



## Occasional poetics

### Wishbone dance: new and selected medical poems

Glen Downie

Wolsak and Wynn, Don Mills, Ont; 1999

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In *Wishbone Dance* Glen Downie selects medical poems from his previous volumes — *An X-Ray of Longing* (1987), *Heartland* (1990) and *The Angel of Irrational Numbers* (1991) —and intersperses them with new ones. He has toiled at innumerable menial tasks, as the book cover and introduction will have us know; he also obtained a degree in social work and thereby gained access to the medical world. Working as a counsellor in various hospitals, most notably at a cancer clinic, Downie has had the opportunity to document, as an observer, the human struggle of illness.

Downie's vignettes are written with a measure of empathy and with the mysteriousness of the good poet: knowing he can't approximate another's experience, he dramatizes as the facts allow and only then ensnares us with observed truth. In "Worker Classification: Material Handler," he declares himself as a member of the working class:

We work in the world you and I handling  
coal chandeliers razor blades hamburger  
whatever they ask us to carry sort shovel

From this vantage point he then deftly links his blue-collar experience to white-coat medical work:

Pat cuts off a cancerous breast —  
the day's work has begun how does it feel  
when a severed breast slips off into your hand?

Effectively, Downie is saying, "I see this as poet, and now I'll comment on it." It's fortunate for the reader that his comments are often worthwhile, as in the conclusion of the same poem:

This is the way the world works: you build a  
house  
As I tear one down we need each other  
Hands must be full of something

In these links to manual experience we are blessed with an eloquent labourer magically deposited into a poetic frontier.

Several of the poems are hindered by missteps. Asking rhetorical questions in verse is a perilous exercise. The poet should show, not tell (or ask). Compared to his otherwise evocative, lithe passages, Downie's direct questioning of the reader about one bad thing or another invites bathos. The easy, awkward questions of "Diagnosis: Heart Failure" are an example:

Complaints in all her systems (listen  
to her chest The fussy old sweet  
heart's congested) Can you cough up love?  
Can you produce anything for us?

*Wishbone Dance* is arranged in several sections that reflect his experience in the health care realm. Many of the poems in the "Learning Curve Journal" component of the collection are woefully smallish — a few lines long, they add nothing to their context. Others suffer from obviousness. The second learning-curve poem, quoted here in its entirety, announces the failure of the series:

They introduce you to the water  
by throwing you  
in the deep end

Welcome to the life  
Welcome to the work

A near-death experience  
followed by another  
& another  
& another

Redundant and clumsy, this poem is characteristic of a sequence that consists of weird, unrelated and jarring lines that conjure only frustration at the poet's unevenness, one moment eliciting a gasp at

a particular phrasing, the next provoking a groan as the poet imperfectly presents what is better omitted. This is true of a few of the other poems in the book. They grapple with sentimentality and lose, but they promise much.

But the poems that elicit gasps do deserve comment. In "Louise," Downie begins by describing an incident at a nursing station in which a staff member, commenting on an elderly patient with the mind of a child, says "Shoot me if I get like that." Downie delivers:

Let go now  
before hospital policy changes  
& nurses patrol the wards with guns in their  
hands  
Tracking down their own echoes:  
*Shoot me if I get like that*

It is in passages like this that Downie succeeds with the poetic turnaround of dimes, leading us one way and then brutally deflecting our expectations. When Downie decides to do this, he does it admirably, and like few contemporary Canadian poets.

In this collection, it's apparent that a distinguished poet has declared himself for quantification, for refutation. There are worthwhile poems here, a handful that defy comment. Wolsak and Wynn were right to publish this collection; several of the poems are prodigious exhibits of meaning, quoting life in distilled form and pummelling us with their poetic cargo. Downie succeeds often, and so exclusively, that his poems should become required reading not only for health professionals but for everyone else. In death and in sickness, he treads the words we're afraid to hear, the words that approximate illness as much as poetry can. Life breathes and stops in his poems; readers are left to discern their human truth, their significance.

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