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# Words from the heart can heal life's wounds

**T**HE PUBLICITY material for Kevin Ireland's latest collection of poetry, his 18th, suggests that the book begins in the form of an open, wry conversation over a meal between friends and moves on – as time and wine take their effect – to a more hushed and close chat.

From "A new book", the first poem in the first section, Generalities, Ireland, recipient of numerous awards, an honorary doctorate and an MBE, lays his cards on that table – while acknowledging that he almost certainly has another up his sleeve. "The best advice / I can offer," the poem notes, "is that whenever a poet / offers a simple reflection, even with / one hand held sincerely over his heart, / always ask him to turn around, / then prise open his fingers and inspect / what's hidden in his other fist". Taking any poem at face value is a risky business.

There is regret, in "Sorry about the weather", which apologises for an unrevealed mistake. And then the poems set off through bouts of heavy rain and scorching sun and snow and frost, into loss. In "The man who had great plans" he writes: "There was only one thing missing . . . At night, in his bed, / in his sleep, it haunted him. He dreamt / on and on of it, to his grave". And again in "Visitation", and "A Parnell tale", the last dedicated to *Landfall* editor Robin Dudding).

But the Ireland humour is never far away. "The way it all happens", which starts off like WH Auden's "Stop all the clocks", wryly laments a Kafkaesque ban on writing and eventually general

merriment: "It is said that people will soon be stopped / from gazing into the sky . . . I am writing this only / until the ink runs out. Then I am to join / a happy task force". The sentiment is echoed a few poems later in "News flash".

When they aren't ruminating or speculating on the large mystery from the small, the poems in Generalities talk about the closely personal, and about the topics of passing conversations, about sore big toes, celebrating perfection, the problem of getting poems to paper.

But in the second section, Particulars, the clouds lift and the mood gets more whimsical and even a little giddy, in "A letter to the editor" – "Has anyone else noticed lately / how the world has suddenly changed?" – and "Rovrufe". The poems speak openly of love, which feels new and enveloping ("Phrasing you", "Get my drift?"), the agony of separation ("News of the day", "Istanbul airport"), and even how a mistyped letter can suggest so much more ("The trouble with emails"). They feel more specific, fixed in time, less speculative and more intimate. When they aren't addressing or discussing a lover, they also inevitably wonder about words, which despite the best care, sometimes barely do when it comes to describing emotional states. Yet the final impression *Table Talk* gives – and I am one of many who has shared a meal with the author – is that words, when exchanged between friends and loved ones, and especially with a glass in hand, will do just fine.



### TABLE TALK

Kevin Ireland  
Cape Catley, \$25.99  
Reviewed by  
Mark Broatch