



**David Ashbee**    *Loss Adjuster*    bluechrome    156pp    £8.99    pbk  
**David Baker**    *Treatise On Touch (Selected Poems)*    Arc    156pp    £9.99    pbk

David Ashbee's collection, his second (the first appeared in 1989), is a reckoning up of past and present: hence its choice of title. Although divided into six sub-sections, what binds it together is a sense of 'a vanished era', and the impact of that era on the present. This is not to say it is remorselessly, or sentimentally nostalgic, although the poems fairly bristle with remembered chip-shops, fairs, steam trains, canes, antique-sales, old photos, fathers. There is even a kind of obituary section, including Ashbee's admired acquaintances, but also Eddie Cochran and Elvis. In one of the best poems, he recalls running cine-film backwards – something you can't do with a DVD, as far as I know, although Ashbee seems to think you can. This poem, 'Old cine-camera', plays a horse-race backwards, but also a marriage:

That's me,  
still standing at the porch door,  
the rest of my life behind me.

It's a trump line, nicely timed, and it's one of Ashbee's skills that he knows how to bring a poem to a cool, wry conclusion. As often as not, his poems start with a memory, as in 'The Shirt': 'My father owned this shirt'. They move thereafter at a steady pace towards a resolution ('Tomorrow I auction the shirt/ for a hospice charity').

What happens in between the opening and the close is always droll, although not always absorbing enough. Ashbee writes in an attractive, accessible way – these are poems which, heard, would make immediate and amusing sense. But for my taste, there is a little too much wandering off and around the point (the horse-race in 'Cine-camera' is an example). Sometimes he snags himself on over-complex metaphors. In 'Camera Obscura', for instance, we have

here we are on both sides,  
swaying round the corkscrew of our lives,  
a Moebius ribbon  
that drops our dilemmas  
back at our feet  
like a pleased retriever.

I don't think we could sway round a corkscrew, nor that a corkscrew is like a Moebius strip/ribbon, nor that a ribbon is like a dog returning what you've thrown. This occasional over-egging, some occasionally protracted ideas, and a general reliance on a three-beat line, mean that the poems don't resonate against each other as Ashbee hopes. Individually, however, their even-tempered angst is highly attractive. The poems stop and start, judder to repeated halts, but the voices, restrained and half-amused, hold you, and there is no poem without arresting lines, quirky ideas, unusual analogies:

And here a footbridge  
arched like an accordion  
plays the air's lament.

By contrast, David Baker's work – never published in this country, and culled from the first six of his seven US collections since 1981, oddly enough printed in reverse chronological order – makes demands on a reader, forces you to read him several times. He is both easy and difficult. The language is beguiling, and, if you read his work as small town/landscape poetry, you are quickly thrilled by his evocations of the Midwest, past and present. 'Creek In Town', from his 1998 collection, is a truly astonishing comparison of dried-up watercourses with a postcard image of a painting of a flood some sixty years earlier:

The sun silvers a few clouds at their hats.

Now streets spread wide by the creek like creepers.  
Drainpipes pour down the mud bars into cess.  
Tell that to the boys with their lines flung loose

who lean over the chipped concrete culvert  
and low, burnished water, nebulae of  
mosquito eggs aswirl at the surface.

Tell the white egrets, necks hooked like hoses,  
standing in a little sun on one foot  
beneath the flood-scored trees they won't nest in.

They're chalk-clean, calm, legible – like brief words  
of greetings sent from the past, spelled wrong  
but so elegant we smile to seem them at all.

This complex conversation between then and now (tough to distinguish which is which, I would say, at first glance) is what is most rewarding in Baker's writing. In a comparatively recent poem, he explores the 'moral harmony of nature' by setting a father's wintry outing with his four-year-old daughter, 'bundled and gloved', against the experience of American writer and thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson's first wife, Ellen, died, aged 19, after a 17-month marriage; after a year, he could not resist opening her coffin. Baker's speaker (who is 'full of fever, insomnia-fogged') investigates his own feelings, and those of his young daughter, and puzzles at the problem of the natural world – the daughter's presumable 'horror' at 'a deer carcass tunnelled/ by slugs, drilled and abandoned', the 'awful, natural/ fact of Ellen's death', his own illness, and the landscape ('burdock is standing/ as if stunned by persistent cold wind').

This poem is called 'Romanticism', and it is clear that Baker is using his own experience to grapple with the same philosophical understandings of permanence and impermanence as Emerson. His most recent work here is filled with quotations from the nineteenth-century figures who are, so you sense that Baker feels, neglected. The sensibility of *Treatise On Touch* is very delicate, very Emersonian, applying skilful contemporary metaphor and form to the old and still fertile ground around him. There are exceptions – there is a party piece, in which Baker, himself a jazz guitarist, structures a long poem 'Sweet Home, Saturday Night' so that it mirrors a wild, end-of-evening rhythm'n'blues rendition of 'Sweet Home Alabama'. Twin guitars mean

he can build different strands of thought through alternating lines; soloing turns into hectic prose poetry, buried in which we find that truth becomes harmonic, polyphonic, a texture of voices, a chord, song, a fabrication not unlike a grandmother's quilt.

It is quite a feat to get metaphysical in a song with a Lynyrd Skynyrd epigraph, and, even if the trickery here is more arresting than the ideas teased out, we still see how brilliantly Baker can fuse nineteenth century thought with contemporary writing. You will need to devote a great deal of time to David Baker, but once you have begun, you will become utterly engrossed. This is, if you like, an excellent primer, although I really do wish its arrangement was chronological.

**Bill Greenwell**

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