

So Much Shared

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Dannie Abse, *Two for Joy: Scenes from Married Life*,
Hutchinson, £15, ISBN 9780091931179;

John Fuller, *Pebble & I*, Chatto and Windus, £10, ISBN 9780701184919

Is it necessarily bad luck to start publishing half-way between two charismatic generations of other poets? Critics and journalists eager to affix labels might think so. John Fuller's eminent father, Roy, was initially seen as sadly late for the Thirties generation of Auden, MacNeice and Spender, but the Forties Neo-Romantics – Dylan Thomas, George Barker and the 'Apocalyptic' poets – were completely unsuitable company for a then leftist war poet. The young Dannie Abse had some affinities with those, but got into his stride only when the utterly different Fifties 'Movement' was emerging. In turn, John Fuller arrived after the Movement was well-established, but shared very little with the subsequent 'Group' or – despite a vein of unnerving fantasy – with the later 'Martian' tendency.

None of this unlucky timing has actually mattered, then or now. John Fuller's *Fairground Music* (1961) was one of the most accomplished and original debut volumes of the last half century. He and Dannie Abse, wholly different and still both at the height of their powers, simply ignored the labelling which promoted the reputations of those just before and after them, and wrote on exactly as their individual talents dictated. Each of their new books is (almost inevitably) about time, self-appraising memory, and mortality, but as poets flourishing in their seventies and eighties respectively they give the lie to the supposition, after too many early deaths and fallings-off, that you can't expect to achieve very much after fifty.

Two for Joy is Abse's celebration in verse of his fifty years' marriage to his wife Joan, killed when they were together in a car hit by another vehicle in 2005. Joan already features movingly in a prose memoir, *The Presence* (2008), and sixteen of the fifty in the collection of poems will be known as an intermittent commentary on love and marriage appearing in earlier books. These include, as well as various lighter pieces, the early 'Epithalamion', which has never seemed one line less touching for all its debt to the later Dylan Thomas; and also 'A Night Out', linking fulfilled married love with the reassurance felt when all is safe at home on returning from seeing in a Polish film "the spotlight drama of our nightmares: / images of Auschwitz almost authentic / the human obscenity in close-up."

What Abse has written following the bereavement, characteristically gentle yet sounding the occasional cryptically scary note that has recurred in his poetry from the start, registers all the more poignantly for coming in a natural way and not forming a planned sequence of elegies. The two names written in 'Condensation on a Windowpane' weep and blend together. 'Lachrymae' confronts the horror of the accident unflinchingly: "I called out her name again and again / to where neither words nor love could go." And loneliness is only ambivalently relieved by friendship in 'On Parole':

Dear, so much shared. Then suddenly, solitary
confinement with the cell door half open,
sentence indefinite [...]

I blinked at the green,
daunting, unsafe world that indisputably is,
then yours faithfully slouched back to jail.

The poem providing his title begins John Fuller's new volume and challenges the reader to come to grips with a 'Fragment of Victorian Dialogue'. Complex and mysterious, and at the same time curiously gripping, this treats matters like the difference between human and animal consciousness, our fear of illness whether imagined and ghastly or real and beyond our understanding, and also – it's fair to suppose – praises everything we experience, living or inanimate, as fascinatingly absurd: "the sport of things existing at all." This suggests a late-in-life relish for the ludic-macabre, which is in fact amply indulged in a book where Fuller's matchless technical virtuosity (as witness almost any of his rhyming) alternately delivers poems of disconcerting power or tender, jaunty humour – but sometimes managing both simultaneously. Our bodies all "surrender at last in rooms already booked / For them, gratis, at the Hotel Necropole." But before that we can still enjoy a walk beside a coastal course avoiding the golfers and "the ironsprung thlock! / And blind careless whistling of / Their dimpled missiles."

Fuller is too rarely noted as the poet to read for his sheer sensuous enjoyment of unremarkable day-to-day living. Here it can be the morning task of tending the inhabitants of his home tank in 'Fish Breakfast', which prompts the reflection that "we ourselves are quite mad / In our small experience of time / To have assumed a distinctiveness / Above these many material cousins." Or he will observe 'Neighbours' (in a manner intriguingly reminiscent of Roy Fuller) and "place them on a scale of threat, / Of comedy, or likely boredom [...] / Or ten empty Bells beside the bin." And he watches "some biscuit foil" he throws onto a log fire and himself blazes "with the simple idea / Of a locus where / There is very little to think / But this: this is my chair."

But if of course there is *much* to think in *Pebble & I*, behind the elaborate forms and weird comedy in such excursions as the set of seashore poems called 'The Shell Hymn Book' (the Victorian mentor in this instance surely being Lewis Carroll) or the reticent passions of what can only be domestic love poems. With both books to hand a comparison of his 'Puzzle' with Abse's 'The Moment' is interesting. Probably the predominant mood is one of trepidation; in 'Hendre fawr', a straightforward account of a Welsh landscape, "the future is only lying in wait / And as little to be trusted as anything unknown." But taking that road with John Fuller ought to sharpen the wits and flatter the senses of any receptive reader.

Alan Brownjohn's *Ludbrooke, And Others* is published by Enitharmon.

