

# Stephen Torre

## REVIEW

Kevin Brophy and Myron Lysenko, eds. *Going Down Swinging: Anthology of Contemporary Writing*. Coburg: Hit and Miss Publications, 1992, ISSN 0157 3950. \$19.95.

In the seventies the continued rise of Australian “New Writing” was associated with the proliferation of small presses and little magazines. Periodicals bursting with experimental writing appeared regularly and irregularly bearing such names as *Nude Dodo*, *Ear in a Wheatfield*, *Etymspheres*, *Fitzrot*, *Rigmarole of the Hours*, *Your Friendly Fascist* and *Going Down Swinging*. The rise of the little magazines was mirrored in the eighties by their decline, and even *Tabloid Story* folded. But *Going Down Swinging* transformed itself into an anthology and survived. Now published every year or two the anthology has reached its twelfth issue.

Like most of its siblings *Going Down Swinging* was created to encourage new or young writers. As well, the anthology had a specific philosophy, as the founding editors Kevin Brophy and Myron Lysenko explain. They made lists of their favourite writers and of words describing what appealed about these writers: “The prominent features were failure, alienation, black humour and absurdity. The characters were all struggling but defiant ... “going down swinging” ... had connotations of playing, dancing and hanging” (1). The last work in the present volume, a poem by Marisa Faizio, captures the essential tone of *Going Down Swinging*:

Before you turn  
green and then purple  
Before you turn  
Into sponge cake  
and rise to three times  
your size  
Before you turn  
Into pools of gas and slime  
and can be taken away  
in buckets

Before you turn  
into a gourmet delicacy  
for snails  
You're breathing. (169)

Before you turn the last page of the twelfth issue of *Going Down Swinging* the anthology will have provided you with a rich and varied reading experience as well as a few sharp breaths.

The anthology is made up of a sequence of short stories punctuated by groups of poems at beginning, middle and end. This arrangement provides a pleasant sense of shape, allowing for an alteration between the intense and concentrated rhetoric of poetry and the more discursive nature of narrative. The editors have also created a subtle sense of thematic progression by sensitive sequencing of the works so that now and then (the effect isn't overdone) a poem or short story seems to follow on from and lead on to its neighbours. Sometimes a group of adjacent texts focuses quite obviously on a single shared topic, thus setting up an intertextual resonance. These structuring effects plus the occasional graphic and the wonderful colour cover depicting a figure plummeting down the side of a building ("Fall of Man" by Carol Carter) combine to create a most pleasurable sense of the text.

Opening the anthology is Grant Caldwell's poem "Einstein, Buddhism and My Stiff Neck." It deals lightly with speculation on the nature of insight, discovery and knowledge, suddenly interrupted when the speaker falls into a stream, breaking his concentration. The poem which follows traces a different kind of descent, from the English word "mad" back to its Greek root "mist-" which means "CUT INTO (LITTLE) PIECES!" (5). Succeeding poems explore the processes by which society conditions behaviour (as in "To My Son, Joe" and "I Am the Woman") or emotional landscapes of loss, doubt, loneliness or fatigue as in "Hat I" by Susan Laura Sullivan:

who lives in them those empty  
houses on the nullarbor where the  
train stops  
who lives in them those empty  
eyes eyes  
nose  
&  
mouth? (8)

The dissolution of self theme is given a literal treatment in the first short story by Jodie Kewley, when the narrator's husband is found "lying in a rancid pool of his own fat on the kitchen linoleum" (15). The only thing left to distinguish him is, in the words of the story's title, "A Foot, a Knee and Three Fingers". The fantasy or SF mode of this story is replaced by cold realism in Justin D'Ath's "A Prayer for Crocodile Jarvis," which describes a shooting accident and subsequent disposal of the body, but the guilt refuses to be so easily buried. The perils of life continue to appear throughout this first group of short stories in the form of a violently aggressive American in "Problems at Tom's Diner," in Intuitions of "the depth of the grave beneath you" (45), in "The Crawfish Moon," in the reversal in social status of the family in "Dirty People," and in the fatal neglect of the aged in "Uncle Digby's Tree-House." The two concluding stories in the first group use images of physical movement to explore the ways in which dreams and desires may be freed or imprisoned.

The editors next create a thematic node in the anthology by grouping together works on the same subject. The central group of poems is preceded by a graphic by Phillip Doggett-Williams: "Military Pyramid" shows kneeling women whose naked bodies provide a platform for the military hierarchy. This is followed by four poems written in response to the Gulf War, and three of a less specific anti-war theme. In a sense this section gives the reader multiple perspectives on a subject of both topical and everlasting interest. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it's the devastation of inner emotional and mental landscapes that is stressed in these works. The author of "Tel Aviv," Gilgi Hauser, was in that city when Iraqi Scud missiles fell, and the poem traces its author's reactions through "fear ... hate ... anger ... helplessness" (74). The response in poetry is perhaps as harsh and urgent as the human response on the night must have been:

I peed for the indignity of war  
I peed for the arrogance of politics  
I peed for peace

After

lying on the carpet  
stroking the cat  
rocking my son

I wept. (75)

Les Wicks' "Dirt Chess" begins by looking at the "barren" country on which the battle takes place, observing that "Most people on the dirt will still be there once the war is over. If alive" (76). But then, in one of the prose passages interpolated into this poem:

People fighting for the dirt don't live anywhere near it and won't be after any god-induced victory they may enjoy. Most of those who DID Vietnam still wear the dirt they collected. It mixes with rage and impotence to form a mud that the ex-soldiers and their families are still wading through. (76)

Balancing the two eye-witness accounts are two pieces responding to the televised imaging of the Gulf War. In one, an ironic tone supports the idea that television desensitises the viewer to the reality of war and in another a pregnant woman watching "Operation Desert Storm on the Seven O'Clock News" reflects on the temporary nature of her un-born child's safety: "Safe in his bunker ... protected from missiles, poison gas, sin" (80). In John Miles' "Flying Home for Easter" the irreversible scarring of the psyche caused by war stresses the marriage of the poem's narrator: after marrying him, says the narrator, his wife's second biggest mistake was "saying That Surely / Time Heals Anything, Everything, Eventually" (83).

The second half of *Going Down Swinging* mirrors the shape of the first half, sometimes echoing its themes, sometimes introducing new ones: art and life, alienation and dehumanisation, class discrimination, conservation and environment, crime and violence, love and sexuality all appear, though not as neatly categorised as here. Complementing the thematic richness is a range of modes and styles, from realism to fabulism, from the conversational to the lyrical.

The editors of an anthology face a difficult task: readers demand variety and diversity, yet search for coherence and continuity. The editors of the twelfth edition of *Going Down Swinging* have skilfully balanced these demands.