

Susan Stanford

LAUGH AND FALL DOWN DEAD FROM THE TRUTH

Home Brewed and Lethal, New and Selected Poems, by Colleen Burke.

Black ink printed onto a slightly stippled grey gives us the cover. A nineteen-fifties' snapshot: four small children, including the poet, in a park or garden. Facing the contents page are two more portraits, one of Colleen as she is today, and another of her at about seventeen, posed with her mother. The first poem, a new one, is witness to forebears back to four generations. This book speaks out of the matrix of home and extended family.

But despite the children, the suburban lawn, the title warns us of danger. It might not be polished or slick, but home is real. It is where we can be our plain, or taboo selves. It is where women have spent so much of their time, brewing up all sorts of concoctions, including the sloeberry gin, which has Colleen "grinning wildly" at her friend in the title poem. If this poetry kills us, she hopes we (at least those of us who are "bold") will experience moments of glee during the process.

The gin and the friend are both Irish, and Colleen's work is firmly grounded in an Irish-Australian

perspective. As a brutally oppressed people the Irish have continued to repudiate the laws and values of their colonizers. All those high-sounding words that make up the rhetoric of law court, sermon and editorial have been used against them in violence. Similarly, the clever, literary, mostly male discourse, that dominated Australian poetry when Colleen was beginning to write, excluded a woman writer who left school at fifteen. In struggling to create a body of work that expresses what it means to be her, as an individual and as a woman, Colleen has come to repudiate more and more of academic standards and concerns. For her, these are bloodless.

The title poem of her first collection (1974), "Go Down Singing," establishes a defiant poetic that reproves herself for turning away from the personal, however messy that might be:

Instead I wrote words/poems
so fragile they scarcely touched
the page.
You had to look carefully to find them
Now I know they should have
leapt from the page
committing suicide
and we could have gone down singing.

More recently, praising Len Fox's poems she writes:

they looked
the world straight
in the eye—yet when I thought
I had them sussed—they bent

twisted or even
smiled between
the lines ...
Yet basically
it's the lack of bullshit
I liked the most about
your poems

Both these poems speak with and for a close-to-ordinary speaking voice. And yet the beautifully handled line breaks pull up the reader/listener and make them take notice. It is less then at the level of the texture of language than the quick evocation of scene and scenery, the ironic unfolding of event, and the exploration of personal touchstones that gives Colleen's work its flavour.

Others, Pam Brown for example, also challenged received poetry from a female and radical point of view in the seventies. In Pam's case, being radical involved her in challenging self and perception along with all the other givens of the establishment. What is distinctive about Colleen is how the lethal remains in the tradition of the illegal community still. She continues the traditions of her transplanted forebears, treasures their gifts and speaks for their bitter losses, bitter legacies. One sees her, as well as her great grandmother, in the lines:

walking the hills of Waverley, Sydney
heading towards the sea
looking for Feakle, County Clare.

But, as the Irish have always found, even home and community provide

insufficient refuge. Corrupt power
bears down on every side and

... there
is lead in the brain and
blood of my child
in Newtown

Colleen chronicles how her (and our) children's games are haunted by the fear of nuclear war. They are poems of experience. She speaks of love, resignation, anxiety, depression, loss, death—including the sudden death of her partner, which left her with two young children.

Part of the horror of this is conveyed by simple narration. Her eight year old daughter boasts:

"There was a man in my bed who was
dead and that's worse than a car or a
bird. It was our dad."

There is humour, but finally, loneliness. Establishment practices corrode from the outside. Community dies around her. Colleen reaches out to Ireland—and finds it can never be her homeland. She identifies with other marginalised Australians. She writes of migrants and the insane, and the discrimination experienced by Aborigines.

Sharing, indirectly, their experiences of dispossession and genocide, and finding a similar value in her ethnic community, it is illuminating to contrast Colleen with indigenous writers. Like Lionel Fogarty she wants to speak with a voice that is at once

individual and communal. Unlike him, she does not have a dialect that stands strongly against the usual domestic (as opposed to public) code of the oppressor.

Her solution is to pare back. As her style matures it becomes simpler, more anecdotal, less ambitious. She wants the facts, not the words, to speak. She wants to record her unadorned voice. Perhaps this leads too many individual pieces to sound chatty, or like the quick jottings of journal entries. Though even these—collectively—give a faceted portrait.

As we read through chronologically we see her accept the shrinking of her range. Affection, never untroubled by loss or betrayal, produced some of the most moving and complex of her earlier poems. But now, she has given up on romantic passion. One of the new poems makes ironic comment on, "The perfect relationship." It reveals an attitude that finds as much comfort in lack of contact and lack of expectation, and meditates on the prolongation of a chaste kiss brought about by the lingering taste of curry.

At their best, the new poems convey clear, easily accessible clusters of images. Sometimes these have the playful vividness of haiku, though with rather more metaphor and explanation. Where the poems fail is where the voice of the poet is contaminated—as one's everyday

voice tends to be—by common sense and cliché. There are still too many tired metaphorical expressions and too much opinion. The alcohol level is not always high enough, for us to laugh and fall down dead of the truth.



Rebecca Edwards

DON'T PLAY GAMES, I WANT TO BE WOKEN UP

Mal Morgan, *Out of the Fast Lane*, Five Islands Press, 1998

R.A. Simpson, *The Impossible and Other Poems*, Five Islands Press, 1998

Deb Westbury, *Surface Tension*, Five Islands Press, 1998

Jordie Albiston, *The Hanging of Jean Lee*, Black Pepper, 1998

Ouyang Yu, *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet*, Wild Peony, 1997

Many poems in *Out of the Fast Lane* are addressed to Morgan's friends and acquaintances, most of them famous in the literary world. This sort of name-dropping can be dreary, and the easy, intimate tone becomes an excuse for slackness in poems such as "Homunculus": "safeway/ is not a poem/ the op-shop/ is not a poem,/ too commercial."