Angels of Breath

David McCooey

Kevin Brophy
PORTRAIT IN SKIN

Five Islands Press, $16.95pb, 79pp, 0 86418 752 1

Andrew Sant
THE ISLANDERS

Shoestring Press, £7.95pb, 63pp, 1 899549 72 2

THERE IS A STORY that when the saxophonist John Coltrane remarked to his bandleader Miles Davis that he didn’t know how to make his solos shorter, the trumpeter replied, ‘Take the instrument out of your mouth’. Knowing when to stop is a key feature of artistry. But then, strong originality often ignores such maxims. This tension came to mind when reading Andrew Sant’s The Islanders: I wasn’t sure if it was too ambitious or not ambitious enough; whether the effect required was Davisian terseness or Coltranesque maximalism. Sant’s seventh book of poems concerns a fictional island close to a dominating continent. The island is remarkably like Tasmania (‘Three syllables, / no four, relayed as the name / of the island’), but it is too much like Tasmania to be properly allegorical and too abstract to be really vibrant. That is not to say that Sant has written bad poetry — far from it — but this is a curious work.

Leitmotifs create Sant’s world: tourism, extinct wildlife, fireworks and celebrations, shooting, bureaucracy. The island’s history shares a tension expressed in Tasmanian literature: an obsession with history matched with a desire to forget it. ‘The name struck on a brass plate / is echo / of an invasion; / the burden of place / it identifies, jetisoned / into forgetting.’ Colonial history, however, is curiously undramatic: ‘A conflict, close up / like a family at Christmas / which has got past / pre-drinks to the crackers’. This suggests a satirical tone (and there is considerable satire in the poem ‘Fifty: a work in progress’: ‘at fifty with death employs a comic tone of great subtlety. This is also evident in the marvellous comic poem ‘A redemption tax’. The figure of the Angel can certainly be facilely strange, but in ‘Wings’ it has a unique poetic energy: ‘My wary angel is confused by doors and shelves / and the cloudy shape of impassable couches. / When my angel stands beside me now its closed-up wings / are dark and coffin-shaped, condemned like dreams / to their own impossible existence.’ As this suggests, Brophy’s poetic world often comes into being through arresting contrasts: the priest is ‘tying the girdle round himself like a mountaineer’; ‘The bike beneath him is his insect-double’; ‘I climb out of the night unsteadily as if I have landed / here, for the first time, nauseous with memory’.

Brophy’s work illustrates an openness to fragility and a need for laughter. The former is seen in the achingly beautiful poems ‘Turning fifty’ and ‘Horizon lines’. Laughter is found in the marvellous comic poem ‘A redemption tax’. The poet’s ordination at the hands of the Australian Tax Office is a good joke in itself, but for me the funniest lines are almost throwaways:

My visitor who was wrapped in a wall-hanging of Indian design said she made everything herself. Even the cushions at home. It was a decision she had made. Immediately I wished I made everything myself too.

Brophy is clearly a master of deadpan, but his humour can also be more whimsical (a peculiarly difficult mode to pull off). For ‘Haiku and Senryu’ and ‘Advice to poets’, Brophy employs a comic tone of great subtlety. This is also evident in the poem ‘Fifty: a work in progress’: ‘at fifty with death still a distant cloudburst / you have a back and a neck and two knees that hurt … / at fifty waking early and tiring on a facile strangeness seen sometimes in magic realism. The

AS THE TITLE suggests, the shadowy condition of real life is at the heart of Kevin Brophy’s latest book of poems. Portrait in Skin is continuous in style, content and sensibility with Brophy’s two previous collections, Replies to the Questionnaire on Love (1992) and Seeing Things (1997), but where these were fine collections, Portrait in Skin is something else again.

Deeply rooted in experience, Brophy’s poems are neither realist nor confessional. His poems are often observations occasioned by the domestic — moving house, going to the laundromat — but they are never banal, and they don’t rely on a facile strangeness seen sometimes in magic realism. The poem ‘Wings’ has a unique poetic energy: ‘My wary angel is confused by doors and shelves / and the cloudy shape of impassable couches. / When my angel stands beside me now its closed-up wings / are dark and coffin-shaped, condemned like dreams / to their own impossible existence.’ As this suggests, Brophy’s poetic world often comes into being through arresting contrasts: the priest is ‘tying the girdle round himself like a mountaineer’; ‘The bike beneath him is his insect-double’; ‘I climb out of the night unsteadily as if I have landed / here, for the first time, nauseous with memory’.

Brophy’s work illustrates an openness to fragility and a need for laughter. The former is seen in the achingly beautiful poems ‘Turning fifty’ and ‘Horizon lines’. Laughter is found in the marvellous comic poem ‘A redemption tax’. The poet’s ordination at the hands of the Australian Tax Office is a good joke in itself, but for me the funniest lines are almost throwaways:

My visitor who was wrapped in a wall-hanging of Indian design said she made everything herself. Even the cushions at home. It was a decision she had made. Immediately I wished I made everything myself too.

Brophy is clearly a master of deadpan, but his humour can also be more whimsical (a peculiarly difficult mode to pull off). For ‘Haiku and Senryu’ and ‘Advice to poets’, Brophy employs a comic tone of great subtlety. This is also evident in the poem ‘Fifty: a work in progress’: ‘at fifty with death still a distant cloudburst / you have a back and a neck and two knees that hurt … / at fifty waking early and tiring on a facile strangeness seen sometimes in magic realism. The
There is little to fault in this extraordinary collection: a couple of poems (no more) strike me as failures; no one picked up that the first lunar landing didn’t occur in 1968; and the cover is pretty awful. (Why are the covers of Five Islands Press books so consistently unappealing?)

Brophy’s delicacy of tone and intellectual energy sometimes produce a kind of surrealism. In ‘As they say’ and ‘To say’, the surreal play of language entirely makes up each poem, but even here the ‘real world’ isn’t replaced so much as the source of the surreal (‘the longer they dog you / the more swimming makes sense’). But sometimes Brophy’s eye for the nuances of experience is artistry itself. This can be both utterly familiar and profoundly moving, as in the description (from ‘Morning’) of the poet walking his children to school:

At school they kiss me, business-like as birds,
and leave me by the school fence
with other parents also suddenly at a loss
but wanting not to show it. I want to shout a last message —
some kind of reminder to them.

Such small losses are shadowed by larger ones. Dedicated to the poet’s late sister (for whom there is an elegy), this collection is deeply marked by loss and death, seen in the book’s centrepieces: ‘Why I am a poet’ and ‘What to do when you’re told it’s not cancer’ (the last stanza of which is in itself a minor masterpiece).

‘Why I am a poet’ is a kind of mini künstlerroman. An extended prose poem, it shows the ambivalent condition of the life of words (something central to Brophy’s important critical work, Creativity, 1998): ‘dead in the endless life of words, it was not easy to know what to do with my life.’ The poet, as altar boy and then novitiate, learns the sacred power of language, but also its connection with death, and its inability to redeem the real world, as the sister’s death so poignantly shows.

Portrait in Skin is a superb book. It powerfully illustrates the strangely antithetical conditions of life — the shadowy life of things. In the end, the loss recorded in these poems is also the source of comedy and love. Stylistically, Brophy brings to mind both Coltrane’s ‘sheets of sound’ and Davis’s wit and lyricism. In Brophy’s hands, the instrument of poetry produces a strange and powerful sound, like the plaster angel over the sister’s grave that sings:

the awful prayers no angel could compose
for death up here is still
these nights of secret work
somewhere outside of us.