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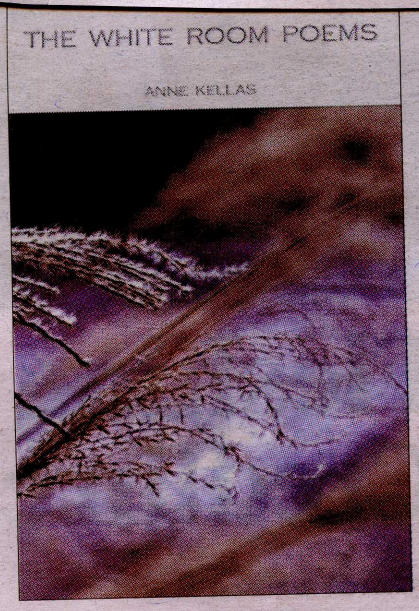
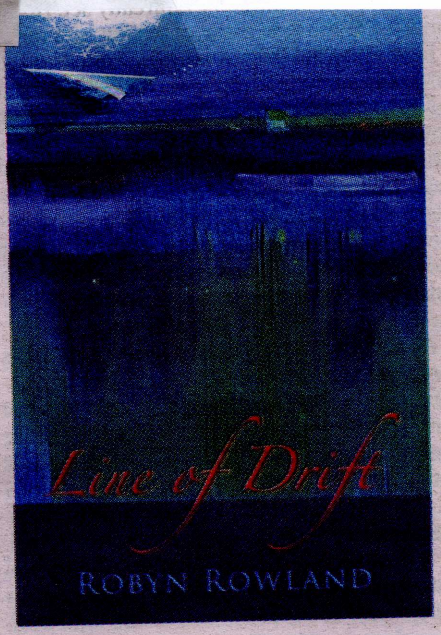
Bereavement, duality and ironies of fate





The White Room Poems (Walleah Press, 72pp, $20) is Anne Kellas's third collection in 26 years. Originally from South Africa (where she published her first book) and now based in Tasmania, Kellas has written here what amounts to a *livre compose* expressing her grief following the drug-related death of her son in Switzerland in 2006. It's the book no poet, however talented, wants to write. In an unusually direct stanza, Kellas notes: "Some friends can't visit / for fear of contagion / for I am every mother's / worst living nightmare, / says one" (*The Vision Tree*).

Fortunately, Kellas's technique is generally more than adequate for the intensity of her grief and the book is cleverly arranged in six sections, only one of which is not a prelude or an epilogue to the central event. The explicitness in the excerpt just quoted is generally avoided in favour of a metaphorical metaphysicality. Often only landscapes and weather serve to carry the burden, to "objectify" the emotions, as TS Eliot recommended. The following couplet is typical: "A sky the colour of a war painting's background / starts to outweigh the clouds the colour of smoke" (*Half Moon at Dawn*).

Part four, The White Room, the book's central section, is located in the discordantly charming scenery of Switzerland, where all is "bright and sunny in Zurich". Here the poet experiences the July landscapes and weather that her son had been enjoying just a few days earlier: "Here in the garden — here they'd stood, / with beers in hand, / so carefree, near the garden pond."

Kellas goes on to describe delays at the Australian embassy in facilitating the repatriation of her son's body. "People like you, they say by phone — / and it begins, the official snub. / For this is a death / involving drugs?" Meanwhile, "Bells ring each hour / and each half hour / and each quarter hour / through every bone of my son's body / God-ready. Lying waiting / nothing more than cloud-light / light now, snowless in the summer heat" (*To the Mountain*).

Perhaps only once does the poet overreach, when she says, in *Definition of a Mountain*: "And I swam, / toward the halcyon reverend day of rainbow". Nearly always elsewhere there is a sure self-discipline that consistently intensifies the reader's sense of an unbearable grief.

Kevin Hart, on the back cover, mentions the influence on these poems of the German-Jewish-Romanian poet Paul Celan (1920-70), but Kellas's grief is more individual and less densely complex in expression. We don't need to reach for comparisons to acknowledge that Kellas is here using poetry in one of the most important ways: to express the unbearable in words that are almost, but never quite, equal to their task.

John Foulcher's imprimatur on the back of Robyn Rowland's **Line of Drift** (Doire Press, 111pp, $22) correctly describes it as a high-water mark in her writing. Now an Irish-Australian dual citizen, Rowland has at last absorbed the country she's been visiting for 33 years and can use its material as authentically as any poet living there, one suspects.

Her dualism is especially emphasised in the book's first section, Here and There, where the poems alternate between the two countries. In Rowland's Irish landscape and/or weather poems particularly there is a lyrical density proceeding from both love and a deep knowledge.

The key to this intensity is probably to be found in *The Poem: In Defence of Excess* where the poet explicitly rejects advice to "scrape it thin" or "discipline it to cleverness". In the third stanza the poet demands fiercely: "Why should I tighten the poem, / take the deco out of it, un-brocade it, / tidy up the baroque flourish, / when all day long / everything I see is layer on layer of excess, / the ridiculous glory of peacock feathers, / a mackerel's opalescent skin?"

One answer to this impatient question is that, occasionally, the poet may go over the top and generate a less-than-successful poem — as, for instance, occurs at the end of Rowland's Australian offering *Lunar Lullaby*: "I seem to sleep in the crease of / sarong on a hot night / suddenly soothing cool, / and the silvered sound / of waves-made-moonlight / calms the heated heart". To this ear these lines, with their syntactical uncertainty and their overload of alliteration and assonance, do indeed sound "excessive" and thus less than convincing.

This is far from the case, however, with Rowland's powerful protest poem *The Long Walk*, which presents, riskily but effectively, a contrast to Tennyson's lines "Into the valley of Death / Rode the six hundred". Only five years before Tennyson's "glorious" episode in British imperial history was the Irish famine, when oats and barley were being exported despite, the starvation caused by the repeated failure of the potato crop. Rowland pictures a winter straggle of 600 starving men, women and children, only 100 of whom arrive at their destination. The poem's narrative develops from stanza to stanza but the third is typically powerful: "In the rage of a storm it was hard to see if skeletons they were, or / walking dead, spirits through which the wind blew as if their bones / were all that held them up, and try though it may, / the wind could play a tune on these bones, only the / clacking beat of a funereal march as / into the valley of death / scraped the 600."

It's also interesting to see the inversion of word order in "it was hard to see if skeletons they were". This is not an affectation; it's a sign of how much Rowland is now an Irish poet as much as she is an Australian one. *Line of Drift* is a rich and accomplished book — equalled only by the best of Vincent Buckley's earlier explorations of similar contradictions and passions.

Frank Russo's first collection, **In the Museum of Creation** (5 Islands Press, 96pp, $25) is an ambitious offering in which most of the poems evoke the ironies implicit in museums, art galleries and dead authors' houses. They are all potentially rewarding areas for poetry, though Russo must be aware of how hot the competition is here, including from Jorge Luis Borges and our own Alex Skovron. In Russo's best poems — for instance, *Proust's Bedroom* and *Walking through the Anne Frank House* — the poet goes well past the more obvious ironies, preferring to use them