

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



New Selected Poems

Dannie Abse

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About the Book

The year 2009 marks the 60th anniversary of the publication of Dannie Abse's first poetry collection, *After Every Green Thing*, and since that time he has published an astonishing range of books, including poetry, fiction, criticism and autobiography. He remains a writer of great distinction who is at the height of his powers – his memoir, *The Presence*, won the Wales Book of the Year in 2008. But it is as a poet that Dannie Abse is best known, and to mark this extraordinary milestone he has compiled a new and definitive volume of selected poems which includes new work combining both passion and maturity.

About the Author

Dannie Abse was for many years a chest specialist in a London teaching hospital. A poet, reviewer and playwright, he has written and edited more than sixteen books of poetry, as well as books about medicine and also fiction. He is the author of *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* and several autobiographical volumes, the most recent of which, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, was published by Pimlico in 2001 to critical acclaim. His most recent novel, *The Strange Case of Dr Simmonds & Dr Glas*, was published in 2002 and long-listed for the Booker Prize. In 2003 his *New and Collected Poems* received the Special Commendation of the Poetry Book Society, and *Running Late* received the Roland Mathais Prize in 2007. Dannie Abse's most recent book, *The Presence*, won the Wales Book of the Year.

Also by Dannie Abse

Poetry

After Every Green Thing
Walking Under Water
Tenants of the House
Poems, Golders Green
A Small Desperation
Funland and Other Poems
Collected Poems 1948-1976
Way Out in the Centre
Ask the Bloody Horse
White Coat, Purple Coat: Poems 1948-1988
Remembrance of Crimes Past
On the Evening Road
Arcadia, One Mile
New and Collected Poems
Running Late

Editor

The Hutchinson Book of Post-war British Poets
Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry
Voices in the Gallery (with Joan Abse)
The Music Lover's Literary Companion (with Joan Abse)

Plays

The View from Row G:
Three plays

Novels

Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve
Some Corner of an English Field
O. Jones, O. Jones
There Was A Young Man from Cardiff
The Strange Case of Dr Simmonds and Dr Glas

Other Prose

Medicine on Trial
A Poet in the Family
A Strong Dose of Myself (Confessions Stories, Essays)
Journals from the Ant Heap
Intermittent Journals
Goodbye, Twentieth Century
The Two Roads Taken
The Presence

NEW SELECTED POEMS

Dannie Abse

HUTCHINSON
LONDON

Foreword

Poets tend to have shorter writing careers than novelists. The intense vision of poets who die young remains strong, whereas those who write throughout a long life may lose touch with their original genius and find that their poems turn prosaic: the later Wordsworth for example. But Dannie Abse runs triumphantly counter to this tendency, and this is why the publication of his *New Selected Poems* is such a joyful and important event.

Just over sixty years ago, Hutchinson published Dannie Abse's first collection, *After Every Green Thing*, and in 2009 the same publisher has produced this volume, which contains Abse's own selection of his work from six decades as well as some new poems and reworkings of others. Such poetic longevity is remarkable, as is the fact that he has remained with this one publisher for all his original poetry and much of his prose. But even more impressive is the continuity and deepening of his vision.

Dannie Abse's early poems were steeped in the romantic lyricism of the 1940s and were influenced especially by Dylan Thomas. As his work grew, it became simpler and less rhetorical, but more profound – so that anyone who now encounters one of his poems can immediately grasp its meaning and enjoy its musicality, but then realize that this is only the beginning and that there are other, sometimes less comfortable, levels to explore.

His themes and subject-matter have always ranged widely, from the playful and the implacably domestic, through parables and mythologies (both Welsh and Jewish) to the horrors of recent history and of the human psyche

(the latter often seen from the privileged and lonely perspective of the doctor). But while his gaze remains clear-eyed his tone is always humane, full of understanding and affirmation. His work covers a variety of writing disciplines - fiction, memoir, criticism, medicine - but poetry is its heartland. His most recent poems, written after the death of his wife Joan in a car-crash, are a revelation. He remains, as Elaine Feinstein has said, one of our few great poets of married love.

I have been Dannie Abse's editor at Hutchinson since the early 1970s. Our first editorial dealings were transatlantic, when he was Writer in Residence at Princeton University and his volume of autobiography, *A Poet in the Family*, was being prepared. But since then, through friendship and the publication of seventeen books, I have come to realize the close identity of the man and his work and the great quality of both.

Anthony Whittome,
Hutchinson, 2009

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Earlier Poems

The Uninvited

They came into our lives unasked for.
There was light momentarily, a flicker of wings,
dance, a voice, and then they went out
again, like a light, leaving us not so much
in darkness, but in a different place
and alone as never before.

So we have been changed
and our vision no longer what it was,
and our hopes no longer what they were;
so a piece of us has gone out with them also,
cold dream subtracted without malice,

The weight of another world added also,
and we did not ask, we did not ask ever
for those who stood smiling
and with flowers before the open door.

We did not beckon them in, they came in uninvited,
the sunset pouring from their shoulders,
so they walked through us as they would through water,
and we are here, in a different place,
hanged and incredibly alone,
and we did not know, we do not know ever.

Letter to *The Times*

Sir, I have various complaints to make.
The roses, first. When they are ripped
from the earth expiring, we sigh for them,
prescribe tap-water, aspirin, and salt.
But when we lie down under the same earth,
in a dry silly box, do they revive us?
Their odour of rose-ghosts does not change
at all, and they continue to call out
in their red and white morse the old, old
messages as if nothing had happened. Again,
consider trees. My God, the impresario
trees. Just try, Sir, just try to cut one down
in Fitzjohn's Avenue at three o'clock
in the ordinary afternoon. You will be
prosecuted. Soon the Householders will arrange
themselves into a deranged *mob*. They'll grow
littler moustaches, Mussolini chins. Frightful,
and write oathy letters to the Council,
naming you *tree-criminal*. Yet tell me, when
the bombs met their shadows in London,
amidst the ruins of voices, did one tree, just one
tree write an angry note in its sly green ink?
No, they only dropped faded tears in autumn
selfishly thinking of their own hamadryads ...
BUSINESS AS USUAL was, and is, their trite
logan. Away then with trees and roses.
They are inhuman. Away also with rivers:
the disgusting Ganges bleeding from Brahma's
big toe; the Rubicon cause of a Civil War;

ne Acheron, River of Sorrows; Tiber that drowned
loratius the One-Eyed; the sweating Rhône,
hine, Don, and the vulgar Volga, not to
ention the garrulous Mississippi with its
latant river-smell. Even the English
ivers can do no more than reflect inverted
alues, turn chaste swans upside down
ke so many flies on the roof of the waters.
wans, however, *cannot* swim upside down.
t least, I have never seen them. Is this distortion
f truth deliberate? Has ever one river,
ne river, Sir, written eulogies of waterfalls
o plead for the reprieve of Mankind? And stars,
o indifferent and delinquent, stars which we have
ecorated with glittering adjectives more numerous
an those bestowed on Helen's eyes – do they
arn us when they fall? Not a hint.
lot a star-wink. They are even too lazy
o shine when we are most awake. Creatures
f night, they are probably up to immoral
urposes. You can't trust a star, that's sure.
o when the greenfly is in the rose,
nd the dragonfly drops its shadow in the river;
hen the axe hides in the tree with its listening
hriek, and clouds gag the starlight
ith grey handkerchiefs – I contend, Sir,
at we should pity them no more,
ut concern ourselves with more natural things.

Duality

Once upon a time,
There was a man who had two faces,
Two faces but one profile:
Not Jekyll and Hyde, not good and bad,
And if one were cut, the other would bleed –
Two faces different as hot and cold.

At night, hung on the hooks on the wall
Above that man's minatory head,
One wants brass where one wants gold,
One sees white and one sees black,
And one mouth eats the other
Until the second sweet mouth bites back.

They dream their separate dreams
Hanging on the wall above the bed.
The first voice cries: 'He's not what he seems,'
But the second one sighs: 'He is what he is,'
Then one shouts 'wine' and the other screams 'bread',
And so they will all his raving days
Until they die on his double-crossed head.

At signposts he must wear them both.
Each would go their separate ways
As the East or the West wind blows –
And dark and light they both would praise,
But one would melt, the other one freeze.

Am that man twice upon this time:

My two voices sing to make one rhyme.
Life I love and Death I hate,

I'll be with you soon and late).
Love I love and Love I loathe
God I mock and God I prove,
Me, myself I kill, myself I save.

Now, now, I hang these masks on the wall.
Oh Time, take one and leave me all
At least four tears from two eyes fall.

The Trial

he heads around the table disagree,
ome say hang him from the gallows tree.

ome say high and some say low
o swing, swing, swing, when the free winds blow.

wanted to be myself, no more,
o I screwed off the face that I always wore,

pulled out the nails one by one –
d have given that face to anyone.

or those vile features were hardly mine;
o wear another's face is a spiritual crime.

Why, imagine the night when I would wed
o kiss with wrong lips in the bridal bed ...

ut now the crowd screams loud in mockery:
h string him up from the gallows tree.

ilence! the Judge commands, or I'll clear the court,
o hang a man up is not a sport –

ough some say high and some say low
o swing, swing, swing, when the free winds blow.

risoner, allow me once more to ask:
hat did you do with your own pure mask?

told you, your honour, I threw it away,
it was only made of skin-coloured clay.

His face is a man, a bald juryman cries,
For one face lost, another man dies.

Gentlemen, this citizen we daren't acquit
Until we know what he did with it.

It was only a face, your honour, that I lost;
How much can such a sad thing cost?

His mask is a lifetime, my bad man,
To replace such a gift nobody can.

Consider the case of that jovial swan
Who took a god's face off to put a bird's face on

And Leda swooning by the side of the sea
And the swan's eyes closed in lechery.

Ho! No! your honour, my aim was just –
I did what every true man must.

Quiet, prisoner! Why I remember a priest remark
That he picked up a dog's face in the dark,

When he got as drunk as a man can be
And barked at God in blasphemy.

But it was a human face, sir, I cast away;
For that offence do I have to pay?

The heads around the table disagree,
Some say hang him from the gallows tree.

Some say high and some say low
To swing, swing, swing, when the free winds blow.