Overall, there is much truth in the collection, but sometimes told so slant that light just refracts off the surface without ever properly illuminating or penetrating the subject matter. It is as if, for some of the writers, that they had had the experience but missed the meaning, and it remains to be seen if hindsight bestows on even the better verses in Privacy Policy the late-won status of W. H. Auden’s (1939) Unknown Citizen or Richard Brautigan’s (1967) All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace.