

Philomena van Rijswijk

I'VE GOT LUNG CANCER. WHAT HAVE YOU GOT?

Colleen Z. Burke, *Pirouetting on a precipice ... Poems of the Blue and White Mountains*. Seaview Press 2000, 102 pages \$16.95 ISBN 1 74008 0769
Mal Morgan, *Beautiful Veins*. Five Islands Press 1999, 64 pages (CD included) \$18.95 ISBN 0 86418 626 6
Carolyn Gerrish, *Hijacked to the Underworld*. Five Islands Press 2000, 68 pages \$14.95 ISBN 0 86418 580 4

In a reassuring interview with Delia Falconer, Ben Okri spoke about "this stubborn relationship with my own truth" ("*Whisperings of the Gods*." *Island*, Winter 1997). I returned to this interview whilst in the process of reading these three collections of poetry. Ben Okri helped me to clarify just what it is that criticism is about. "... it's not got to do with perfection," says Ben Okri "because perfection, that's not what art is about. Perfection is the enemy of art, perfection is the end; perfection kills art, it's not what it's about ... Perfection kills dialogue; it brings it to an end." Relieved by Okri's insistence, I set about finding my way through the words of these poems, to the stubborn relationships the authors have with their own truths.

If Colleen Z. Burke's poetry were a physical pursuit, then it would surely be yoga. Casting my mind

way back to my first yoga class, I recall being told to sit comfortably and to concentrate on my breathing. At first, all I could think of was whether I'd taken the chops out of the freezer that morning, but, in spite of myself, a stillness, an equilibrium, started to emerge from inside. Burke's poetry seems as easy to read as breathing in and out, but there are great monumental ideas and images moving just below the surface: "Under my skin/ mountains/ take shape" she says in "Mountains." In "Who's rational? or a Scenic ride," Burke gives us another clue to her soulful steadiness: "even gasping for breath/ my feet would be touching earth." Small wonder that a poet with this solid, unfussable stance should write a collection of poems about mountains; the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, and the Snowy Mountains of southern New South Wales.

In "Orphan rock" you can't help wondering how much Burke is talking about herself when she describes the castaway outcrop as "orphaned from her tribe." There is a strong sense of grief, both personal and communal, in some of these poems: "Doors bang/ glass cracks/ heart/ splits open." Using the imagery of the Bogong moth, Burke explores, with originality, the changes brought about by European settlement west of the Great Divide. She is a poet who seems to relish the names of native plants, flowers and birds as poetry in themselves. In "Tastes of Summer" the last few lines

could be summing up the feel of this earthy poetry: "... a potent brew/ of/ moonshine/ cold ash and/ singed air."

"Keep breathing for me/ trees! I've got lung cancer./ What have you got?" demands Mal Morgan in his poem, "Radiotherapy." In his collection, *Beautiful Veins*, Morgan lets us in on many of his closest relationships, but the central theme is the developing relationship that he has with lung cancer. In "Belsen Boy" he says to his emaciated reflection: "We are lovers/ from another time/ and place."

Indeed, there is the sense of another time and place coarsing through the beautiful veins of this book, for the persistent blood of beat culture melds with the new vocabulary of cancer. Thus, references to "Navelbine, Navoban, cytotoxic burn" and "chemo" seem almost nostalgic when coupled with phrases like "but I feel/ hip today" and "alprazolam for a buzz."

"A beer a smoke and a bit of Bukowski/ and luck happens like shit," Morgan assures us, as though reinventing a culture where his Belsen Boy might feel at home. "You didn't know it could be so busy in a home/ where someone's dying," he writes in a poem dedicated to poet John West. Many old friends people the pages of this book, while the ghostly figure of a partner whose name is Di drifts in some shadow world, from page to page. And there

is the unmistakable presence of that ancient father-figure called Judaism: "Alex says/ Judaism is two pillars one erect the other/ bent like an exclamation and a question/ mark."

With all this busyness, it's a shock when the author stops in his tracks and forces himself (and us) to look beyond the sorting out. "I clicked on print preview/ instead of new/ and saw an empty page./ It spoke to me" he says; and in "Death in Shining Armour": "You just don't/ hear it stop. One day you're in someone's kitchen/ then their life and then you're not."

And, at the bottom of it all, there's Morgan's relationship with poetry itself. You might think that, with death breathing down his neck, a man might throw his scribbled-upon papers to the wind and laugh hysterically. Not so. "and I remember he once said poetry took me/ closest to it was the only way through/ like a deaf man suddenly realising when he/ had ears he'd never heard a thing"

In contrast to Morgan's almost swaggering beer/ smoke/ bit of Bukowski, my own experience of these poems was more in the line of a deadly black coffee, a triangle of bitter, illicitly sweet, and liable to keep you awake for at least one whole night. Morgan sums himself up, simply, in three words: "I spoke truth."

Carolyn Gerrish, in her latest collection, *Hijacked to the Underworld*, seems to be a woman caught in some kind of hiatus, stuck between one part of her life and the next. "this chapter of my life/ is finished/ & i'm still/ living in it," she says in "Crisis Dreaming." In the poem "Tenebrae" she worries about "this dearth of pathos a mid-life autism."

In this collection, Gerrish concerns herself with those things that she has already lost, and others that she will possibly never have. She is unsparring in her analysis of the superficial, though at times there is a tiny glimmer of envy when she turns her attention on superficial people. "I sit on the side. here." she says in "At the Movies" and "if you sit in front of me ... I disappear."

In Gerrish's poems I found a refreshing contrast to the popular, simpering reverence for every possible misconceived sentimentality. At times I was almost moved to utter the now-famous words: You're terrible, Muriel! Reading the back cover of the book I discovered, to my surprise, no mention of Gerrish's wicked humour and irreverence. "But you wonder (as we are caught in the updraught)/ is it safe to live without gravity?"

Gerrish picks the bones of her relationships with her parents and the sorry process of aging. She exposes the vulnerabilities of her own loves, lusts and losses, and lets

herself remain exposed while waiting for her new life to put in an appearance. "time to come out of exile/ return to the tribe or/ form one of your own." The title of the book, itself, may give us a clue to the author's progress into this unknown future. There was once an oracle built in Boeotia and dedicated to Trophonius. Any questioner underwent a complex initiation, was dressed as a sacrificial victim carrying a honey-cake, and descended into a pothole. An underground stream swept her along some distance before she was returned to the light, having heard invisible speakers in the cavern. I can't help wondering what Gerrish's first words might be, on her return to the Aboveworld: "you arrive home, terminally damp/ Trusting your distrust of the world."

Diane Menghetti

UNTIRING WOMEN

Carole Ferrier, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary*. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1999. pp.394 + x, illus. \$45.00 ISBN 0 522 84847 8

"Comrades," Jean Devanny informed a Waterside Workers Federation meeting during the 1930s, "in the