

Kevin Brophy introduces *Ways to Say Goodbye*, by Anne Kellas

Delivered in four parts, this new book from Anne Kellas, might possibly offer us four ways of saying goodbye, or the parts could signal the four-way revolving door of spring, summer, autumn and winter. I suspect, however, that the four parts reflect four impulses, or four time periods in the writing of the book.

What I find upon reading and re-reading it, is a book that moves along criss-cross trails of observation, memory, silence, and grief.

The first section are poems of her own orphaning through the deaths of her parents. In the second are repeated winter scenes along with the growing presence of silence. And silence might be the most frequently used noun in the book. I am reminded that those great silent, whited-out landscapes of snow were the paintings that first brought to many people's notice the beauty of Claude Monet's art in the late 1880s. Kellas works silence, like a snowfield, into her poems as a presence that creates possibilities. In the third part, silence ushers in angels of terror and beauty. They stand mute in the poems as powerfully strange as the solitary angels of Wim Wenders in *Wings of Desire*. The fourth part returns to the grief of losing her son at twenty-one. But these poems, some years and a book (*The White Room Poems*) on from that death are perhaps less lament and more revelation.

Anne Kellas has an exquisite feel for the way a single word or brief phrase can be dropped into a poem's white space to surprising effect. And if Tasmania is that part of Australia that looks towards the white space of Antarctica, then the opening poem, The Prologue, sets us on an icy sea of enigmatic symbols in a world of extremes acutely focused and reduced.

Probably
I'll go that way
by sea
in a ship that sails in the night
and drops life-boats
like lifts down lift-shafts
onto storm seas below.

*

The sea will be glass
with ice breakers for flags.
If you look starboard
You'll see ink-rays, sparks.
My travel will be fast.
I will be lightning.

Kellas later writes of her mother who could once 'read the mind of clouds', that she has been placed in 'the machine for the reduction of complexity'. And of course we all long for

such a machine, even though we are terrified of it. The paradoxical, shimmering images in these poems do the work of understanding, grieving, and remembering in ways that are beyond being paraphraseable. Oblivion and knowledge seem to co-exist.

Anne Kellas' poems carry some of the enigmatic, wintry grace of a Wallace Stevens, but not his nervousness. There is something of the calm of a Nancy Wood in her work, though the wisdom (and there is wisdom everywhere in the book) is not nearly as easily resolved. Silence is this poetry's companion. While clouds and sunsets become messages, mist and wind are languages shaped by the silence of mountains and missing birds. In her poem to silence, 'On Hearing the Bells of St John's, New Town', what she hears from the brickworks, from the church bells, from birdsong, is 'An angelus of sorts [that] has called us into silence.'

The visual arts and the sweep of history are as present as birds and angels. At the centre of these influences is the iconic 1920 Paul Klee image, *Angelus Novus*—long known as an image of powerlessness in the face of a catastrophic present blown, violently into a future of 'sorrow heaped on sorrow heaped on sorrow.'

Kellas asks of this angel, in the longest and most heartfelt poem of the book, 'How could you be so beautiful?' and so 'soundless behind glass', recalling the opening poem's glass sea and futile ice-breakers.

In what country are we now?

Is this the world?

The poet asks of the angel.

And yes, we are in a country where the poet can say:

In the silence, a mist — the long breath of the earth
curled upward and sideways and down
in a green sleeve of summer
along the riverbank.

Kevin Brophy

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