

## Reviews

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### BOTH SIDES NOW: REVIEW BY DAVID HARMER

*Janus* by Catherine Ayers, 38pp, £8.00; Indigo Dreams Publishing,  
24 Forest Houses, Cookworthy Moor, Halwill, Beaworthy, Devon, EX21 5UU  
<http://indigodreamspublishing.com/our-collections>

So much to admire here, it's difficult to know which pieces to highlight. And the book's structure is elegant and direct. Pairs of linked poems set in the same month and often, though not always, separated by several years, look in different directions, as the title suggests.

The opening poem's blunt first line, 'What might never happen, did.' is followed a few lines later by these startling statements, '...cross-legged on the floor, / a space where I have nursed and fucked, slept / chemo off and watched a husband leave.' ('January 2015 – a new sofa arrives). However, 'January 2012 – travelling to Allenheads' offers a contrast, saying 'I'm travelling towards love.'

There is subtle lyricism as well: in 'March 2020 – lockdown declared by UK government', we read, 'Streetlights weep like snowdrops, / a beech hedge sings in a trickle of wind. / No moon.'

This mix of narratives containing delicate metaphor can also provide dark humour. 'May 2009 – a confrontation with my neighbour', opening, 'Kyle's dad berates a group of boys in my back garden', is a found prose poem about a front garden which speaks perfect Geordie, as the man tells off the stone throwing lads, 'Divvent ye think I divvent knaa what's been gan on doon that / back lane...' He admits Kyle can be 'a little shite' but continues '...naeone deserves the size of egg borstin / on his heed.' Of course Tyler's provocation is really to blame. He is wearing a Sunderland football shirt. As the dad says, 'Naeone likes a mackem. Fuckin / disgrace son.'

Time shifts between ancient history, childhood memories, Catherine's own family, walking through Northumberland's countryside and personal moments of great challenge. 'October 2019 – diagnosed with breast cancer for the second

time' is open and moving. Another mastectomy, and she is left at Halloween 'with freshly-painted seams / and sit in a costume / I can't take off.' The matching poem, 'October 2019 – walking to the castle' details the resilience of the isolated ruin, ending with a defiant 'Still here.' The analogy is clear.

The last poem, 'December 2014 – Christmas Eve alone' finds Catherine wrestling with lights for the tree and that in itself is painful, 'They're bunched in the bag like an addled brain. / Last Christmas it was easy: he shook them free,'

Cleverly, the last words 'Another year.' take us back to where we began; the first poem set in the next month.

These are tough, brave and often wonderfully lyrical poems. It's a superb collection, revealing real rewards the more it is read.

### IN A NUTSHELL: REVIEW BY THERESA SOWERBY

*The Shadow of Words* by Ana Blandiana translated by Paul Scott Derrick and Viorica Patea, 287pp, £14.99; Bloodaxe Books Ltd, Eastburn, South Park, Hexham, Northumberland NE46 1BS [www.bloodaxebooks.com](http://www.bloodaxebooks.com)

This collection, featuring the first four books of Romanian poet, essayist and political commentator, Ana Blandiana, introduces a vibrant, complex voice moving from youthful idealism and criticism of a repressive regime to a nuanced exploration of identity, heritage, religion and the natural world.

The importance of speaking out is at the heart of 'Torquato Tasso', described as 'The poet undone by fear' and Romania's own history of oppression is addressed in 'Avram Iancu', a nineteenth century lawyer and revolutionary, son of Romanian serfs, who refused to bow to Hungary's refusal to acknowledge the rites of ethnic groups. Surprisingly, this haunting poem in a minor key deals not with the firebrand period of conflict but with Iancu's depressed later years when he withdrew to his own people to play his 'voiceless flute with open, empty eyes' to a 'country tranquillised in dreams'.

Daughter of a fiercely nationalist orthodox priest (himself imprisoned by the communists) Blandiana's poems show a powerful but conflicted sense of religion and patriarchy. The speaker in 'Death in the Light' conflates father with the supreme being, who 'alone gave me birth', a figure also addressed as 'my brother' and 'The groom of my quest' in a poem full of sensuous longing. In 'Requiem', she recalls her father's innocent faith noting his belief that: '...in our chests under the soft bars of bone/ We all have flocks of birds'.

A preoccupation with purity, death and annihilation of the ego permeates Blandiana's work, expressed in extended metaphors. Snow is often the vehicle for this drift towards death, seen in 'Shepherd of Snow', whose sacrificed lambs are a 'needed libation' after which '...as decreed, we'll all flow away/ In immaculate, intended transmigration.'

While snow and the moon are recurring motifs, Nature – in particular Autumn and the world of small creatures (bees, spiders, crickets) – comes alive in startling images and imagined occupation of other bodies. A fascination with dissolution and transformation into new life is explored through the grape's longing to become alcohol in numerous poems and, in 'One, Two, Three', plums fall, rot, lose their kernels deep in the ground, until the closing couplet asserts: 'The death of a plum! / Its afterlife is spring.'

Influences from European writers are present but the poet who seems to preside over many of these metaphysical musings with their collapsed or expanded space and slippery identity of the lyric 'I' is Emily Dickinson, whose poems Blandiana has translated. 'Inside a Walnut' asserts that:

'...the whole universe  
Is nothing more than a chamber  
Dimly lit by a quince'

I am new to Blandiana's work but would strongly recommend discovering her. The translations are good with subtle metre, unforced rhyme and occasional acknowledgement that it's impossible to render a specific word's multiple layers in English. Viorica Patea has also provided an excellent introduction.

#### WHAT LIFE'S ABOUT: REVIEW BY D.A.PRINCE

**Kindling** by Julie Burke, 44pp, £7.00; Five Leaves Publications, 14a Long Row, Nottingham NG1 2DH [www.fiveleaves.co.uk](http://www.fiveleaves.co.uk)

A happy coincidence: Julie Burke was the Featured Writer in *Orbis* #211, with five poems varied in style. If you enjoyed her humour and playfulness with poetic form, you'll find even more to like in this debut pamphlet. The narrative arc of her life holds the collection together, balancing personal loss and pain with the joys of family and friends, along with an eager curiosity about the quirky wider world. She begins with finding her own piano ('Music therapy'):

in the second-hand shop  
its smile found me from  
across that boneyard  
of birch, maple, hornbeam.

and ends, 35 poems later, with 'Mum's rules for a long and happy life'. It's funny, recognisable, rhymes, and this 16-liner deserves a place on the National Curriculum: 'When in public / make no fuss. / Give your seat up / on the bus.'

Burke handles rhyme well, playing with it and keeping it fluid. She's alert to how form can be an asset rather than a limitation. 'Coast walk', a series of snapshots of Devon seaside in April, is a sequence of haiku where the form (not obvious) keeps the subject closely in focus and immediately visible. She clearly enjoys playing with shape on the page: 'Kite' is a pattern-poem, a child's kite plus tail flying in front of us, while 'Displacement activities' is a tall column of text built from the daily tasks which squeeze out the '...glorious / idea for a poem.' 'Thankful villages' describes the feelings there when all the First World War soldiers returned (villages whose memorials have no dead) from the point of view of the boots they wore: 'They marched away, fresh, / straight-laced and shiny black / with spit and polish' before they return 'battered and torn, soles worn'.

Burke's publisher deserves recognition too. Five Leaves Publications (the publishing arm of the energetic independent bookshop in Nottingham) supports East Midlands poets with attentive editing and elegant design. Buy this: in a troubled world it will lift your spirits.

#### DOES IT EVER FADE? REVIEW BY ANDREW TAYLOR

**Grief's Alphabet** by Carrie Etter, 71pp, £10.99; Seren, Poetry Wales Press Ltd, Suite 6, 4 Derwen Road, Bridgend, Wales, CF31 1LH [www.serenbooks.com](http://www.serenbooks.com)

I read recently on Social Media that it wasn't the role of the poet to write about individualised familial relationships. Obviously, this person doesn't know their history. We can look to Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* or Peter Gizzi's recent *Fierce Elegies* to see that elegy is most definitely still part of the wider poetic tradition. Etter's collection, in three sections, is in memoriam for her mother, weaving a path through from the poet's adoption to her mother's death, via her father's death.

The poet has been at the forefront of the rejuvenation of the prose poem, and (wide-ranging in terms of form), the book's strengths are in this area. For example, 'Heroin Song' (partially about morphine), with its refrains of 'I rubbed my eyes with fists' and 'I didn't think to hurry.' is indicative of those strengths: the engagement with the human experience; the emotions we all will encounter at some point.

The overarching sense of loss permeating the collection doesn't make it an overly difficult read. Of course, elegiac poetry by its very nature can be difficult to process, but instances of hope in poems such as 'Reincarnation as Seed' with its long lines reiterate the circularity of things:

begin in air, aloft float drift in an early mist a few weeks  
after the season's last frost [...]

swell with water and now crack! open into root and shoot grow,  
grow toward light drink it and O, my dear mother bask

*Grief's Alphabet* also benefits from the inclusion of photographs of Etter's mother, family members and Etter herself, photographed with her mother. This positions the poems from merely being black text on white paper with shared (or other) meanings. Poignancy is at play here.

Memory, obviously, forms a central part: lives led, shared and remembered. 'M is Usually Memory and Occasionally McDonalds', aside from being a stellar title, posits that memory can be triggered pretty much anywhere - 'a McDonalds in England, with a whiff of not quite nostalgia.' But as is often the case when dealing with loss, humour and wider details surface: 'There must be a way to talk about capitalism without disdaining everyone.'

Then Etter places the reader in the day that she shared with her mother, obviously in the late stages of capitalism: 'After the thrift shops, maybe a shoe store, Dollar Tree, and on home. / How we took ease. Our only thought, thirst. Slaked homeward, again.'

A profoundly moving, mature collection, it speaks to personal grief and yet is delivered with a sense of universality touching those who are lucky enough to not yet have experienced grief, as well as those touched by the inevitable.

#### WIT AND DEEP RESONANCE: REVIEW BY PAM THOMPSON

**A Full-On Basso Profundo** by Ken Evans, 76pp, £10.99; Salt Publishing Ltd, 12 Norwich Road, Cromer, NR27 0AX [www.saltpublishing.com](http://www.saltpublishing.com)

Ken Evans is an entertaining and compassionate story-teller whose frustrations at Society we share. Structured in three sections, I: The Oikosphere (family), II: The Anersphere (masculinity) and III: Americanicity. Titles from the Greek, these hint at the timelessness of concerns about family and identity.

In 'Bus Replacement Therapy', a booked trip goes awry. The speaker, on a 'replacement train', takes a place in Second Class, having refused the entreaty of a Greek man to join him in First, though at the same time, acknowledging his

own 'Spotty pieties'. 'The Emotions Macerator Running Vest' probes adolescent sensitivities via witty Sci-Fi imagery. A younger brother seeks to irk his older sister (who 'lords it at tea'), with an impertinent question about a training-bra causing her 'death-ray stares'; the Mum as 'deflector shield of silver alloys', and the Dad, 'whizzed, hesitant, equivocal,' wearing (metaphorically) the vest of the title. There are frequent tonal shifts. In 'The Wolf's Bite', unwanted news comes in a phone call about a sister's illness, lupus, 'named for an animal's bite'. When discussing it, the family members become a 'pack', circling in the dark. The poem layers myth, a child's anxieties and closeted family behaviours. 'Purple Iris' is a moving elegy to a lost daughter in a series of poised tercets, 'thought's a realm of stone, a cairn / I add a pebble to each year'.

Male vulnerability ripples under or on the surface, specifically in Section II. In 'Songs of the Wild', a note tells us that Ukrainian soldiers sent to the front are offered a visit to a sperm bank. The poem is staggered in form, as if to mimic a primal impulse of creatures to return to the wild, 'the impossible urge / to live.' In 'The laughter of Mustard and Sea Foam', shared memories of the poet and a male friend are ballast against ageing. There is wish-fulfillment in a fantasy that Butch Cassidy was not shot dead but lives on in Utah; no fantasy though in the high school shootings of two young girls in Wisconsin (SpongeBob Lollipops All Over America). The speaker, in thin air, acknowledges his own physical imitations 'Five thousand metres high, and air's / slow striptease in mountain light finds / my own breath wanting.' ('The Atacama Oxygen House').

A 'basso profundo', the lowest bass voice, is deep and resonant: a call, not a whisper, a fitting title for an absorbing collection where there is serious play at work. Ken Evans takes the temperature of the personal and the political, yet returns to what enhances and endures: 'home remains a flicker / of a kitchen light, radio on, some song.' ('The Optimism Principle')

#### SHAPESHIFTER: REVIEW BY PHILIP DUNKERLEY

**Hare's Breath** by Brian Kirk, 63pp, €12.00;

Salmon Poetry, Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, Ireland [www.salmonpoetry.com](http://www.salmonpoetry.com)

Perhaps the first thing to mention here is the cover: a portrait of a hare by Rosaleen Fleming, a beautiful work of art in its own right. Kirk is an Irish poet, short-story writer and novelist, who has won awards in all three genres. This second collection, published in 2023, comprises 46 poems, with the title poem placed first, and deservedly so. It captures one of those rare occasions when Nature suddenly provides a special moment, in this case during a cliff-top walk:

Then I saw her, shapeshifter,  
iambic, limber, crossing the hill.  
Frozen, lungs filled with wind –  
a hare's breath – I held it  
a moment before it escaped.

'Iambic, limber', ah, now *that* is poetry.

After that, however, the contents are less lyrical, more societal, mood-driven. First comes a batch which are mostly reminiscent of family and adolescence, then some relating to lockdown, plus a number with a more philosophical tone. The jacket notes talk of the poet's use of form and careful crafting, but many of the poems are free-flowing, often dispensing with rhyme and metre, more like prose poems, for example, this extract from 'Train Dreams':

When Denis Johnson died I went to my local library –  
built with money donated by the philanthropist Carnegie –  
borrowed a copy of *Train Dreams* and read it in his memory.  
All week I'd been reading his stories on my phone on the tram;  
gems buried in the archives of the New Yorker and the Paris Review.

Kirk can be quite introspective, reflecting on particular moments or events, as in 'Deepfake': 'I'm happy to mind my own business, / to turn a blind eye, so long as I'm left alone. / When people complain, I can't help but think: / *boo boo, you have only yourself to blame. ...*'

But there *is* also form, perhaps used freely. There are sonnets, a villanelle, even a sestina, written during lockdown, from which this is the coda:

After this summer of silences, you are primed to storm  
the garden's barricades and reach up to pull the sun  
down out of the sky, into your fever dreams, your hollow house.

['Dog Days']

Brian Kirk is part of the Irish poetry scene and it's interesting to read a contemporary poet from a country with which the UK shares so much. But Ireland is always a little different, for example in its mythology. After all, poetry, like the beautiful depiction of the hare on the cover, is, and always will be, a shapeshifter.

#### HOW TO BE A WIDOW: REVIEW BY JENNY HOCKEY

*After the Rites and Sandwiches* by Kathy Pimlott, 30pp, £7.99;  
The Emma Press Ltd, Workshop 4 Spectacle Works, Hylton Street,  
Birmingham, B18 6HT theemmapress.com

The pretty blue mug on the cover and the word 'sandwiches' led me to expect cosy domestic poems. Many are, but then we try not to recognise the home as a site for sudden death. I had missed the spilt milk, the mug on its side and found myself where 'Words no longer hold' ('How to be a widow'). Like a diary of grief, it begins starkly with 'It's cruel work/to kneel down/and hunch over/ a so-familiar body at the foot of the stairs...' ('No shock advised'). Then the stilted or half-registered conversations with paramedics and friends after 'I've been picked up and dropped/into a foreign land in which everywhere looks the same.' ('How to be a widow'). They're followed by death admin; the funeral; a ghost (which there isn't); the first Christmas, 'making a facsimile of joy' ('And then that first Christmas'); walks in the park 'looking to lull that bully, anxiety' ('Looking for a cure in parks and gardens'), and triggers for grief within domestic routines: taking clothing to the charity shop. The penultimate poem, 'Merlin in Mapperley Park', ends with, 'However much I try I can't/ make things hang together and yet they do: everything, everything.'

Particularly striking is how the absent partner's presence enlivens the work, filling the empty spaces left behind. An immense vitality is evoked in 'the easy way you lifted unloved children in the home ... made you seem like someone I could make a life, make loved children with' ('Interior décor'), 'The onion skins you trailed from kitchen to living room' ('Since you fell downstairs and died'). When the speaker pours his ashes under a park tree, then runs away, 'the illicit thrill [is] exactly what/you would have wanted' ('What I do with you now you're dead'). Through many such examples, the past and the couple who peopled it expand from the moment of failed resuscitation.

Poetry readers and writers will find much to inspire them in Kathy Pimlott's evocation of the internal and external landscapes of loss, through her craft. For anyone bereaved, this is an accessible, companionable collection which I hope will find its way to that wider audience.