Knowing Your Budgie

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Aileen Kelly
City and Stranger
Five Islands Press, $16.95 pb, 88 pp 0 86418 798 X

Stephen McInerney
In Your Absence: Poems 1994–2002
Indigo, $18 pb, 53 pp 1 74027 145 9

Deborah Westbury
Flying Blind
Brandl & Schlesinger, $22.95 pb, 63 pp, 1 876040 36 X

‘SOME METEORITES make it to the surface simply because they’re so small that they literally float to the ground. There are thousands of these interplanetary particles in the room you’re in now, stuck to your clothes, in your hair, everywhere.’ This startling piece of information introduces Aileen Kelly’s ‘Notes from the Planet’s Edge’ in her new book, City and Stranger, whose cover features Russell Drysdale’s iconic image of Woman in a Landscape. This bushwoman, then, is stuck with interplanetary particles or, as Kelly puts it, ‘the invisible sift of space’. Drysdale’s woman is transformed from the Australian legend in the dirt-coloured smock, wearing those oddly impractical white shoes, into a figure framed by an immense and moving universe. We look for this in poetry — the breaking of frames, the pleasure of surprise and discovery, and the contest between language and experience.

This is Kelly’s second book after her prizewinning Coming up for Light (1994). The poetry seems more complex, more ambitious, no less poised and measured, but less convinced of William Carlos Williams’s troublesome dictum, ‘No ideas but in things!’ There are ideas here, and many things, but mostly there is the intimate care Kelly takes with language. The book is dedicated to her parents, ‘Tops and Tom Kelly who handed on their belief that words matter’, and this mattering is there in the poems, slowing each one to a pace often doubly marked by line breaks and ends of phrases.

Kelly repeatedly shows that she understands the expectation or constructed naturalness of a movement to a rhetorical rise at the end of each poem detailing personal observations and feelings. ‘Scarecrow’, for instance, ends with the following stanza: ‘Now you’ve narrowed me / into the dead end of my kingdom / I’ll be standing / my arms this far apart / to measure your echoing life / as the days crawl in through my eyes.’

With this sureness of craft, and a vivid painterly touch that’s unafraid of the stink and viscera of life, Kelly occasionally shifts words around the page, using slashes and collapsing some words (‘could’ to ‘cd’). Mostly, however, these poems speak directly to the reader. Kelly’s new book will only strengthen her reputation and attract more readers.

Deborah Westbury’s fourth book is fast, terse and intense, and heated by the surrealism of the everyday. Just as Elizabeth Bishop gave up on European surrealism because, she said, she found enough strangeness on her own street, Westbury’s poetry is down-to-earth in its strangeness. The early poems are set in the Wollongong Port Kembla area, where ‘the sulphurous air clings / like infatuation’ and second-generation Yugoslav boys are ‘showing off their loud flash cars; / not going far from home / but going fast’. The intense and sensual strangeness is there in one of the smaller poems, ‘Humidity’, a wildly surreal extended image:

The sky was so wet and full
it trembled like an oyster
hanging from a fork.

And I wished for a mouth wide enough
to encompass the fat-oyster sky,
to slide it over my tongue,
to crush it on the roof of my mouth
and swallow it whole.

‘Crime & Punishment’, about a shopping mall and a supermarket, creeps up on us like a picture of hell. Westbury does not display the same craft or craftiness, or careful phrasing, we find in Kelly’s poetry, but rather an intensity that often pulls a poem apart, closing not with a flourish of imagery but a desperate last word. In ‘her next door’, the poet can hear through their shared wall her neighbour’s ‘bath filling up /
and the squeak of her wide arse / on the porcelain’, and
imagines ‘the soft mollusc of her body / curling into an arm-
chair / in front of the soaps’. The strangeness, the everyday
horrors, are not just there for readers to cope with, as so many
easy manipulations, but the poet herself is at a loss to know
how to deal with them or to make poetry from them.

In the later part of the book, the poems evoke the Katoomba
region and Varuna Writers’ Centre, where Westbury writes of
a woman ‘who inhabited / the room in such a way / that when
she left / it was as if she had never been there / or even
dreamed of it’. You cannot enter these poems and not be
inhabited by them. Westbury’s voice is strong, what she
notices is uncompromising, and her writing is touched by a
kind of despair at doing justice to any of it.

In Your Absence, Stephen McInerney’s first book of po-
etry, carries endorsements from Les Murray and Robert Gray
on the back cover. While Kelly can dazzle and seduce with
intellectual risks and the physicality of her imagery, and
Westbury brings her determined gaze and intelligent ear to
what’s going on around us, McInerney shares some of his
rambling thoughts or makes gentle prods at insight or memory.
One of the disappointments of McInerney’s poetry is the
predictably apposite adjective. Wheels are whirring, a winter
morning is cold, hailstones are sharp. The poetry is not bereft
of inventiveness, but it is insufficient to thicken or complicate
the writing. There is a repeated formula at work in these
poems: images are presented, they are linked to a memory, and
a question or idea is made explicit. There are not enough
invisible particles clinging to this poetry. Each poem reads
like a lesson: the one on ‘worms’ even ends with ‘Amen’. The
ideas and observations are not informative, engaging, ironic
or even strange enough to captivate this reader. Here are the
opening lines of ‘Budgerigar’:

Most animals and birds just play a part
Without a thought of whether it is long
Or short, if it amounts to art,
Or if it in the end is right or wrong.

The poem predictably reminds us of the cruel unnatural-
ness of caging birds (‘Despite her genes, this bird will never
fly’), and ends with an image reminiscent of Rilke’s poem of
the caged panther (‘The world beyond ourselves stirs here,
inside’). I wanted the poem to enter more inarticulately into
the unknowingness of this budgerigar.