

**Speech for launching ‘the moon’s reminder’ by Kevin Gillam, Fremantle Arts Centre, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018.**

What a pleasure it has been to acquaint myself with the poems of this new collection, ‘the moon’s reminder’. Kevin Gillam is no stranger to anyone here I am sure. He is a deeply loved member of the Perth Poetry community. He is also a musician and an educator. He is one of the most generous writers I know. His is not a closed writing coterie. Kevin has always made me feel that all writers are on the same team, and that we grow and learn by helping each other, sharing ideas, talking about our work.

It will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Kevin’s work that this collection continues his fascination with language, and with rhythm. Kevin has an auditory imagination; his poems need to be read with the ear as well as with the eye. Rhythm is one of the most important techniques on the page. Kevin will readily tell you that he learnt to read and count music before he learnt maths, and naturally counting is all over this work: Line counts, syllable counts, rhyme patterns.

‘seven dreams round’ is a perfect example of this exactitude. It’s a sestina in lines of 7 syllables telling of the Whale bones dropped off the coast at Goode Beach. (Read the first two stanzas)\* ... Just listening you may not notice the repeated words, the counted syllables. The rich language is allowed to tell its story – the technique does not distract. Any poet in this room will know just how difficult that is to achieve!

The villanelle appears and reappears in this collection too.

But it’s not all metronomic precision. Language is constantly transposed: silence can be spelt with and *ence* or an *ents*. Punctuation appears, disappears. In this book you are invited to dance with language.

I’d like to read from ‘Albany 2011’, which is the third in a suite of poems called ‘slack jawed in the dark.’ (first three stanzas)\* When you see this poem on the page you will appreciate the orchestration of the poet. There is so much meaning in each line, we are led through it gently, moment by moment. Each image hones in closer and closer to the heart of the poem.

Another delightful aspect of this book, for me, is the breadth of material. This book is firmly West Australian and just as our State spreads expansively over the globe, so the subject matter in this collection is varied and surprising. Of course there is family, there is music, but we go from down south, to the wheatbelt, to suburban Perth, to asylum seekers in a boat, from times past to times present, from intimate images to abstract thoughts. The reader is constantly asked to change key, to lead with the unexpected foot, to experience syncopation, silence. It’s unsettling, it’s provoking, it makes you think.

But we *need to talk about Kevin* in a different way— one that isn’t about the pleasure of dance. Kevin is no stranger to hospitals. He has spent more time there than most of us, and he has faced his mortality at a younger age than most of us. Beneath all the playfulness, the

rhythm, the rhyme, the counting, the beautiful language, there is a deep appreciation of the, darker, stuff of life. Coming out of unconsciousness to consciousness, pushing at that membrane between love and heartache, between connection and disconnection and between life and death, that's where this work takes you. At times you'll be reaching for the oxygen mask, at times you'll be dancing. All of us will find resonance in these experiences. Life is precarious, precious.

I'd like to read all of 'the purpling', which is my favourite poem, and perhaps one that highlights this ... The poet saves 'words brittle as kindling', clings to the Salmon Gum, remembers play and flight and with a surreal surrender, allows the purpling to do its work of healing.

The title poem is a response to a triptych artwork called Tide Travellers by Edna Broad, which is on the cover of this book, an ekphrastic poem that I will leave you to discover, but I'd like to add another layer of meaning to the painting in its position as your first visual experience of the collection. You will notice that most of the boats are made of paper, and this seems incredibly appropriate for a poetry book! In these paper pages you will float to many different kitchens, sofas, backyards, laneways, beaches and life experiences. The poems inside the book have been collated by Kevin into five sections; Mothers, Maps, Masks, Moths and Moons. They all begin with Mmmm, which is the sound you make when you are humming or thinking, and I promise you, that's what you will be doing as you sail in your paper boat through this collection.

So happy sailing. I am delighted to declare this book, and its passengers, launched.