

**Fragmentary Introspective Observations: Animals, Emotions and Location  
in John Kinsella's Poetry.  
Review Essay\*  
Tom Bristow**

John Kinsella, *The Jaguar's Dream: Translations, Adaptations, Versions, Extrapolations, Interpolations, Afters, Takes and Departures* (Alma, 2012)

John Kinsella, *Jam Tree Gully: Poems* (W.W. Norton and Co. 2011)

At present, the version of history we are encouraged to consume is one that suits big corporations and their employees in our state governments. It is a history of conflict and consumption, of production and power that denies us elements of our very nature, as human animals.  
John Burnside<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary criticism regards the term 'pathetic fallacy' as one indicating excessive sentiment. In the current geological epoch it is questionable if we can ethically ascribe human qualities to inanimate objects; the attribution is as problematic as ascribing emotional qualities to flora and fauna. Poets have long considered this pejorative inference arising from the act of placing a noun onto an object. As counterpoint, making (*poesis*) – conceived ecologically – harnesses the present participle within craftwork, to offer things as yet incomplete and always in relation. Sense and emotion become questions of expression, mood and tone that entail the world that includes the human as one part therein – arising on its own terms. John Kinsella's cartographic and posthuman turns in these two collections promote awareness of emergent ontologies and the limits to language in attending to a creaturely life that speaks of subject (self) and world (object) as one: to extend the self into the world might suggest both an epistemological flaw and a fallacy of bi-directional harmony.

The dead planet slumbers,  
its godpaw on its dogear,  
stars billowing like clouds. ('Bedenimed Cloud: An Apostasy?' 229)

These are the final three lines of the closing poem to 'Verse from the Nineteenth to Twentieth Century', one of eight sections to *The Jaguar's Dream*, an incredible collection of poems running over 200 pages that offers an extensive range of translations, adaptations, versions (and 'transversions') of poems from non-English languages. The topography of Western Australia now dominates Kinsella's writing and philosophy to the point that *location* is a complex and nuanced literary critical idea of central importance. However, readers of Kinsella's anthology of Persian poetry, *Six Vowels and Twenty-Three Consonants* (2012), *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography* (2008), and his 'Derrida poems' (*Peripheral Light*, 2003) will be familiar with the poet's forays into linguistic cultures

<sup>1</sup> John Burnside, 'A Science of Belonging: Poetry as Ecology,' *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science* ed. Robert Crawford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 92.

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beyond the Australasian context as a means to explore the human propensity to alter physical and intellectual landscapes. This collection is the most significant and inclusive trans-nationalism offered by Kinsella thus far in his ever-expanding oeuvre; it moves from the seventh-century BC Greek poet, Alcman, to the contemporary Chinese-Australian writer, Ouyang Yu, and it moves through Latin, French, German, and Russian on the way.

Alongside a deep consideration of the common plight of drought in the WA wheatbelt region lies a creative engagement with multiple sources of inspiration in *The Jaguar's Dream*. Layers of multiple localities place fresh light on language understood as 'a patronymic | splendour in the rasp | of imprint'; and while one might focus on 'rasp', imprint is conflated with impact: 'I tread carefully, not | wishing harm' (214). This celebration of human technology in the guise of poetry is curiously aligned to an intertextual cultural husbandry that is indicative of human resourcefulness that Kinsella is keen to write out and critique. In these two books, the Romantic problem of the delicate use of language to acknowledge its limitations is turned over to incorporate an ethical onto-poetics like that of the lyricism of Jan Zwicky, Dennis Lee and Don McKay, but is also in eco-poetic dialogue with Jorie Graham, Mary Oliver, Allison Funk and Nancy Holmes. Furthermore, an engagement with Language Poetry is clear once more in Kinsella's practice, yet this North American analogue portends an acute trans-hemispherical mind that belies the focus on selfhood, region, ecosystem, or particularised angles on flora and fauna. Here selfhood is political consciousness, and thus consciously beyond nature; and by extension, Kinsella's uniquely elasticised Australis offers an alternative to this new field or sub-genre known as 'eco-poetics'. Kinsella's handling of poetics of location, or home, brings to light an anarchical attempt to disown the ego heralded by the lyrical stance. His relinquishing of human centredness is ultimately impossible in human language and in human action, yet the intention and the objective give rise to an earth-centred poetics, which rewrites the human in place. Kinsella appears to negate any holistic apolitical realm by insisting on situated knowledge that positions a posthuman subject at play with non-human animals. This approach is not fashionable; it is critical.

'Godpaw' and 'dogear' are intriguing compounds that might indicate an image of a human figure in contemplation, the head propped up by the hand while the mind is transported to thoughts further afield than the quotidian domain of experience; however, the real jewels of poetic sense that *The Jaguar's Dream* has to offer lie in their ability to harness what can only be called a 'transcendental-material-animalist-sensory faculty.' This compound is evident in these three lines and throughout this poem of over 700 lines. Such interfusion of elements and embodied sensibility suggests resistance to a normalised sense of creation as transport, or elevated consciousness as a mode of knowing – and by extension, controlling. Eco-poetics desires emancipation from the artwork and yet, at present, is wracked with a guilt and loneliness born from a disconnection between humans and their environment that is apocalyptically amplified to the scale of subsequent planetary decline through a loss of ecological literacy. Such art invokes an emotive terrain, a period of our history known as the anthropocene. Kinsella's negotiation of this moral domain as an extension of and causal effect of Enlightenment rationality can be seen within these lines that exemplify his riposte to the crude explorations of cosmologists in 'Bedenimed Cloud': 'Look for their names in constellations | I'll grow microbes over your fractures' (228). Like weeds growing over concrete – or as the North American William Carlos Williams has it, saxifrage splitting the stone – this post-rationalist courage is in part a celebration of the lyric and in part a new

posthuman stance; a stance that is animated by the successful comprehension of exterior or more-than-human worlds operating beyond our categories of knowledge. Moreover, these micro-moments within the poems are indicative of the various standpoints and departures Kinsella takes from the selected ur-texts, which operate to foreground his political intelligence.

‘Not | wishing harm’ (214) understands the principle of *ahisma* – an important religious tenet, literally non-violence towards all living things – but it also acknowledges Walter Benjamin’s view on the task of translator, whereby ‘the language of nature is to be compared to a secret password, which passes on each post the next in its own language, contents of the password’.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin is speaking of language as the expression of the aspect of mental life that is communicable. He is drawing from the notion of language as a method of expression, not particularly a lexical field. Kinsella, most acutely in this collection of translations and adaptations, is adroitly sensitive to Benjamin’s sense of respectful translation within the context of contemporary eco-poetics, as he is sensitive to the naming process through which the essence of man’s being arises. This very essence, according to Benjamin, has not remained creative in man; it must be ‘fertilised’ to forward the language of things themselves. Such fertilisation is a spiritual quest, to allow ‘things’ to shine forth on their own, avoiding violent naming if you will, and enabling fresh points of relation to arise without the dominance of human intention or human instrumentalism. The jaguar’s dream that is the subject of the eponymous poem of the collection is symbolic in this very sense. Fertile relations thus understood vis-à-vis instrumentalism and symbolism is significant for eco-poetics and its concern for literature’s view on physical geography.

‘Zoo Ferry’ is one part of a sustained response to book six of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which details the protagonist’s descent into the underworld and his father’s prophetic vision of the destiny of Rome. One may abstract the following from this moment: lineage, inheritance, envisioning futures; and the transformative role of human action. From these abstractions one can consider the material legacies of anthropocentrism rather than the cultural migrations of things from one era to another.

#### Water

Birds – gulls, terns – would neutralize  
The zoo sounds, and the guttural splutter  
Of the ferry, shallow-draughted, would

Counterpoint the bird calls. (51)

Lineation is key to Kinsella’s dialogical inscape of possibility and potentiality (note the stress on ‘would’ here): ‘water birds’ and ‘counterpoint’ receive significant amplification through the enjambment of the syntactic unit by white space, thus the conspicuous arrangement of things enables the reader to rediscover a sense of separation and classification of the earth’s manifest processes. Simultaneously, lineation here signifies the always already deconstructed binary of *nature* and *culture* – the former is situated within *technology*’s wake in this poem and many others. However, as in this poem, any crude positivist formulation of causality is undercut by the soundscape in *Jaguar’s Dream* that is often set in the foreground to thicken

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’ (1916), *Selected Writings Vol 1*. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996) 74.

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surface appearances and warp linearity. Here, the ‘shrieks and calls of animals’ disconnected from ‘their environments’ (51) pollute the walker’s scene to bring into relief culturally constructed currents or locales – knots in the space-time continuum – that enfold upon one another to indicate a world beyond ‘codes’ and ‘zoos’: a shorthand both for sterile controlled space and false categories of knowledge, incarcerating containers that are witnessed as forces with ‘sun and moon bending’ powers. The ecologically literate reader gains much from this poetic outlook, especially in terms of human sensing, and the forms of distance between human and non-human worlds.

Elsewhere, this rewiring of human sensing to illustrate the possibilities of a subtle proto-ecological consciousness, broadly conceived, is written out as polemic attuned to the power dynamics of ‘this greedy State of Entrepreneurs’ who ‘hack away’ at the earth’s resources in ‘On the Devastating Fallout of The War Against Climate Change Waged by Humans Around the Earth as Witnessed in the Chattering Valley’. Notably, counterpoint in this poem is charged with hope: trees will survive over deep time; trees will re-grow and be re-imagined, ‘they will re-become archetypes’ (74) – a fascinating idea that owes something to geological time and a sense of creation oscillating between elegy and lament, growth and decay. Such tricky manifestations of cyclical patterns and biological resilience are far from romanticised in this collection. At times this collection betokens a view of spiritual life, of *Zoë* (not *bios*, biological life), that is rendered as an oil painting of Henri Rousseau. A thick tapestry of moments of observation in ‘The Jaguar’s Dream’ captures environment – ‘stagnant | humid air’ – and agent – ‘slayer of oxen and horses’ (118) – to move into a human view on animal consciousness represented as a combined mode of intelligence and imagination that can be registered in dreams. This particular combination inflected with post-human emphasis is not easy to locate and yet it is the watermark to this collection.

Form and content are dynamic creators of ultimate sense throughout Kinsella’s interrogation of the capacity of lyric poetry to decentre and resituate the human in space. These collections instantiate what the poet is calling ‘international regionalism’: to open the bond between different geographies and cultures, while respecting the cultural and regional integrity of the participating points, and the fact of the pronominal voice.<sup>3</sup> We are informed that the male gendered jaguar, ‘dreams that in the middle of the green arbours, | With one leap, he sinks his liquid claws | Into the flesh of startled and bellowing bulls’ (118). The slick and expansive stanza of four sense units constructed over 22 lines of generative fluidity match the predator’s imagined stealth. Here, the animal rendered as a symbol of consciousness in flux, is clarified in the final move as something that is not unreflective but is taken from ‘measured | Steps’ sustained in the present participle. As with the impulse to internationalise without obscuring minority literatures, the politics of the representation of animals as ‘others’ in this collection is programmed by a particular empiricism of poetic images that resist the reduction of things to nodes within a network of relations. Readers will find this resistance when they locate agencies of human, animal, landscape and region convincingly left alone to shine forth in their own way. The animal here does not speak for itself; it *dreams* itself into being.

This part philosophical, part aesthetic project takes on an allegorical hue in the extended metaphor of the ‘beast’ that ‘had no existence’ (192) in Kinsella’s ‘Variation on Rilke’s “Sonnet to Orpheus”’ (2, 4). The unnamed, non-existent force, lacking concrete

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<sup>3</sup> John Kinsella, ‘From Regional to International: The Story of *Salt: An International Journal of Poetry and Poetics*,’ *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 38.2 (2003) 7.

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signification, indicates the presence of our failed love and our failed language games; the failure (and concomitant loss) is the problem of Enlightenment dualism, setting things in view but transforming verb to noun, as figured in the making of *poiesis* degraded to the state of production, reducing life into something ‘made’. In Stephen Cohn’s translation of Rilke, the beast is to be beheld as ‘the animal that never was’; fortified and nourished with the idea that ‘space uncompromised and pure’ enable ‘*being*’ to be ‘paramount’ (75);<sup>4</sup> Kinsella, too, has the beast ‘poised’ and fed ‘with the possibility of existence’ (192). Both poets are speaking of freedom. Both translators conceive of life not as something that is necessarily an embryonic form of a future state not yet manifest, but that it is *in process*, within a wider field of *becoming* – or a world that is creatively fertile to draw from Benjamin’s *lexis* – and thus not as easily reduced to an isolated object. And thus not easily exploited by instrumentalists. Kinsella, wise to this poetic stance, delineates freedom thus: ‘And in the space, clear and left aside, | it made its presence known, but scarce | needed to’ (192). The stanza break separating the final two lines provides a double economy of limited animal presence and unnecessary obscurity, yet this marginality does not detract from the autonomy afforded by being ‘left aside’: in its own space; forgotten or missed by the human. This space for the other is the result of diluted human *techne* or skill: anthropogenic agency relinquished for elliptical witness that fails to adumbrate that which is settled (or at home) in the processes (and pure space) of change that our photographic naming cannot fix. It is a position of loss.

Kinsella’s progressive lyrical response to and reworking of Rilke is carried forth into departures from Paul Celan in a series of difficult ‘graphological’ poems at the end of *The Jaguar’s Dream*. These works appear to be informed by Celan’s unsettling celebrations of and revisions to the syntax and morphology of German language. While the haunting background of labour camps in German occupied Ukraine and Wallachia sustain the dark genius of Celan, Kinsella shifts from the obliteration of familial and geographical points of origin to ‘a grinding out of bread growth’ namely the tensions and incommensurable values that lie resident across cultural growth and basic sustenance. This is an understatement of the conflicts between capitalist, market-oriented ownership of materials, and personal, self-sufficient withdrawals from unified, monochrome, hegemonic forces. One notes that Kinsella’s international regionalism gestures towards political internationalism and environmentalist anarchism.

*Jam Tree Gully: Poems* is equally daring and trans-nationalist, and deeply indebted to Henry David Thoreau. 20 of 100 poems use *Walden; or Life in the Woods* for their epigraph; another 20 either take their title from a quotation or paraphrase Thoreau. The collection documents Kinsella’s version of the American poet’s nineteenth-century project in self-reliance, undertaken in a dwelling place outside York, Western Australia, to settle a piece of land and write out a portable sense of place that is attuned to an acute geographic site. As a response to scepticism, husbandry of the WA wheatbelt conflates a literary cartography of location with ecopolitical consciousness. This amalgam transforms the American’s acclimatisation to the shifting seasons, acoustic response to distinct birdcalls, and the cultivation of vegetables; each of these in Kinsella’s version, are pictured as complete and discrete events in themselves. That is to say, they are centres of sensibility, which are alive to psychological processes i.e. the move from impressions to motor fibres that ignite reason and emotion. These specific moments in time are clearly legible as environmentally

<sup>4</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus* with *Letters to a Young Poet* trans. Stephen Cohn (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000).

problematised actions lived out by a sensitive subject who labours amidst nature. They offer a critical revision of pastoral as a mode of selective reflection and an idealised reconstruction of a more complex reality.

I have colours and shapes  
at angles, blurred,  
confrontational; the smell  
is of over-ripening grasses  
and their drying, and that's  
also the sound. ('Four Scenes' 1.5-10).

Here, three sense faculties operate to offer an impressionistic sense of the world that 'leav[es] | out the birds and insects' and 'the hint of larger animals' that are present only through their absence. Thus an ironised version of the world is viewed in terms of a comprehensive analysis of parts and wholes, as indicated both by the season 'over-ripening' and the impossibility of epistemological security or human confidence once one is fully convinced of a depleted world as read through a seasonal aperture on an unfixd scene that is almost 'dying'.

Such complex spatial amalgams that instance degrees of complementarity between human and non-human worlds find their home in the foreground of the collection's strongest poem, 'Survey'. This poem reads like a notebook-in-process, the lyric as compressed mp3 recording of poet-in-situ. The tour around the block leads to the knowledge that dead tree limbs cleared by the surveyor will provide an enclave for ground insects and perches for birds. Environmental knowledge of this kind supports a mind that connects both to the geographical specificity of 'Jam Tree' and the literary heritage that Kinsella is explicitly invoking.

The water-trough I fill for Kangaroos and other  
wildlife in this desiccated habitat is almost  
dry and what moisture remains informs a bloom  
  
of algae. (82)

This poem might best exemplify a new nature poem of the anthropocene: the climatic pastoral of the vacant block. Here, the property viewed at the lyric's primary mode of orientation – the landscape scale of the block seen from a transcendent vantage point – is processed at the level of human action grounded by the act of walking, and yet the lyrical timescape is evident beyond the human experience of its corporeality. Nature comes forth on its own terms via Kinsella's reading and paraphrasing of William James in this poem.<sup>5</sup> While James sensed that emotion derives from self-observation, Kinsella downplays the human sympathetically excited by sensations; his is an emphasis on sensations and physicality. This is no dualism but a bridge across sensory feelings and intellectual excitement. Emotion is not

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<sup>5</sup> The epithet elected for this article is taken from William James, 'What is an emotion?', *Mind* 9.34 (1884), 188-205, 189. For relations between James and Kinsella, see Tom Bristow, 'International Regionalism as American-Australian Dialogue: William James and Henry David Thoreau in John Kinsella's *Jam Tree Gully: Poems*,' *Australasian Journal of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* 2 (2012/3) 57-74.

a songline that runs through particulars in the world, separated yet related. Lyricism is not devoid of moral feeling. These two ideas seem to be at war in these collections that rely upon the referent as a symbol of contingency and as locus for human (misplaced) care.

In 'Sacred Kingfisher and Trough Filled with Water Pumped from Deep Underground' the very same act of husbandry – or somatic effort – replayed with the speaker noting kangaroos and birds coming to the trough, suggests that one consequence of human habits is that we require new vocabularies, otherwise we become accustomed to things too easily. The central theme is the tension between freedom and sustenance, married in bird and man with the action taking place 'With[in] the record heat' of the season. Human-centred reckoning in this version of the same problem – that offering sustenance to one life form (or altering the resources within an ecosystem) impacts on all life in the seasonal biome – contrasts with the wisdom of the bird that reads the coffin-like trough as a container for 'dead water | from deep in the earth' (90). We note the representation of animal consciousness via the controlling lyrical voice, which counterfactually acts as an antidote to the idea of the block as an isolated sphere of perception. This poem is not the same poem as 'Survey'. 'Sacred Kingfisher and Trough Filled with Water Pumped from Deep Underground' moves outwards from the appeal to introspection towards the given lifeworld. This move reflects back upon the site of both poems: the block thus brought into relief as a microcosm of Kinsella's expansive point of view, ironically suggests that nervous centres have their own modes of perception.

Thoreau's 'Spring' is used as epigraph for 'Pressure at the Boundaries (of Jam Tree Gully)', to foreground a human sense of inheritance of land (rather than history) that extends to 'plastic emotions' meeting 'quasi-scientific' desires, which are detailed against a backdrop of an orange crowned hill and the overwhelming death of trees: 'groundwater | vanquished | And surface evaporated' (143). This use of Thoreau as a platform for Kinsella's pastoral negativity that plays with depth of field is worth comparison to the American's chapter, 'The Ponds', which anticipates his seasonal ruminations at the close of *Walden* and its contemplation of the smooth surfaces of the ponds, alive with no disturbances. These material events in the Concord landscape act as metaphor for a relatively cool mind, albeit animated and excited by the apostrophe to spring. This relaxed *view* on things, an interiority or state of mind, suggests that one way to keep calm in the face of environmental anxiety is to resist the fallacy of cooperation and to embrace the solidity of material events present to consciousness; to engage with illuminative moments whether or not they recognise us or speak directly to us. This acute sensibility to things, objects, and events, at least in its literary form as instanced by Kinsella, invokes human impact while carefully mapping dependencies and relations between things. This reflexivity constitutes a twenty-first century position in nature poetry that is heightened by the posthumanist impulse to provide pluralist accounts of humans, birds, and marsupials, which extend the post-Romantic frame of the lyrical 'I' to an international regionalism that quietly betokens a new Whitmanian and Wordsworthian ecologically oriented expansive selfhood.

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