



POETRY REVIEW

***Poppy: and Other Poems of Grief and Celebration*, 2nd edn, by Julian Nangle – with a preface by F.H. Mikdadi and an afterword by Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno; Wessex Media, Dorset, 2019; available for £7.50 + £2.50 post & packing from Books Beyond Words, 25 High East Street, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 1EZ (01305 261186)¹**

Reviewed by **Adam Horovitz**

It can be all too easy to forget the need, when in the grip of grief, to celebrate every facet of the person who has died; to step beyond the necessary platitudes of the funereal and into the nitty gritty of the life that has been lost; to look deeply at what made it special.

In this collection, Julian Nangle explores the minutiae of lives lost with a raw delicacy, allowing rhyme in to heighten the natural patterns of speech that the poems tend to operate most effectively in. The majority of the book is given over to an unsentimental, searching exploration and celebration of Nangle's relationship with his daughter Poppy, before and after her untimely death, but he also remembers and honours others who have died, including writers Helen Dunmore and Jay Ramsay.

Poppy... is not always an easy read, but the weight of loss is leavened by Nangle's willingness to explore everything, from the significance of newly painted double yellow lines outside the house of the departed, to the unreality of 'existence / outside the soul', from the pressure and intensity of hospital visits to

the moments where 'unconditional love jostles and elbows / its way' into the reader's presence.

These are poems that demand to be spoken. The conversational rhythms and rhymes that, on occasion, look awkward laid cold on the page more often than not come to life on the tongue. Reading them aloud gently unwinds the deep sense of intimacy that most of these poems are suffused with; even if the reader is only speaking to themselves, it feels like someone else is in the room.

This is most potently true in the sequence *Poems for Poppy*, which closes with 'The moment of death'. The previous two parts of the sequence detail the inconveniences that it is somehow impossible to ignore when the stakes are as high as getting one's dying loved one to the hospice, such as humps in the road, and sit in stark contrast to the achingly sad yet lightly stated final poem, in which Nangle sits '...close to your head, / As I waited for each breath to be your last'.

There are moments when the book's necessary rawness is evident within the structures of the poems: an occasional phrase that doesn't quite sit right on the tongue or in the ear; the occasional use of exact dates, which tend to take the edge off the otherwise universal thrust of the book; or something like the sweet-but-unnecessary-to-the-poem joke about a Romanian nurse taking blood that slightly destabilises the start of what is otherwise an ecstatic built-up list of the achievements of Nangle's daughter in the poem 'Poppy'.

It's not a matter of humour having no place in a book like this, just that the mordant wit of poems like 'This Is a Hospice You Know' and 'What Price a Ticket to Heaven?' make it clear how well Nangle can handle humour in verse. However, as Nangle writes immediately after the joke about the nurse: '...even this can't hijack the mood' – of the poem. Or, for that matter, the book, which essays Nangle's long journey through grief with a sharp

eye and a steady spirit, and which never once gives in to the lure of self-pity or overt sentimentality.

Note

1 The first edition, published by Alyscamps Press, Paris, sold out – hence this new, second edition. Another review of the collection, written by poet Gabriel Millar, was published in the previous issue of this magazine.

About the contributor

Adam Horovitz is a poet and performer who became involved in performance poetry in his twenties, appearing at festivals such as Glastonbury and Cheltenham Literature Festival. Published in many magazines, his first full collection of poetry, *Turning*, was published by Headland in 2011. Adam was awarded a Hawthornden Fellowship in 2012, and his memoir of growing up in 1970s and 1980s Cider with Rosie country, *A Thousand Laurie Lees*, was published by the History Press in 2014.