Kevin Hart has been described as the "most outstanding Australian poet of his generation" and "one of the major living poets in the English language." He's also an internationally recognised philosopher, theologian and literary critic. So who is this former Brisbane boy, who was always bottom of his class in primary school? And why does he address God as "Dark One"? This week on Encounter, the sensual and sublime poetry of Kevin Hart.

Kevin Hart: When I was a little boy in England, growing up in London, I was always at the bottom of the class and was thought to be very slow. I remember one day the headmaster came to see my parents after school, and I think I was about nine, and said there's nothing they could do for me and that I should be taken out of school. And my mother took me to the local butcher's shop down the road and tried to apprentice me to the butcher's, big hefty guys with arms like legs of lamb, and they took one look at me and didn't want me, quite rightly.

Then my family emigrated to Brisbane, Australia, and I was still at the bottom of the class.

READING FROM PoeM 'Brisbane' (in Flame Tree)

Carmel Howard: It's lucky Kevin Hart wasn't a big hefty lad. He may have made a fine butcher, but the world of poetry would have lost a very fine voice.

Welcome to Encounter on ABC Radio National. I'm Carmel Howard.

Kevin Hart: And then one day, our first class in algebra, I remember looking at the board and seeing a simple algebraic formula. And it was as though some rusted window inside me just sprung open, and I understood exactly what was going on in the algebraic formula, and I looked around me and saw the classroom, my teacher, my friends, all of which was very familiar to me, as though it was completely new, as though I'd never seen it before. And then over the coming weeks when we had exams, to my surprise and to the astonishment of my parents, I went from being at the bottom of the class to the top of the class.

And that was an experience I've never fully been able to understand. And I sometimes worry that maybe that window will just spring shut one day.
Carmel Howard: It doesn't seem as if that window of illumination is shutting on Kevin Hart any time soon.

The renowned American critic, Harold Bloom, has called him 'the most outstanding Australian poet of his generation' and 'one of the major living poets in the English language.' Kevin Hart is also an internationally recognised philosopher, theologian and literary critic. He's currently the Edwin B. Kyle Professor of Christian Studies and Chair of the Religions Studies Department at the University of Virginia, where he holds courtesy professorships in the Departments of English and French. He also holds the Erin D'Arcy Chair in Philosophy at the Australian Catholic University.

But back to Kevin and that sense of a 'rusted window' springing up in the classroom of Brisbane's Oxley State High School, many years ago. What else blew through after algebra class?

Kevin Hart: It was a complete opening of everything that I am. Shortly after that experience, that I had had no ability in mathematics, I started reading quite difficult mathematics books and I started doing algebra and geometry by myself, and I worked on several theorems and sent them to the Head of Department of the local university, the University of Queensland. I started to write poems, I started to go out with a girl. Everything happened within a few dizzy weeks.

About that time, I had a very good English teacher called John McGrath, who did something which would probably be almost illegal today: he made his students learn poems by heart. So I had to learn for homework a poem by Shelley, Ozymandias, and I thought it was wonderful, it utterly ravished me, and over the coming weeks I wrote a lot of poor imitation Shelley and saved up my pocket money and worked at a carwash in order to buy a volume of Shelley, and read all of him, and was intoxicated by Shelley. And thereafter read Hopkins, and T.S. Eliot, and couldn't be separated from these books, while all the time being preoccupied by mathematics.

Carmel Howard: Beneath the earthy, sensual surface of Kevin Hart's poetry, there always rides something that's 'left unsaid' - something vast and mysterious, an invisible, deeper world of the spirit.

It was also around that heady age of 13 that Hart began his spiritual search. It was a search he initiated himself, having come from a family with no particular interest in religion.

Kevin Hart: It was about that time I went to the local Southern Baptist Church, in part because it was local and because an American boy in my class who went there, and I found the hymns very, very moving. Hymns of such longing and
passion, and I found a kind of sublime simplicity in the service and in the prayers, which I find very moving. It served a purpose for a long time, but this was the age of the Vietnam War and it seemed to me after a while that there was a conflation of republican politics, and Christianity, and my version of Christianity as I was starting to form it at the time, was very different from that, and so in the end I stopped going there.

READING FROM PoeM 'Dark Angel' (in Flame Tree)

Kevin Hart: When I was in my early 20s I converted to Catholicism after a long period of searching. What I think drew me to the Catholic church is that in Catholicism, prayer suffuses all of one's life by virtue of the sacraments. Prayer is not something which occurs just on Sunday, it doesn't occur only at particular moments of intensity or by particular conventions, one's whole life is given up to prayer in many, many modes. And so everything to do with the faith is trying to put you in relationship with God and trying to make that relationship grow deeper and more mature.

Carmel Howard: I heard you say that you're interested in the mystical strain in Catholicism. I wonder if you could explain why that mystical strain attracts you?

Kevin Hart: Catholicism is the big house of Christianity. It's got many, many rooms in it. And I've always been attracted to the rooms which are to do with prayer. The mystical strain is the strain whereby the whole day can be given over to prayer through what we call lectio divina, prayerful reading of Scripture, through practice of meditation of when one uses the imagination and the intellect with respect to images, and then finally, and most difficult of all, contemplation, where one empties the mind of all images and all ideas, all concepts, in order to be completely attentive to God. What you find I think in this mystical strain of Catholicism is that you're put in relationship with God, and you have many opportunities not only of talking with God in petitionary prayer, but also of listening to God, being attentive to God, as happens in contemplation.

READING FROM PoeM 'Prayer' (in Morning Knowledge)

Carmel Howard: Many of Kevin Hart's poems are concerned with Prayer, and many take the title, 'Prayer'.

But while these poems stretch out towards the Divine, they never try to 'grasp' God. As Hart suggests in his early poem 'Master of Energy and Silence', God is beyond reach of language.

It's an approach that's in keeping with the tradition of Negative Theology.

Kevin Hart: The whole tradition in the West and in the East has been that there are two threads in theology: there's cataphatic or positive theology, in which God the Son is sent by the Father in and through the spirit, and hence we have Revelation in scripture. And then there is apophatic or negative theology which is
to do with how we are to speak about God, that we begin from what Revelation gives us but we question the predications that we make of God. So that when we say 'God is good' for example, we don't mean God is good in the way that chocolate is good, or wine is good, nor do we mean it in the sense in which something might be a good action. Obviously divine goodness transcends all of these things. So we question the predications and we pass from acts of knowing to acts of unknowing, so that our speech is taken away from us and we're less and less concerned with saying things about God than an intimacy, a silent intimacy with God.

Carmel Howard: In Kevin Hart's book *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, written in 1989, he brings Negative Theology into conversation with Jacques Derrida's concept of 'Deconstruction' by suggesting that negative theology is, in fact, a mode of deconstruction.

Kevin Hart: Negative Theology shows us that our discourse as Christians, our theological discourse and even our prayers, are constructions, using finite language. And it allows us to glimpse the ways in which we construct that discourse. Now the modern discourse that points out how we examine how discourse is constructed is called deconstruction as Jacques Derrida calls it, it's a mode of phenomenology. The very word 'deconstruction' comes from Luther in his Heidelberg Disputation. Martin Heidegger translated from the Latin into German and then Derrida translated it from the German into the French. And what Luther was quoting is St Paul in 1 Corinthians 1-19, 'I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise', and there Paul is actually quoting Isaiah 29-14, 'I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise', namely 'I shall not rely upon the wisdom of human beings, even as priests, even of popes, even of theologians, in talking about God, but God himself is much greater than these things, and breaks through all systems.

I think that the great early fathers of the church, Gregory of Nyssa for one, Pseudo-Denys the Aeropagite for another, were attuned to this in their writings and they make us see that everything we say about God is only very partial, only constructed, and that what counts is not the statements we make about God, but the intimacy of the relationship that we have with God.

READING FROM Poem 'The Companion' (in *Flame Tree*)

Carmel Howard: Hart's early poem 'The Companion' which we've just heard, gives voice to a mysterious intimacy with the Divine. In his more recent poetry, Hart addresses God as 'Dark One', as he explains.

Kevin Hart: This came to me quite naturally one day when I was writing a poem. There seems to be something poetically that doesn't work or is limiting when you call God 'God' in a poem. When I tried to be honest with myself in my relationship with God, Christ is, on the one hand, completely dark, he's transcendent and unknown. On the other hand, he is completely imminent and completely
knowable as Jesus. Our tradition speaks of him in both ways as transcendent but also as a lover who comes to us, and the two word 'Dark One' seem to me to contain both things, the transcendence and otherness of Christ on the one hand, but also like a kind of dark lover who comes to us. And I wanted to keep that ambiguity.

READING FROM Poem 'Dark Retreat' (in *Young Rain*)

**Carmel Howard:** Kevin Hart's poetry often blurs the lines between romantic and religious longing, with erotic love becoming an allegory for Divine union.

It's a way of speaking that stems back to the Hebrew bible and to the Christian mystical tradition.

**Kevin Hart:** It comes to us from the Song of Songs, the canticle, which is a series of Hebrew love poems which were allegorised by the Jewish community and by the early church, to be of the soul's longing for God. Divine love, agape, is self-sacrificing love, which sounds difficult, as it is, and not very attractive. If the best image we have of love is of a man who's been tortured and hung upon a cross to die an excruciating death, this is something that human beings find very, very hard to understand as love. But it is the highest Christian image of love.

But in the path to God, the path which leads to greater intimacy with God as Therese Avila, John of the Cross and many others have pointed out. But agape suddenly flips into eros, and the best way of understanding God's love for us is of the kind of intimate love that men and women share.

READING FROM Poem 'Nineteen Songs' (in *Flame Tree*)

**Kevin Hart:** The kind of love that God has for us, I think, is of an infinite longing for union, and the kind of love that God wants us to have for him, I think, is of this also endless longing. Now in eros we lose ourselves. I think erotic love transforms us, but it does so only momentarily. It has to be embedded in something much longer, a much bigger narrative called marriage or durable relationship or something like that. In the relationship that we have with God, most of that relationship I think is not characterised by the erotic, it's only in the most intense moments of it that we can understand that what God wants with us I think, is a union which is so intimate, the best image that we have as mortal, finite creatures, is erotic love, is marriage. And so it's a momentary image that we can have for the life that God ultimately wants with us.

MUSIC

READING FROM Poem 'Come Back'(in *Flame Tree*)

**Carmel Howard:** You're with Encounter on ABC Radio National. I'm Carmel Howard and we're hearing this week from the Australian poet, philosopher and theologian, Kevin Hart.
As we've heard so far, Hart's poetry explores intimacy from many angles. In poems like 'The Room', he addresses the deepest reaches of the self, which can't be offered directly to consciousness.

For Hart, the 'deep self' is a presence that's beyond representation, like a closed room at the centre of a house.

READING FROM Poem 'The Room' (in Flame Tree)

Kevin Hart: When we talk about Transcendence, there's often two things that are going on. There's that which is above or beyond phenomena, as we imagine God to be; and there's also that which is beneath or prior to phenomena, the roots of language, as you find in Heidegger and Wittgenstein and others. And both of these things are equally mysterious, it seems to me.

Now in a poem like 'The Room', it's concerned with something dark or secret or mysterious in our own lives, that our lives turn around that, a secret that we can't even explain to ourselves, a mystery that we can't present to our intellect and decode it. Something which is so deep within us, that we can't articulate it. But nor can we live without it, so there's always one room in our house, in our lives, which is completely closed to us.

Carmel Howard: Are you suggesting something like the unconscious?

Kevin Hart: The unconscious could be a figure for it, but it's only one figure. I think for most of us there's something in our lives which is either secret or mysterious, that we can't articulate, and it would be different for each one of us. In the Jewish tradition people talk about a secret proper name, which is inscribed in us that we can't actually articulate; in the Christian tradition we often talk about the Imago Dei, the Image of God, which is inscribed upon the soul, that we can't pronounce. So in a sense, all of our lives turn endlessly around this unspeakable word that we keep trying to find other words for. Every poem that I write is, in a sense, trying to find adequate words for this unspeakable word, around which my entire life turns.

MUSIC

Kevin Hart: I was in Melbourne, about to go out to dinner one evening and the phone went, and it was a man with a fairly thick Spanish accent, and he told me he'd just arrived in Adelaide, I think it was, from Chile, where he'd been in prison in solitary confinement and tortured daily. And he said that before he was taken into prison, the local bishop had and a number of people in the group he was with, learned some of my poems in the Spanish translation. And I had no idea that my poems had been translated into Spanish. And he said that while he was being tortured each day he would recite 'The Room' and he said, 'that experience of reciting your poem, kept me sane while I was being tortured, and I wanted to tell you this, and thank you.' And then he hung up.
Carmel Howard: The mystery of language and its effects runs deep in Kevin Hart's poetry.

For Hart, a contemporary religious poetry, to be defined as such, must question any mode of representation, including language.

The limits of language become especially important in Hart's poetry of 'counter-experience'. But first, what is 'counter-experience'?

Kevin Hart: This is an expression, Jean-Luc Marion's, the French phenomenologist, and I use that expression and various others like it in some of my work as well. When we talk of experience, we talk of experiencing things which are objects. Counter-experience is to do with our experience of things which are not objective. They don't have the quality of objects. These are phenomena, but they don't take the form of objects, like revelation or the sublime, for example. Now when we are faced with the sublime or revelation, we can't process it in the way that we can when we are perceiving an object, and this sometimes is very frustrating, and sometimes it's exhilarating. You get the two different modalities. And in poetry, often enough, we're talking about phenomena which are not objects, we're talking about sublime experiences, and so a lot of poetry, not all of it, but a lot of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry in particular, is concerned with Counter-experience.

READING FROM Poem 'Facing the Pacific at Night' (in Flame Tree)

Carmel Howard: In Hart's poem 'Facing the Pacific at Night', which we've just heard, the speaker's senses are overrun by counter-experience.

It's a vast, mystical moment, described in terms of silence, darkness and longing, terms that recall the Negative Theology Hart spoke of earlier.

'Facing the Pacific at Night' seems to suggest that everything we 'know' depends on our ability to 'name' it, but these names simply point to a silent, dark grandeur that goes on beneath the noise of the world.

In Hart's poem, 'Yes', the idea of counter-experience comes up again, but this time, it appears lightly, as moments of radiance that are somehow strangely affirming.

READING FROM Poem 'Yes' (in Young Rain)

Kevin Hart: It's concerned with those strange moments of otherness that seem to break in to our ordinary lives. It happens on days that go astray, I say, or when time is inside-out a little. I think these are quite common experiences or counter-experiences when something seems imbricated in an ordinary day that we can't quite identify, although there's been a sudden change of level of our experience. And in the poem itself, it doesn't say what is being affirmed, it just affirms that kind of counter-experience. I think what happens in a religious life is that we have
those experiences of affirmation and that one starts to live a Christian life or a Jewish life or a Muslim life or a Buddhist life, by affirming that affirmation each day. Each day you say 'Yes' to that Yes. So the life of being a Christian for example, is always a life of double affirmation, that you each day say 'Yes' to those counter-experiences of saying 'Yes', even when you're not experiencing them at that time, you're remaining loyal to that experience.

So, in marriage for example, you say 'Yes' on the day you get married, 'I do', but each day you implicitly if not explicitly, also say 'Yes', by every act that one performs in a marriage, one is saying 'Yes', making a cup of coffee for one's wife or husband is a form of saying 'Yes' to the marriage vow that one is continuing the marriage by affirming it in one's deeds. And exactly the same in the religious life.

MUSIC

If the religious life as I think it does, has the structure of double affirmation, it means that even in periods of dryness, you are still affirming the fundamental 'Yes', the fundamental affirmation of God. Anselm says quite rightly, that 'faith is always in quest of understanding', that we're always trying to understand what it means to have faith in God. And our understanding, by the same token, as Augustine says, is always in quest of faith. We don't always possess faith in the sense of having a clear embodiment of something to hang on to. The relationship between the intellect and faith is a very curious one. Sometimes the intellect can point us to faith, sometimes the intellect can stand in the way of faith. Sometimes, as St John of the Cross points out, we have to darken or blind the intellect in order to have faith.

The relationship we have with God is not the same over a life; sometimes, as with human relationships, it goes through bad patches and sometimes it becomes very intense. It is a terrifying thing to have a relationship with one's creator, to spend one's life so that one is trying to converge with one's creator seems an extraordinarily difficult and sublime thing. But at the same time it's extremely simple. One of the things which perpetually amazes me is that at any moment or any day, anyone who is alive can talk with the creator of the cosmos.

But then when we try to reflect on it, when we try to do theology whether we're theologians or ordinary folks who like to think about God, it's almost impossible. How can you think about God who is absolutely singular, who's transcendent, who escapes all of our mode of thought? As soon as we try to write the simplest sentence about God, we find ourselves in anxious perplexities, but when we stop trying to write about God and talk with God, God is there and we can talk with God.

This paradox, it seems to me, is at the heart of the Christian life and not just the Christian life, the religious life, and it's something we never can overcome.
Carmel Howard: And when you attempt to 'speak' to God in your prayer poems - is there anything that you experience or learn in the process of that attempt?

Kevin Hart: I think that every prayer is thrown upon the void. It's always an experiment. Prayer is sublimely easy because we can talk to God, but a lot of what's involved in prayer I think is overhearing ourselves talk to God. Every prayer involves a thorough-going critique of the person who is praying. So whether one is saying a prayer or writing a poem which is a prayer, it always is concerned with a moment of critique, of exposing the poverty of one's ability to pray, and exposing the vacuity of one prays for.

READING FROM Poem 'Lightning Words' (in Young Rain)

Carmel Howard: Kevin Hart's poems, like his prayers, have an attitude of exposure and risk.

As we've heard so far, they grapple with the great unpresentables: God, the deep self, 'counter' experience.

His poems also find words for the experiences of ageing and death.

As he ventures in his early poem, "The Old", written in his 20s (quotes from 'The Old', in The Departure)

Kevin Hart: I think in society today we've almost completely medicalised death. We're so scared of death that we want doctors to do the best they can to medicate us so we don't feel pain. No-one dies at home any more, very few people I think in terminal illnesses actually have an opportunity to confront their death. We experience death in medical terms, we don't experience death as a mystery. I think death is not simply the last few moments of life, death is something that runs throughout the whole of life. Each of our moments is not only the possibility of affirmation, but it's also we're saying farewell at each moment to something.

So unless we form some kind of adequate relationship to death, we're never going to live properly, and if we think of it purely as a medical thing, we have reduced life. We should think of it as some sort of mystery which we can participate in now, not something to be pushed off to one side till the last moments.

READING FROM Poem 'My Death' (in Flame Tree)

Carmel Howard: I wonder if you could also explain a little about the poems that you've written for your friend David Campbell. You have said that you've had a sense since his death, which was a long time ago now, a sense of your friendship somehow continuing, and I was wondering whether that was something that had happened in the act of poeticising his death.
Kevin Hart: David Campbell was a great poet, and he was a very good friend to me when he was alive. When he passed away, in 1979, it was a huge loss. I've never overcome that loss. I've had experiences over the years that are very difficult to verbalise of David, as it were, looking out for me, watching over me, drawing close to me and they've been profoundly moving, and I've written now several poems about David. And it's strange to say that it's as though our relationship has become richer since he's died than it could have been when he was alive. I was young, very young, and he was getting old, and I have the feeling in writing the poems that the relationship gets richer and more varied as though I am talking with him and learning from him still. It's a very peculiar experience, I must say.

READING FROM PoEM 'David' (in Morning Knowledge)

Carmel Howard: Whether speaking about loved ones or God, Kevin Hart's poetry has long traced the movements of intimate relationships, and the pain of absence.

In his latest collection Morning Knowledge, he grieves the passing of his father who died in Brisbane in 2009.

In poem after poem, there's a sense of him searching out his father's life and death, and of being haunted, surprised and confounded, again and again.

READING FROM PoEM 'My First Tie' (in Morning Knowledge)

Kevin Hart: So far at least, the writing of the poems has been an act of mourning. I knew my father was going to die, I wrote about anticipating his death, particularly in the poem called 'Dark Bird'. And when he died, a very easy death, almost a happy death one could say, it was very traumatic, and I haven't recovered from it, and I can't imagine that I shall. We were very close, and I've had no sense of anything continuing. I knew when he died when I was in Charlottesville, I was sitting at my desk in my office and I went suddenly completely cold, and then a few minutes later, the phone went, and my wife phoned and said my father had passed away just a few minutes ago. It was as though his spirit went directly through me and chilled me to the bone. And since then, just an utter void.

READING FROM PoEM 'Dark Bird' (in Morning Knowledge)

Kevin Hart: I think poetry can be a kind of secular way in which people can be led to approach the difficult parts of their life, where there's been loss, where there's sadness of a deep kind. If poetry can help people to be more at ease in expressing even to themselves a lot of the darkness and pain of ordinary human existence, then it's serving some kind of cultural role, perhaps more than a cultural role, perhaps it is serving something of a spiritual role.

The kind of poetry I write, lyric poetry, I think is really concerned with intimacy,
with mystery. That needn't be religious mystery, there are mysteries to do with everyday life. Often poetry, especially the sort of poetry I write, is concerned with looking at the borders between the sensual and the spiritual and seeing them as divided, equivocal, that mystery somehow can break in to the ordinary. And we read poetry I think in part, to gain a sense of that intimacy with things that we can't understand that are unable to be understood but that buoy up our lives.

Poems which draw us close to prayer are, I think, doing more than that. I think poetry has started to take on a supplementary role of prayer for some people. The churches, I think, including my own, are terrible at teaching people how to pray. It may be that we need to learn from the ground up as religious people, whether Christian or not, how to pray.

READING FROM PoeM 'The Stone's Prayer' (in Flame Tree)

MUSIC

Carmel Howard: And that was 'The Stone's Prayer' by Kevin Hart - poet, philosopher, theologian, and this week's guest on ABC Radio National's Encounter program. My thanks to Kevin Hart. Thanks also to Eugene Gilfedder, who read from Kevin Hart's new collection of poetry Morning Knowledge, published by the University of Notre Dame Press. He also read from Young Rain, published by Giramondo, and Flame Tree, published by Paperbark Press.

More details for this Encounter program are available at our website.

Technical production this week was by Peter McMurray. And I'm Carmel Howard.