

My name is Amanda Johnson. Welcome to the launch of Professor Kevin Brophy's new book, *What Gives Us Time*, published by the fine new poetry press GloriaSMH, which I hope all of you will rush to support. Small publishing is always a brave, wearying, joyful undertaking as many of you here know. I congratulate Jacinta Le Plastrier for publishing this exquisite book. Long life to the press, Jacinta, and I hope it will be a case of *Gloria in Excelsis Deo!*

Now. We need to talk about Kevin! Has that been said before? I think it has! The esteemed poetry critic Martin Duwell, alluding to the poet's Irish Catholic upbringing, once cheekily said, as a critique of patrician literary dominance, 'Fewer major Australian writers than you would think are called Kevin' (2012). I am going to say a few words about Kevin and his distinctive voice in Australian letters. And also tell you a little bit about what he has been up to. There is much to say, so forgive me using some notes.

I am honoured to launch this book and warmly welcome Kevin back from the remote desert community in Mulan, Western Australia, where he has embarked on a great adventure in 2016 with his teacher partner Andrea Lloyd. I am sure, before too long, we will be launching another fine collection of Kevin's, seeing new images of place that open out to bigger questions and ideas, retrieving so much that is lost to us through the weaselisation of ordinary language. A good poem, as Borges observes, doesn't necessarily show us something new; rather it reminds us of something we have forgotten, deliberately or otherwise.

Kevin, then, is first and foremost a poet of located personal and collective experience. In his new poems, as with older collections, observation and tender images of human beings at their most absurd and vulnerable, tussle with, or even give way to, a darker, even divine dimension. Secular metaphysics certainly feature across Kevin's work to date and especially in this, his fifteenth book of poetry. Here again, Kevin shows us a brilliant linguistic ability to evoke place and space, in wry yet often surprising ways.

Strains of *distinctly spiritual* metaphysics nonetheless offer a second-tier haunting in this new work. That haunting, perhaps one borne out of Kevin's Irish-Catholic upbringing and early Jesuitical training, has been tested and revisited by the recent experience of a residency to the BR Whiting Studio in Rome through the Australia Council for the Arts. As a result of this residency, Kevin has been commissioned by the Australian Ambassador to the Holy See to participate in a poetry, music and visual art project as an Australian artistic contribution the Pope Francis's declared Extraordinary Year of Mercy for 2016. This is an incredible accolade.

But Rome is not Brunswick! When Kevin first told me he was off to Rome, I wondered how he would read (and re-read) the epicentre of Catholicism, history, political corruption and faded empire. There would be no greenhorn nephews from a Doncaster McMansion visiting to puzzle over the sometime scarred urban detritus and crammed details of back-street Brunswick. How would this poet of intimate, lived space and relationship find his way around the cold giant marble hands and feet of the eternal city? Would he see it as solidity or illusion or both?

In the poem 'What remains unanswered' (p.30) you have your answer!

Cliffs are 'as real as anything you could fall from,' he writes. And, elsewhere: 'There are signs in several languages to keep us/off the grass. I don't care. I step over the railing and walk on the poor grass – under trees that don't mind/It's not the real world, though, it's something like it.' ('To my fever' p.26).

And, on the urine-sprayed statues of Rome:

... Your beautiful arrested gestures/Your noses get snapped off your faces without a murmur from you/so intent are you on the work/of expressing a moment/that lasts many lifetimes/ ... blind eyes martyred to inner visions/you are all asleep to each other/ **You are** asleep to us minor presences/here below you too – us with/our rumpled coloured costumes, awkward gestures and defeated backs/our lack of pedestals and artistry, us with our light-filled liquid eyes/ ... We fear only stone, stucco, bronze/all things that fix. ('To the Statues' 59)

Kevin clearly, and perhaps more than most, is able to discover the intimate in the epic as well as probe the illusion and illusions *of* the epic from an entirely personal point of view. This is achieved, in Carol Rumen's words, through a kind of 'homely surrealism', though that term, for me, places limits on the allegorical and political power of his poems. The meaning-making ability of the poem to shift suddenly between raw observation to gods-eye-view and back again is also a key strength. In any case, effects of 'homely surrealism' may be the first thing to invite the reader in. Kevin never shuts readers into puzzles of language, stripped of signification. As the poet observes in his 2012 collaborative collection *Radar*, 'The world always senses another world' (See Duwell NP). This is both an observation and an ethical imperative for the poet.

I can say confidently that with these poems, Kevin discovers his Coburg, his Brunswick, anew. Consider the poem 'Walking Home from the Academy', a tender poetic miracle that merges the Roman night with memories of a Coburg childhood:

As a child I was impatient for night/to come down properly/as if doubt infected the universe/as long as dusk lingered/I dragged my blankets over my head/ I wore soft cotton pyjamas/Night at last came down over me neatly/I wanted it there – then I wanted it gone when I opened my eyes/ Night, so much larger than our suburb/squatted over us/more ancient than my childhood ('Walking Home from the Academy', p.40).

This book is a selection of poems from a prodigious outpouring of work made over a six-month period (nearly one a day, Kevin confides, roughly 144 poems produced). Themes of mortality and love abound, often connected to metafictional interrogations of what poetry can be. Death is literally, and metaphorically, the last possible poem, the literal 'end of the line', the terminus of lived enjambment. Death is the *place* we don't quite know, but we can know love:

Love is here, I am sure, I can sense it close, tentative,
as desperate as me for itself.
... We might never need a key again when we've found the place
Of love beside the place we don't quite know.
Tell them, tell them when you get there, I am about to go.
('Love is close to here,' p.18)

The beautiful incantatory rhythm of this poem summons the poetry of Roethke. Rumens otherwise suggests that the ebb and flow of Kevin's rhythms suggests the music of a contemporary psalm. This poem and others like it are performed with careful restraint. In Colm Toibin's words, writing on Elizabeth Bishop, this kind of poetic 'reticence' hits one with such considerable emotional force that one has to sit up, pay attention to the fact 'that something important is being both hidden and said.' (*On Elizabeth Bishop*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2015, pp. 105-6).

This book feels like a culmination of a life in poetry exploring the hidden and the said. Except for the fact that Kevin is continuing to make poems apace, as if so much is suddenly at stake.

We are all beneficiaries of the poet's sense of urgency. Of the mature songs of the poet who drives home with lyric intensity that: 'We are building ruins/It is taking forever/This is what gives us time.' (*Elena!* P.3-4). There is a palpable acceleration of energy that marks a shift from recent collections I think. The new poems are passionate, probing, tender and energetic.

Consider the stand-out poem *Elena!* (quoted above, p. 3-4) (which I hope KB will read). This poem was recently shortlisted for the prestigious 2015 Montreal Prize. This poem speaks simply to the idea of the presence of death in life, the poet insisting we grasp our lives as small ruins (built upon a history of ruin. This is a palimpsestic notion, but not one that buries or drowns, (though water imagery plumbs this collection in both threatening and enlivening ways).

I know from chatting to Kevin that a provisional title for his collection was *The Drowned World* after the J.G. Ballard science fiction novel (1962) of the same name. Note the epigraph from Ballard: 'Beyond the lagoon the endless tides of silt had begun to accumulate in enormous glittering banks'. In his prescient 1962 novel, Ballard creates a future urban world where solar radiation has caused the polar ice-caps to melt and worldwide temperature to soar, leaving the cities of northern Europe and America submerged in beautiful and haunting tropical lagoons. Ballard uses the post-apocalyptic world of the story to mirror the collective unconscious desires of the main characters.

Kevin signals early on in this collection that he is prepared to encounter and come close to all kinds of drowning moral, political, emotional, linguistic worlds. The cheap smile of optimism is nowhere present. But a potentially bleak outlook is rescued over and over by sacramental moments of renewal, demonstrations of conditions of faith, by a saving grace and humour. The opening poem, named for Ballard's novel, tells us lyrically that: 'Fountains work hard to be joyous for us. Look how they/keep their mouths open. There is something ridiculous about water, its mindless/ falling and welling'.

Then come the usual darker notes: '... she was drowning, her face upturned. Someone/ lifted her clear of the water.' (1). Elsewhere, 'still sliding along its old groove,' the river '... carries whole trees and plastic bottles down to the sea.' ('The Mystic', p.54). Nature remains impervious to human desires: the river 'keeps its own counsel, the rain at its back/Mountains feed it everything it needs.' ('A name for it', p.48). The sea too, 'turns everything over, puts each part in its mouth'. This is an image of a child, but also an image of Saturn eating his children ('Mediterranean Sea', p.56), a haunting liquid ambiguity.

But water is also sacramental, a transfiguring element, as is pure earth ('We bend so naturally towards the earth/we go easily onto our knees in churches and gardens,' the poet opines, recalling his beautiful poem on ageing, 'The Sublime' where his nonagenarian parents gently tap the earth with sticks as if to be let in ('Numbering', p.12). The poet yearns, finally, piously (and there are few pious notes, this one appropriate in the final poem) for 'one last long chance to understand/ what things mean and how we might find out/ what they have to say by water and ground' ('Mountains at our back', iv, p.80). There are no suicidal English ponds and rivers in these poems, even when rain and rivers are awash with threat. The drowned world, much like the poem, Kevin seems to suggest, can still oxygenate, resuscitate, turn back and construct the daily 'ruin' of love and work, the poem as life.

The first-person voice of 'Hours' (which may not necessarily be the poet), asserts that 'eternity will never be what I need or understand/ ... But: 'This small chapel of an hour is all I need for now.' ('Hours', p.10)

I suggest you take this glorious book and sit down with it for an hour, or more, very soon. Even if your schedule is ruined! Believe me, *you will be given time*.

Congratulations Kevin, and Jacinta. I welcome this profoundly moving, intelligent book into our not-quite drowned world.

Amanda Johnson