

# Out of Hours

## Dannie Abse:

Wales' finest literary doctor

Doctors often pursue other interests outside of medicine with remarkable passion and insight. Very rarely, a very gifted doctor will be able to use their medical work to inspire that outside interest. Dannie Abse was such a man, his work as a chest physician in London acting in synergy with his evocative poetry. His passing in September 2014 left us with a remarkable collection of verse, full of insight into medicine yet humane and compassionate.

His first collection of poems, *After Every Green Thing*,<sup>1</sup> was published while still a medical student in London and resonated with Dylan Thomas' declamatory style. He then served in the Royal Air Force<sup>2</sup> and returned with a more mature voice in his book of parables *Tenants of the House*.<sup>3</sup> Much of this early work was inspired by his brother Leo's involvement in politics, where as a longstanding MP for Pontypool, he made huge changes to divorce and gay rights legislation.

Around this time, Dr Abse also began writing prose as well as novels, the most famous being *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve*,<sup>4</sup> where he drew on his experiences in 1930s Cardiff. This was filled with rapid-fire staccato interchanges between gawky adolescents interspersed with evocative imagistic passages, such as where the Rhondda Valley is described as 'naked, bony, the green grass pulled off it'.

Yet Abse's first work avoided medical topics entirely, instead he explored his Welsh roots as well as his personal experiences of love. His romantic poem, *Epithalamion* demonstrates his remarkable gift for writing a highly personal poem which could appeal to a universal audience. His description of his marriage as 'more than one, less than two', resonates with any couple coming together and is followed by a profound musing on 'the bailiffs of time' being the guardians of the rent of love that is due. A theme that emerges throughout is of taking his place with nature, his stunning image of a shipwrecked sun unloading cargoes of marigolds show his wonder and celebration of humanity's privilege to be on this earth.<sup>5</sup> It was not until much later that his medical work began to appear in his poetry, but when it did he hit a rich seam. During one of his tours, a fellow writer commented that he wouldn't know that Abse was a doctor based on his poetry. This surprised Abse, who believed that poetry should be immersed

in the world rather than retreating from it, leading him to begin to explore and confront some of the traumatic events of his job.

His poem *In the Theatre* describes in harrowing detail the neurosurgery carried out on a patient in 1938. The solemn yet sarcastic opening lines, describing a nurse giving false reassurance, set the tone for the poem to build through descriptions of the surgeon's fingers 'rash as a blind man' hunting in vain for a brain tumour and simply leaving 'more brain mashed'. The haunting refrain of 'leave my soul alone, leave my soul alone' represents the climax of the patient's cries eventually winding down, leaving the shock of the final line: 'silence matched the silence under the snow'. The theme of disregard for life comes through strongly, as does Abse's cynicism about people finding horrifying procedures amusing.<sup>6</sup>

The poem's refrain made it an arresting live experience and Abse was soon touring the world, promoted in the US by the same agent who had promoted Dylan Thomas.

Further medical poems with medical themes followed. *Pathology of Colours* demonstrates his precision in examining the varying hues of disease without becoming clinical or morbid.<sup>7</sup> Other poems are unafraid to tackle ethical dilemmas in the context of personal grief. *In Llandough Hospital* depicts the prolonged suffering of Abse's own father and asks the question 'why night with stars, then night without end?', comparing his philosophical questions to a child's wonderings.<sup>8</sup> As with many of his poems, there are many hidden agendas, following his saying that:

*'A good poem is like clear water: it tempts one to suppose the bottom can readily be touched with a stick ... yet be puzzled when they cannot touch the bottom.'*<sup>9</sup>

Abse retained strong connections to his home in Wales throughout his life, and in later years wrote a poem describing the M4 as an umbilical cord that connected Wales to the rest of the UK. Yet in 2005, that umbilical cord was the scene of tragedy, when his wife was killed in a road traffic collision. The first few years after her death were difficult, Abse felt he could never write again and turned down all speaking engagements. However, it was his writing that came to his rescue, and eventually his journals were published in a collection of work called *The Presence*,<sup>10</sup>

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described by poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy as 'written ... with a pen dipped in blood and tears'. It is a surprisingly joyful collection that juxtaposes his year of grieving and navigating life without her with powerful and often amusing anecdotes.

At 90 he remained a prolific force, producing the book *Speak, Old parrot*.<sup>11</sup> He mused on the passage of time through his own experiences of ageing. His line 'all pavements slope uphill' remains an often-quoted musing on the physical hardships of ageing, and acted as a counter balance to thoughts such as 'men become mortal when their fathers die'. To the end he maintained his craft of writing from 'way out in the centre' with 'one foot in the grit and one in the study.'

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