

**CRACKING OPEN THE SKY\***  
**SUSAN JANE SIMS REVIEWS A SELECTION OF RECENT  
POETRY PAMPHLETS**

*The Bone that Sang*, **Claire Booker**, Indigo Dreams Publishing, 2020. £6. ISBN 978-1-912876-3-6  
*Black Mascara*, **Rosalind Easton**, Smith Doorstop Books, 2021. £6. ISBN 978-1-9121964-1-8  
*What if?*, **June Hall**, Hen Run Press, 2020. £4. ISBN 978-1-9996903-9-7  
*Just Above the Waterline*, **Elizabeth Hare**, Live Canon, 2020. £5. ISBN 978-1-9999728-8-2  
*Aloneness is a Many-Headed Bird*, **Rosie Jackson & Dawn Gorman**, The Hedgehog Poetry Press, 2020. £5.99. ISBN 978-1-9134994-5-7  
*In Your Absence*, **Jill Penny**, Smith Doorstop Books, 2021. £6. ISBN 978-1-9121964-2-5  
*The Tying House*, **Lynn Thornton**, Poet's House Pamphlets, 2020. £6. ISBN 978-1-9073273-6-0  
*The Last Dinosaur in Doncaster*, **Sarah Wimbush**, Smith Doorstop Books, 2021. £6. ISBN 978-1-9121964-3-2

\*from *a Paving Stone Fights for Freedom*, in *The Bone that Sang* by Claire Booker.

This week I attended a memorial, then four days later a baby shower, the two inextricably linked, one celebrating and remembering a grandpa who will never see his grandchild, the other event looking forward to the birth of that child to a mother-to-be grieving for her father, yet excited at the prospect of producing new life. To be human is to experience losses and gains and it is in this philosophical frame of mind that I open this latest batch of pamphlets for review. The covers are a myriad of colours and designs, the titles intriguing. I can't wait to begin reading.

A piece of vertebra found by a herdsman in a forest, in the startling opening (and title poem) of *The Bone that Sang*, by **Claire Booker**, becomes, with human ingenuity and craftsmanship, an instrument to be played with human lips, yet lips are a part of a mouth that can proclaim false truths: "that walk and talk / like real children". One thing can easily become something else with human imagination: "Look up long enough / and the cave flips into a Manhattan skyline" (*Rock Beast*), "a handkerchief", from a dead mother "drops" into the narrator's hand "like a glove" (*Deadline*). This poet is skilled in the use of haunting metaphors that can expose the human condition and the term "bone", used more than once, contains as many complex layers as the material itself.

Bones make an appearance in the *Girl as Bike* poem near the beginning of **Rosalind Easton's** *Black Mascara*. Medical procedures and a sense of adventure are captured in quirky ways: "The stethoscope answered in fluent Italian, not a heartbeat, but the humming cadence / of a Campagnole crankset." This collection offers a wry look at contemporary life. In *Bra Fitting, Mayfair*, for example, "[b]ehind the cubicle's red drapes / the fitter twangs the backstrap of my bra / like David Gilmour appraising the strings / of a charity shop guitar." Details are concrete and specific. This is Mayfair, the lifestyle glamorous, yet like bones, can prove to be hollow. Waterproof Mascara can be applied, its container shaped like a wand, can be carried in a handbag, but will prove to be devoid of magic, and cannot "[hold] back the tide".

"Uninvited, you greet me / circling the web of hands / in the still spaces of the dance / to claim me as your partner" (*Stranger*). This poignant poem opens **June Hall's**, *What if?*, a collection that explores, responds to, and confronts what it means to be diagnosed with, and go on to live with, a chronic, debilitating and possibly life shortening disease. Every aspect is examined: what to tell the children (*The Truth Trail*), the treatment in the hands of the doctor who "runs his polished measure" over the poet's body and with words "chops through hope" (*Snakes*), the discussion of symptoms "*Is it better? /... / Is it worse?*" (*The Shake*), its interference in "love-making" and "driving", the way it can "ambush sleep" (*We Two*), the strange phenomenon of illness taking on a persona, an almost flirty "self", with a softer side and its own need for love and attention. The impact of science is also explored, with its ability to offer miracles and yet dehumanise and diminish (*On/Off*)

On reading *Wall Beatitudes*, the opening poem of *Just Above the Waterline*, by **Elizabeth Hare**, I am reminded of Robert Frost's poem *Mending Walls* and the fact that there are two aspects to everything. "Blessed are those who build walls. / Blessed are those who tear walls down", claims Hare. The poem prepares us for what is to come: hard hitting pieces about refugees and asylum seekers and the lengths individuals will go to, to attempt to reach safety (*Just above the waterline, Getting Here*); trauma masked by a limited command of English (*Getting Here*); kind but inadequate responses in the face of the unimaginable; the logistical difficulties of negotiating an inflexible system; the constant threat and fear and sense of powerlessness (*Reporting to the Home Office*); the strangeness and newness of a new environment to get used to and a new language to learn (*Leave to Remain*).

I always look forward to new collections by **Rosie Jackson** and **Dawn Gorman**, and now a joint collaboration in my hands. What a delight! *Aloneness is a Many Headed Bird*, is a dialogue between two voices, each speaking alternately. Impossible to do this justice in a brief review I'll simply offer a taste by discussing the first two poems. Rosie's opening plunges us into a philosophical meditation on darkness and light; the expectations and hopes of both the dead and the living, the spiritual merging with the physicality of sex: "Can anything lift the soul / into rapture the way love-making can?"; the seeming impossibility of graceful ageing "in a culture that makes death the enemy?" Dawn continues the meditation as she explores an afterlife much prized by the romantic poets; spirit merging with nature: "When I am gone, you will find me here, / where swallows swoop over dandelion clocks" and a description of what will be missed, "the sun's warmth / on [her] face, the tickle of cow parsley against / bare arms". Dawn's response to ageing and society's expectations in relation to it, is that there can be "a letting go... / a different kind of love, if we are wild enough to take it". I love that concept.

Dawn's thoughts on wildness make me think of Mary Oliver's poem *The Summer's Day* where she says "Tell me what it is you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?" so rather bizarrely I am not surprised when I open *In Your Absence* by **Jill Penney**, and find my eyes drawn to lines in italics: "*In the days before our wild and precious lives began to choke us...*" (*Things I See on the Hard Shoulder*). The poems in this collection take us into the aftermath of trauma, into the twilight world of a hospital intensive care unit where all you can do is sit by a bedside and wait if you can bear it. One voice out of many admits that she "experience[s] extreme synaesthesia", as she witnesses her loved one lying there in "a nylon gown" (*In Your Absence*). Voices, all in their internal world make this a challenging read but one that, like the dialogue in *Aloneness is a Many-Headed Bird*, explores philosophical issues and contrasts, light/dark, absence/presence, moving seamlessly between realms.

*The Tying House*, an ambitious collection by **Lynn Thornton** takes a subversive look at many of Shakespeare's best loved characters. Ophelia speaks from her death bed in the river "distorted by moving water", yet imagines an alternative future where she shall be "liberated / like a kite/ swooping low" (*Ophelia*). Ariel, the airy spirit from *The Tempest*, speaks from his prison in a tree and imagines "the power to create storms" (*Ariel's Complaint*). The Dark Lady (presumed here to be Penelope Devereux Rich) from Sonnets 127-154 is written about in the third person in *Penelope*, so we don't hear her voice directly which I found disappointing. I am speculating that this poem is about her unhappy arranged marriage to Robert Rich but I can't be sure. Definitely one for Shakespeare fans.

*The Last Dinosaur in Doncaster*, by **Sarah Wimbush** contains within it a moving account of people in transition. A way of life, (in this instance the coal mining industry) (*Strike, Near Extinction, Rosso' Youthby 1984, Hillards* and others) comes with its own language: "the language of the pony riders and jumped-up check weighmen, of Davey lamps and Dudleys, [of] oncostlads and / gaffers, of black-nails and snap-tins, and names like Arthur / passed down through time until [they become] more than a name" (*Our Language*). Where there is destruction there is grief and trauma, along with a loss of self. In carefully observed poems, characters are brought to life: the father who "should have been an astronaut" (*Giant Leaping*); the mother who passed on her knowledge of how the world worked to her daughter: "A spoonful of sugar or cake helps a fire to catch / ...the best thing to feed kids after swimming is pancakes.... / ...[a] pair of pants on top of your tights as well as underneath / keeps them up all day..."; the group of men who spend afternoons "on street corners / like old youths planning revolution" (*Markham Main*). I love the humour here but also the pathos.