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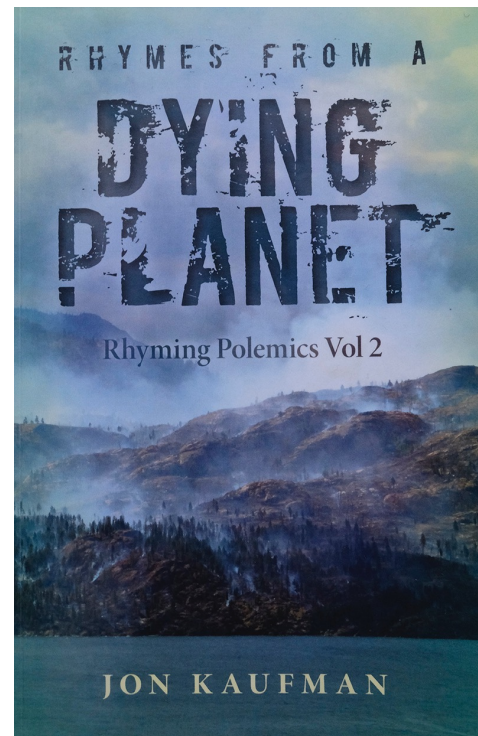
Rhymes from a Dying Planet
– *Rhyming Polemics Vol2*

By Jon Kaufman

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By Lyn Ashby

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KAUFMAN'S book of polemical rhymes, he claims, is a response to an open call from the Nigerian writer, Ben Okri. All artists and writers, exhorts Okri, should now turn their craft unstintingly toward focusing the spotlight of attention onto this urgent, existential moment of climate crisis, without wasting a moment or a word. "It means," writes Okri, "that the writing must have no frills." Kaufman, with an with an open-hearted and a simple-minded vigour, takes up Okri's call.

Like a madman declaiming to all and any who might be equally fool enough to stop and listen, Kaufman stands atop his soapbox and delivers. But, like the court jester, who strips language of its familiar, comforting patterns and figures (thus momentarily disarming the king with unfamiliar turns and twists, the better to deliver some searing truth) Kaufman utters and stutters his humble pleas with his own brand of seemingly ingenuous arhythmic ruffles and frills. And in so doing, he finds his target – unstintingly – through the innocently ungarded back door.

These strange, stumbling lines and rhymes are themselves an attack on the normative, consoling traditions of poetry. One can't read them without being thrown out of bed, and bumping one's head. Many, perhaps most, do not resolve how and where one thinks they should. One is thrown off tract, into the by-lane, perhaps dangerously into the oncoming next line. Out of this ditch one must struggle back, renewed, angry, resolved to come to terms with it all, start again. This is the poetic accompaniment to the contemporary transformation in the real world that is called up from all of us, part of which is to mercilessly uncover and shake off the lies and blandishments of the failed world order. With simple humour and play, Kaufman assists with this too.

Each entry in this collection tackles a painfully familiar sub-issue – ecological, psychological, sociological, political or economic – of the main crisis: the workers of the developing world, locked in poverty in part by our own indulgent Western demands (Trees); American hegemony (UncleSam); empty and meaningless promises from our leaders (Blah). The list of sins is endless. Each entry plunges fearlessly, this way and that, seemingly without map or destination, headlong into its topic. And in its unplanned tumble it usually uncovers some hypocrisy or double-dealing. Nicety, neither of words themselves nor

their claims, seems of much concern to Kaufman. What does the fool care? The underlying mockery of all human hypocrisies and the jester's jousting tone does not spare the poet-as-fool himself. All the old world might come crashing down if the fool had his way. All the more to make the space necessary for the implied, hoped-for new world, that must arise out of the mess that we have made.

Kaufman confesses that he can't dance. It shows in many of these often zig-zagging lines, sometimes requiring squinting double-takes and generous multiple-readings. But this is no weekend party. This is the dance of the dammed dervish, searing and surging to its own timing and purpose. This is the drumming of the off-beat, the down-beat, the lost-beat. These quavers quiver in quiet, odd-ball staccatos. (For the madman up front, save your tomatoes.) Into the grimaced face of the fact that we have decided to pretend – even now, at the eleventh hour – that this crisis is not happening, these rhymes are the mad, beautiful, rumped, last-minute prayers against the ever-growing odds of deliverance.

There is no resolution in any of this, of course. It bleats on like an abandoned radio. The final story that arises is the fool's capacity to go on dancing in his mad-hatter manner, declaring, insisting to be heard in the face of the greatest of all (apparently) lost causes. Here is the core, foolish, creative drive to speak up, just as Okri demanded, to make a stand, to not allow the travesty to so easily unfold without comment, and in so doing, to encourage others to also raise their voices, however they can in whatever form, in counter-intuitive celebration.

Lyn Ashby