

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Kevin John Hart**  
**- poems -**

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## Kevin John Hart(5 July 1954 -)

Kevin John Hart (born 5 July 1954) is a British-Australian theologian, philosopher and poet. He is currently Edwin B. Kyle Professor of Christian Studies and Chair of the Religious Studies Department at the University of Virginia. As a theologian and philosopher, Hart's work epitomizes the "theological turn" in phenomenology, with a focus on figures like Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida. He has received multiple awards for his poetry, including the Christopher Brennan Award and the Grace Leven Prize for Poetry twice.

Hart was born on 5 July 1954 to James Henry Hart and his wife, Rosina Mary Wooton. Hart's family moved to Brisbane, Australia, in 1966. Hart attended secondary school at Oxley State High School, and gained his Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy from the Australian National University. Hart received his PhD from the University of Melbourne in 1986. In 1991 he became Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Monash University, rising to full Professor in 1995 and also becoming Director of the Institute for Critical and Cultural Studies. He also taught in the Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology. Leaving Monash in 2002, he became Professor of Philosophy and Literature at the University of Notre Dame, a position he held until 2007, when he became Edwin B. Kyle Professor of Christian Studies at the University of Virginia, a position he holds as of 2011.

### **Theology and Literary Criticism**

In his professional life, Kevin Hart is primarily known as a theologian who works in two areas: systematic theology and religion and literature. His work in systematic theology has not yet been collected into volumes but remains as uncollected essays and chapters. In general, Hart's approach is to ground theology in a phenomenology of the Christ, both a phenomenology of Jesus's words and actions, and an account of Jesus as performing epoche and reduction, especially through the parables. On Hart's understanding, the preaching of the Kingdom brings forth Christ's death and that preaching is confirmed by the Resurrection. His work on the Christian mystical tradition is focused on practices of contemplation. In terms of religion and literature, Hart has written extensively on English and French poetry and Christianity, especially Christian mysticism. Recent work has converged on Geoffrey Hill.

One facet of his work is extensive commentary on the writing of the atheist Maurice Blanchot to whom he has devoted four books: *The Dark Gaze*, *The Power*

of Contestation, Nowhere without No, and Clandestine Encounters. Hart's analysis on Blanchot was praised by Peter Craven as combining "an attractive expository technique with an openness to speculative ideas". His work on Jacques Derrida and Samuel Johnson has also been praised, although one critic said that Hart's work on Johnson was "dubious" "and inconsistent in approach".

### <b>Poetry</b>

Hart's interests in poetry were piqued by an English teacher's presentation of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias*. In addition to Shelley, Hart also cites T. S. Eliot, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Éluard, Vasko Popa, Zbigniew Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins as influences. He first began writing poetry as a teenager, partly thanks to a Shelley anthology he had purchased and partly as an excuse to enjoy the Public Library's air conditioning during Brisbane's hot summers.

Critics have noted religious and philosophical themes in Hart's poetry. As Toby Davidson writes, "Kevin Hart's poetry cannot be separated from his multiple, enduring engagements with mysticism and mystical poetics. He is an innovator, suggesting new approaches to the mystical in the free facets of \*attending\*." Michael Brennan notes that the philosophical connection stems out of Hart's "long study into phenomenology", specifically connecting Hart's "The Room" to Heidegger's philosophy. Similarly, David McCooey detects the influence of Jacques Derrida, specifically Hart's use of metaphor an perspective.

Erotic and sensual themes are also pronounced in Hart's work. Nathaniel O'Reilly notes, for example, that even though most criticism of Hart focuses on his religious themes, Hart is also an "intensely physical and sensual poet". O'Reilly further says that Hart often links physical sensations with spiritual connections.

### <b>Reception</b>

Hart's poetry has garnered multiple awards, including the Greybeal-Gowen Prize for Poetry in 2008, the John Shaw Neilson Poetry Award in 1977, the Mattara Poetry Award in 1982, the Wesley Michel Wright Award in 1984, the NSW Premier's Award in 1985, the Victorian Premier's Award in 1985, the Grace Leven Prize for Poetry in 1991 and 1996, the Christopher Brennan Award in 1999.

Critical response to Hart's poetry has varied. Harold Bloom, writing on the back cover of Kevin Hart's 1999 volume of poetry, *Wicked Heat*, strongly praised Hart, saying that he is the "most outstanding Australian poet of his generation", and one of "the major living poets in the English language". Bloom also names Hart as one of the eleven canonical writers of Australia and New Zealand in his book,

The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages, specifically praising Hart's book *Peniel and Other Poems*. Other critics, such as Cyril Wong and Christian Sheppard, have also praised Hart's work. Critics such as Geoffrey Lehmann and Pam Brown, however, have expressed negative views of Hart's work. While Christian Sheppard, reviewing the same volume, said "The primary pleasure of Hart's poetry, however, is an easy rhythm, swiftly flowing line tracing the moment-by-moment impressions of an often impassioned yet always lucid mind". Lehmann, for instance, found Hart's 2008 volume, *Young Rain* to be self-indulgent and lacking in clear, specific meaning.

# My Name

There is a silence words can't touch.  
There is.  
And there's a name inside my name  
Though one my mother never said out loud

She never said it, never once, although  
She knew there was another name  
That sleeps inside my name

Sleep now, old name,  
For no one wants to know of you

My mother, she is dead these dozen years  
And she is grown so small  
She sleeps inside my name when it is said

I think she sleeps  
Within that other name as well, more deeply, far  
More quietly, turning only once or twice  
Inside that paradise

Sleep now, old love,  
It is too late to say a word to you

Kevin John Hart

# The River

There is a radiance inside the winter woods  
That calls each soul by name:  
Wind in young boughs, trees shaking off thick coats of snow,

The rattle of frozen rain on a barn roof: all these  
Will help you lose your way  
And find a silence older than the sky

That makes our being here a murmur only,  
That makes me walk along the river  
Beyond where it has flooded itself

While freezing over, past these dead firs,  
The great assembly of cedars,  
So that I must say, I do not know why I am here,

And move around in those few words  
And feel their many needles  
Upon my lips and warm them on my tongue

Though I say nothing, for it is a calm  
Beyond the calm I know  
That wants to talk now, after all these years

Of hearing me say spruce, wind, cloud and face,  
Not knowing the first thing about them all,  
Not knowing the simplest thing,

That every word said well is praise:  
And someone deep inside me wants to say  
I am not lost but there are many paths!

While someone else will whisper back,  
So you are on the longest quest of all,  
The quest for home, and not appear

Though I have walked along the river now  
These good five miles  
While letting wind push me a little way

And letting thoughts grow slow and weak  
    Before I feed them words, for what  
Is told to me this afternoon

Is simply river , with each I and it dissolved,  
    A cold truth but a truth indeed  
Held tight on the way back

Past curves and forks, as evening takes hold,  
    A strange light all the way  
That falls between the words that I would use

When talking of this strangeness or this light  
    So that I speak in small, slow breaths  
Of evening, cedar, cone and ice

In words that stick to skin –

Kevin John Hart

# The Room

It is my house, and yet one room is locked.  
The dark has taken root on all four walls.  
It is a room where knots stare out from wood,  
A room that turns its back on the whole house.

At night I hear the crickets list their griefs  
And let an ancient peace come into me.  
Sleep intercepts my prayer, and in the dark  
The house turns slowly round its one closed room.

Kevin John Hart



# The Word

Say wood and everything is clean again.  
The word is all around you, like the night,  
Impossible to grasp. Your mouth is dark.

A splinter found its way into your quick.  
That old tree slit by lightning won't be moved.  
Last year's thin rain froze hard inside a trunk

And now a honey flesh shines through cracked bark.  
Your mouth is dark. Go far into yourself,  
Let quietness gather there, then say the word.

Kevin John Hart

# Three Poems From Dark Retreat

Dark One, it is the summer now: the evenings feel  
Beneath my shirt, and it is good.

The trees, they sway a little when they get high,  
And higher still the nests and stars are quiet.

Those wasps my children fear  
Are tight in their mud house, near lax electric wires,  
And those two girls, dipped in a humid day,  
Are deepening in sleep;

And I am left alone  
With you inside those wild electric wires out there  
And playing with my half-unbuttoned shirt  
And growing in those shady leaves

And in a black and yellow summer sting

A single word can darken the widest room  
Even in summer:

glass all through my bread

For year on year

Yet I would give

This sunburned air for just one word,  
Dark One,

Even a word that filled my mouth with blood;

But you keep quiet,  
Just hiding there, behind my death,  
For year on year

Your voice—

I would give up this champagne light

To know it just once more,  
Even if sheathed in a sparrow's song,

A flash  
Of a sparrow's outstretched wings,

Or the memory of that sparrow  
That smashed into my windowpane  
In a black storm

Untuned Spring: the young grass flirts  
With stringy weeds; the tanagers  
Sing with a splash of Spanish; wind  
Saves gobs of old man snow in shade.

Between big awkward chords, I push  
Stiff windows high, tack on new screens,  
And taste this sweet old thing: chill air  
That's brushed some baby leaves of oak.

You're here as well, Dark One, so where's  
Your hidey hole? The kettle's hiss,  
My daughter's drawing of our cat,  
That crumbling wasp nest by the door?

Kevin John Hart