

On the Death of Plants: John Kinsella's Radical Pastoralism and the Weight of Botanical Melancholia

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Abstract

Through the poetry of Australian writer and activist John Kinsella (b. 1963), this article emphasizes the actual, embodied—rather than metaphorical—dimensions of the death of plants vis-à-vis the pressing international context of accelerating botanical diversity loss (Hopper) and the anthropogenic disruption of floristic communities globally (Pandolfi and Lovelock). On many levels—scientific, ecological, social, metaphysical—a fuller appreciation of plant life necessitates an understanding of their decline, decay, and demise. Toward a more nuanced appreciation of plant lives, the discussion draws a distinction—but aims to avoid a binary—between *biogenic* and *anthropogenic* instances of plant-death. Considering the correlation between vegetal existence, human well-being, and our co-constituted lives and deaths, I assert that a more encompassing and ecoculturally transformative outlook on plants involves not only an acknowledgement of their qualities of percipient aliveness but also a recognition of their senescence and perishing. Kinsella's poetry reflects such themes. His *botanical melancholia* derives from the gravely fragmented locus of his ecological consciousness: the ancient, native plantscape existing as small, disconnected remnants within the agro-pastoral wheatbelt district of Western Australia. Consequently, rather than a marginal occurrence in his work, plant-death is essential to Kinsella's enunciation of a form of Australian radical pastoralism. His poetry provides a counterforce to the idyllic textualization of botanical nature as existing in an unimpacted Arcadian state of harmony, balance, and equitable exchange with the built environment (Kinsella, *Disclosed* 1–46).

Keywords: Australian poetry, John Kinsella, critical plant studies, radical pastoralism

Resumen

A través de la poesía del escritor y activista australiano John Kinsella (1963), este artículo hace hincapié en las dimensiones reales, en vez de metafóricas, de la muerte de las plantas frente al apremiante contexto internacional de acelerar la pérdida de diversidad botánica (Hopper) y la alteración antropogénica de las comunidades florísticas a nivel mundial (Pandolfi y Lovelock). En muchos niveles, científico, ecológico, social-metafísico, una apreciación más completa de la vida vegetal requiere una comprensión de su declive, decadencia y desaparición. Hacia una apreciación más matizada de las vidas de las plantas, el debate suscita una distinción, pero tiene como objetivo evitar un dualismo, entre ejemplos *biogénicos* y *antropogénicos* de muertes de plantas. Teniendo en cuenta la correlación entre la existencia vegetal, el bienestar humano, y nuestras vidas y muertes co-constituidas, afirmo que una perspectiva más abarcadora y transformadora eco-culturalmente sobre las plantas implica no sólo un reconocimiento de sus cualidades de vitalidad perspicaz sino también un reconocimiento de su senectud y ruina. La poesía de Kinsella refleja este tipo de temas. Su *melancolía botánica* deriva del locus seriamente fragmentado de su conciencia ecológica: el paisajismo vegetal antiguo y nativo que existe como restos pequeños, desconectados dentro del distrito agropastoral del cinturón-de-trigo de Australia Occidental. En

consecuencia, en lugar de un mínimo hecho en su obra, la muerte de la planta es esencial para la enunciación de Kinsella del pastoreo radical australiano. Su poesía proporciona un como un contrapeso a una textualización idílica de la naturaleza botánica que existe en un estado arcádico e inmaculado de armonía, equilibrio, e intercambio equitativo con el entorno construido (Kinsella, *Disclosed* 1–46).

Palabras clave: poesía australiana, John Kinsella, estudios críticos de la planta, pastoreo radical.

Where the almond tree died, so died the wattle.
That parabola can take no life for long. If borers
are below the surface,
they will move on. They have killed the already dead.
When the last leaves fell they flagged independence:
thin acacia leaf became the hearted leaf
of the almond: it all added up in going.

-John Kinsella

"Where the Almond Tree" (*Armour* 29, ll. 1–7)

Introduction: Shades of Plant Life and Death

Without a doubt, many of us as children or adults have formed potent bonds to the botanical world and have mourned the passing of cherished plants. Nonetheless, few of us—except for perspicacious botanical writers like Henry David Thoreau, Richard Mabey, and others—have substantively engaged with the intricacies of vegetal lives and deaths apart from their emotional, decorative, scientific, or utilitarian importance. Why does a tree, shrub, or herbaceous plant die? And when should the death of a plant matter to us? These questions embody divergent—though not mutually exclusive—aspects of mortality in the vegetal kingdom. To begin with, it is necessary to disentangle the knottiness of plant-death. Let me refer to one form as *biogenic* death. This entails the material decay and demise of plants: the withering of leaves, rotting of roots, shedding of bark, and falling of limbs as ecological occurrences implicated in the regeneration of biospheric systems and the proliferation of obligate species (Van der Valk). The second form could be called *anthropogenic* death: the felling of trunks, poisoning of rhizomes, and destruction of floristic enclaves as acts of botanical negligence or "ecocide" promulgated by humans (White and Heckenberg 115). Whether anthropogenic or biogenic, plant-death signifies the end of a single vegetal life, the demise of a floristic collective, or the farther-reaching cessation of a botanical species as the genetic matrix making possible the generation of plants. In the harrowing context of the Anthropocene (Steffen, Crutzen and McNeill), the Sixth Extinction (also known as the Holocene Extinction) (Kolbert), and anthropogenic climate change (Parmesan and Hanley), both forms of plant-death take on an eerie significance.

According to *The State of the World's Plants Report*, one in five (or approximately twenty-one percent of), plant species on earth is presently regarded by scientists as

nearing extinction (Kew 3). Yet, only five percent of plants across the globe have been assessed for extinction, suggesting a potentially much higher actual percentage of species facing a complete end. The tragic irony is that, despite increasing threats to botanical taxa and communities the world over, researchers continue to identify previously unclassified plants on an annual basis. For instance, in 2015, two-thousand-and-thirty-four new vascular plant species were registered in the International Plant Names Index (Kew 10), leaving us to speculate about the species already lost to the scientific record, and those that will be. Moreover, whether biogenic or anthropogenic, vegetal death can spur resonances within human subjects in the wake of plants ceasing to live. Emotive responses of grief, mourning, and melancholia intertwine with symbolic nodes of attachment to the natural world. One possibility of the metaphorization of nature is plant-death standing in for something other than itself: the ultimate finitude of the human condition or the entropic decay of society, relations, love, knowledge, idealism, potentiality, or the future itself.

Regarding the poetic history of death in the plant kingdom, consider, for instance, the rhetorical timbres of Walt Whitman's meditation on death, "Scented Herbage of My Breast," a poem in which he addresses the rhizomatous sweet flag (*Acorus calamus*) as a plant persona: "You are often more bitter than I can bear, you burn and sting me, / Yet you are beautiful to me you faint tinged roots, you make me / think of death, / Death is beautiful from you, (what indeed is finally beautiful / except death and love?)" (Whitman, ll. 14–18). Notwithstanding gestures of empathic identification with the calamus, the poem obscures the real life and death of the plant through the rhetorical appropriation of its vegetality for sentimental reflection. Also suggestive of the metaphorization of plant-death is American Romantic poet William Cullen Bryant's "The Death of the Flowers" (Bryant 101–102). The poem opens with the line "The melancholy days are come, the saddest of the year" (Bryant 101, l. 1), enumerating in the third stanza the violets, roses, orchids, golden rods, asters, sunflowers, and other flowers that are "in their graves" during the saddest season (l. 14). Through the contemporary example of Kinsella's botanical imagination, I emphasize plant-death absent of metaphoric totalization and in its manifold sensory and ecological impact—with passing reference to plant-death, in contrast, as an object of melancholic identification or as a rhetorical device deployed by poets, such as Whitman, through the ages.

To be sure, the questions of when and why a plant dies are rendered complex by the biological capacity of plants for adaptation through plurality—their innate predisposition toward "being singular plural" (Nancy). A salient example is the gargantuan trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) colony known as Pando—adopted from the Latin term for "I spread"—identified in 1968 by forest ecologist Burton Barnes and later characterized by geneticists as the world's largest organism (DeWoody et al.; Rogers). *P. tremuloides* is notable for reproducing vegetatively through root sprouting, or suckering, enabling the formation of genetically identical stems, known as ramets, constitutive of one ancient, sprawling, but living (not fossilized) plant. The forty-seven-thousand stems of the Pando clonal colony register at approximately thirteen million pounds. What's more, the organism encompasses one-hundred acres in the western U.S.

state of Utah; and scientific estimates of its age range wildly from eighty-thousand to one million years old. In this instantiation of vegetal longevity and resilience, the death of a single aspen tree—as we recognize it visually—need not signify the demise of the entire clonal system. As a result of its persistence for millennia by virtue of a tenacious root system, Pando seems at once inconceivable, limitless, and immortal from a narrow human temporal perspective. Nonetheless, empirical studies indicate that the intensive grazing of domestic and wild herbivores in conjunction with prolonged drought conditions have led to a pronounced absence of young ramets and the senescence of the Pando colony (Rogers).

The clonal propagation of *P. tremuloides* ensures that the loss of an individual aspen's life is not likely to precipitate the demise of the colony. Whereas the Pando epitomizes this systemic capacity, in other instances plants display the uncanny aptitude to return from the brink of ordinarily death-dealing conditions, specifically drought and dehydration. This is acutely so for *resurrection plants*—a small grouping of species that occur globally and can survive complete desiccation, resuming normal physiological function when rehydrated. Although the exact mechanism of their reverting metabolic arrest has not been fully identified, a subset of resurrection plants, characterized as *poikilochlorophyllous*, make use of protein-mediated biochemical pathways to disassemble their chloroplasts and degrade their chlorophyll, which are then resynthesized during rewetting (Challabathula, Puthur and Bartels). A well-known example, the rose of Jericho (*Selaginella lepidophylla*), a species native to the Chihuahu Desert of the United States and Mexico, returns to green approximately twenty-four hours after rehydration as photosynthesis and respiration recommence normal levels (Lambers, Chapin and Pons 213). In biodiverse Western Australia, the pincushion lily (*Borya nitida*)—the subject of Kinsella's poem "Resurrection Plants at Nookaminnie Rock" (*Armour* 53)—withstands dehydration to below five percent of its typical leaf moisture content, as signaled by the orange color of the leaves that revert to green within a day of receiving rain (Hopper, Brown and Marchant). Resurrection plants exemplify the courting death by paring down—then resuscitating—physiological processes in correspondence to fluctuating ecological circumstances.

In contradistinction to these plants and the Pando, other expressions of plant mortality entail the cessation of vegetal lives deprived of their intrinsic right to exist and flourish independently of human directives. Anthropogenic in origin, such deaths derive less from environmental circumstances and more from human negligence, the absence of an ethics of care, distorted modernist visions of progress, myopic anti-environmentalist attitudes, and pervasive misconceptions about the ways flora adapts to stress over time. A story from a Perth, Australia, newspaper captures the harsh finality of careless human-spurred plant death as well as the response of outrage that can ensue once botanophilic ("plant loving") members of the community become aware of local plant-related injustices. The government agency, Main Roads WA, which manages the implementation of policies on road access in Western Australia, chainsawed a healthy jarrah tree (*Eucalyptus marginata*) showing faint indications of decay. Estimated at between five-hundred and one-thousand years in age, the specimen's final transgression

was its harboring of a supposedly dangerous beehive. As a result, Main Roads deemed the jarrah a public hazard and furtively targeted the tree for removal. A prominent botanist, Hans Lambers, interviewed about the travesty likened the felling of the jarrah to “ecological vandalism” and “burning the Mona Lisa” (qtd. in Young).

Indeed, the massive eucalypt was one of only thirteen remaining in the Swan Coastal Plain of Perth—an area noted for biodiversity but which has lost approximately seventy percent of its native plants since European colonization in the early nineteenth century (Seddon). This is the broader biogeographical and biopolitical context in which Kinsella’s radical pastoralism is situated and provoked. The impetus of the government agency could have been to incite—through the indiscretely public and brashly cruel gesture of the tree’s felling—the removal of native vegetation to open the way for the controversial Roe 8 highway development project (Rethink the Link). In this instance, the death of the jarrah mattered, on the one hand, to a government bureaucracy because the colossal specimen posed a physical and symbolic impediment to the capitalistic drive and, on the other hand, to local conservationists who recognized the age, size, stature, rarity, endemism, and ecological function of the tree. For the latter group, the decaying appearance of the jarrah signified its potential to nourish the well-being of other species, as Lambers relates, but within the definitiveness of its death echoes the stark absence of an irreplaceable ecological presence: “half-dead trees and trees with dead branches with hollows provide important nesting space for our parrots and cockatoos” (qtd. in Young). In addition to provoking ethical deliberation on plant-death, the story of the jarrah underscores the question of temporality: given the peculiar ontological modes of the vegetal—its uncanny capacity to integrate death into its being—when does life in the the botanical kingdom actually cease? For Michael Marder, the consideration of plant-death is reflective of the “decentralized and nonorganismic” nature of vegetable existence. The event of death does not consolidate the decentralized plant subject into a perceptibly dying organism (like an animal in the throes of death, eyes rolling back and breath sputtering) nor does it bring about the end of life for plants with comparable finality as death rendered for the animal (Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant* 187).

[...] Diggings

around termite scaffolding at the foot
of died-and-reborn York gums. Roots.

The dead have been gathering.

And, to be frank, accruing.

They are phenomenally heavy,

like self-doubt or self-belief. (Kinsella, “Harsh Hakea [or Elements of the Subject’s Will]”
132, ll. 9–15)

Toward a Philosophy of Plant-Death: Modularity, Desire, Dignity

Whereas the death of animals has been debated in the field of *critical animal studies* (CAS) (Taylor and Twine), the death of plants has been treated as a tangential

event in posthumanist and ecocritical studies. After all, if a plant is construed as lacking percipient sentience—and is, thus, inferior to animals and humans in the great chain of being—then its death should matter to us neither personally, socially, nor intellectually. On a functional level, plants are the nuisances we eradicate (weeds) or the nutriment we consume (fruits, vegetables, herbs) on a regular basis: their deaths make life (and the pleasure of living) possible. In contrast to this utilitarian perspective, my intention in this article is to invigorate a consideration of these nuances through the poetry of John Kinsella; and to position poetry as a vital medium for enunciating the lives of silent, sessile non-humans beyond the use-value of their deaths. Not merely a symbol of human mortality or social decline, plant-death is the immanent, embodied expression of vegetative ensoulment. To understand plant-death is to acknowledge its intricate ecological manifestations. Although from widely ranging corners of the globe, the Pando colony, resurrection plant, and jarrah eucalypt emblemize three permutations of plant-death essential to locating Kinsella's radical pastoralism vis-à-vis native Western Australian flora.

The example of Pando conveys the inherent capacity—or *dunamis*, to adopt a term from Aristotle (Marder, *Plant-Thinking* 36)—of plants for decay, as the poietic correlate of growth, but also the ways in which vegetal being uniquely conscripts death and its mechanisms of senescence and decay for survival. The *dunamis* of Pando for vegetative multiplicity and anatomical repetition perpetuates the arboreal collective regardless of the death of an individual plant or loss of a body part (leaf, stem, root, flower). One of the defining features of vegetal life of particular interest to thinkers historically has been its pronounced *modularity*: the recurrence within the corpus of a plant of basic units—or functionally analogous structures—of growth (Trewavas 50). In relation to a plant's "body plan" (Baluška et al.), the principle of modularity describes the repetition of growth units. In fact, modularity is the reason why plants can survive intensive grazing by herbivores by sacrificing parts—leaves, flowers, stems—without dying. In contrast, the loss of an anatomical segment for most animals is typically catastrophic. For seed-producing flowering plants, known as angiosperms, repeated patterns of leaves, branches, nodes, buds, flowers, fruits, and root meristems constitute their modularity. The *metamer*—the structural subunit replicated over the lifetime of a plant—comprises an internode and a node with associated leaves and meristems as the basis for larger modules, including branches and stems (Herrera 2). Considering this unique evolutionary mechanism, physiologist Anthony Trewavas asserts that plants are "intensely modular" (Trewavas 42). In classical antiquity, Aristotle's pupil, Theophrastus (circa 371–287 BCE), noted plant modularity in his treatise *De Causis Plantarum* (*On the Causes of Plants*)—one of the most important early botanical texts in Western philosophy. He commented that "every tree has many starting-points for sprouting and fruiting. This [...] is of the essence of a plant, that it also lives from a multitude of parts, which is why it can also sprout from them" (Theophrastus 85). Much later reflecting Theophrastus' observations, the polymath and early plant morphologist, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), in his long poem *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790), conceptualized plant foliage as the homologous basis—the repeated structural

unit—of flowers and fruits: “Like unto each the form, yet non alike; / And so the choir hints a secret law, / A sacred mystery” (Goethe 1, ll. 5–7).

Unlike the clonal reproduction of the long-lived aspen, the resurrection plant returns from a provisional state of metabolic arrest that would spell the end for less hardy plant species. This unusual example lays bare the particular vegetal dynamic of life (and living) within their deaths (and dying) as integrated ecological processes involving minimal human intervention. In Aristotelian entelechy, the vegetative soul is characterized by the dual movement of the plant toward liveliness, nourishment, and growth, and toward decline, decay, and death. The latent potential for aliveness inheres within the potential for death, and the reverse is true. In Aristotle’s triadic hierarchy, plant ensoulment constituted “an originative power through which they increase or decrease in all spatial directions” and live out their lives through the continuous absorption of nutriment (Aristotle 700). Moreover, the nutritive soul of the plant—“possessed by everything that is alive” (Aristotle 732)—conferred the basis for the birth, existence, and death of the higher-order lives of the sensitive and intellective souls. Without the corporeal surrendering of the plant to other organisms (being grazed, harvested, pruned), life on earth as we know it could not exist. According to Aristotle, like animals and human beings, plants grow, mature, and decay in correspondence to sustenance received from the environment, including photosynthetically from the sun. In his treatise “On Youth, Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration,” the philosopher recognizes that plants vegetatively circumvent the finality of death and, in doing so, ingeniously proliferate through their own process of dismemberment: “plants when cut into sections continue to live, and a number of trees can be derived from one single source” (Aristotle 791). The ability of some plants to propagate profusely through vegetative division signified, for Aristotle, the corresponding entelechy of the vegetative soul in its heterogeneity: “It is true that the nutritive soul, in beings possessing it, while actually single must be potentially plural” (Aristotle 791).

The Aristotelian theory of ensoulment privileges the sensitive (animal) and intellective (human) over the nutritive (plant). In a similar vein, contemporary philosophy of death reinscribes the pernicious presumption that plants bear neither mental life nor sentience worth considering and that, hence, their ceasing to live should matter less than animal and human deaths. Reflecting the conceptual conventions and terminologies of Western philosophy of death, Christopher Belshaw invokes the Aristotelian order in discerning between a *desire view* (as true) and a *life view* (as false) approaches to ascertaining whether death is a “good” or “bad” outcome for a living thing. For Belshaw, the desire view reflects categorical desires—those unconditional desires that arise independently of our living long enough to see them eventuate or materialize. A desire view depends on a being’s capacity to desire: life is something a subject wants to live. In contrast, a life view suggests that death can be bad even when such desires are absent or (in the case of plants) cannot readily be identified—but when life, health, and pleasurable experience are present—because death prevents more life regardless of the desires a being has. Belshaw concludes that having “future-directed categorical desires is a necessary condition of my death’s being bad for me [or for other beings]” (278).

A glaring presupposition within the desire view is that plants lack mentation, sentience, and categorical desires: a plant desiring sunlight, nutrition, water, comfort, or to proliferate is superficial metaphor. An activity, such as felling an ancient jarrah with bravado, understood as compromising vegetal well-being, for Belshaw, reflects a life view of plant-death, which is false. Even if one were to adopt a life view, “from conceding that death is bad for the plant it doesn’t at all follow that we should be exercised about plant death, regret its occurrence, or make any sacrifices to prevent it” (Belshaw 290). Yet, as the field of plant signaling and behavior indicates through empirical outcomes (for example, Trewavas), plants have a kind of inner life—the exact nature of which we are not yet completely sure—affirmed by their ability to learn and remember. In light of this burgeoning science and hastened by the exponential loss of plant species across the globe, a more nuanced consideration of plant-death and, more generally, human-plant relations has been put forward (Hall; Heyd; Marder, “Is It Ethical”; Pouteau; Koechlin). If plants have a mental life and can experience pain (which we cannot and should not rule out), then death is bad for them, as it is for us; and while we must nonetheless eat, drink, and otherwise use plants for our benefit, their deaths can matter to them and us, and their living and dying can have dignity. As a contentious example of plant ethics in the public domain, the Swiss government’s Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology report *The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants* (Swiss Confederation) was inspired by emerging scientific studies of plant sensitivities. For the authors of the report, that plant roots distinguish between self and non-self implies their subjectivity and cognition, notwithstanding the general socio-political “refusal to understand plants as something other than living automatons” (Koechlin 79).

Kinsella’s Radical (Vegetal) Pastoralism: Plant-Death and Melancholia

Having considered the manifestations of death in the plant kingdom—biogenic, anthropogenic, and the interplay of both—as well as the dignity of plants, it is appropriate to ask: How have plant-death and its ethical consideration impacted the landscape poetry of Western Australian writer John Kinsella and his practice of radical pastoralism? The possibility of plant ethics brings us closer to the consideration of our lives and deaths, including the embodied, emotional, and spiritual effects on humans of plant life ceasing to exist. Regardless of the myriad forms the responses and effects take (desperation, withdrawal, indifference, anger, impoverishment, malaise, disease), there remains at the center of plant-death the demise of an actual non-human entity—the termination of a vegetal life, the cessation of the possibility for more life and experience—as definitive and final as the toppling of the five-hundred-year-old jarrah. Let’s remain a while longer with the idea of our own deaths inhering within vegetal otherness. In comparison to the Pando and resurrection plant (which I conceptualized—albeit crudely—as exemplifying biogenic modalities of death and life-within-death), the jarrah instantiates the direct, injurious interference with plant being that, at once, reduces the capacity of companion species—including ourselves and our kith and kin—to actualize the full potential of ecological interrelatedness. More simply put, as plants

die, so do we, though our deaths might not necessarily be physical and can, instead, manifest as an obdurate sense of loss and malaise. As the comments of Lambers intimate, the anthropogenic death of plants can often lack ethical grounding (Young). This kind of wanton plant-death can incite outrage over the despoliation of vegetal nature, followed with the weight of botanical melancholia involving lingering feelings of personal helplessness and community violation.

An ethics of botanical life figures conspicuously into Kinsella's eco-poetic corpus—which combines acute sensory awareness of habitats and meticulous ecological knowledge of native flora (Ryan 254–56). While pictured in reference to the beautiful and sublime, Kinsella's wheatbelt plantscape reflects intense rupture and stark polarization between human and other-than-human actants in the Western Australian context. Kinsella's sense of ecological ethics enciphers a poetics of fragments in which his fracturing of the whole (of the poem, of the landscape representation) calls the writerly self into question. In Kinsella's understanding, "language contains all possible meanings in the fragment as much as entirely" (*Disclosed Poetics* 237). Hence, his radical pastoralism—pivoting, to a significant extent, on the poeticization of plant-death—often makes use of fragmentary sequences that upend narrative lyricism while maintaining a sense of movement within the text (*Disclosed Poetics* 133). Notwithstanding the tenor of ecological despondency echoed in his fragments, Kinsella also revels introspectively, at times, in the complexities of vegetal living and dying, revealing a multifaceted perspective on plant death and dying as a wellspring of hope and change. An illustrative case is *Jam Tree Gully*, titled after the raspberry jam tree, *Acacia acuminata*, for the fragrant odor of the cut timber. Jam Tree Gully is also the name of Kinsella's residence near the Avon Valley of Western Australia in "York gum and jam tree country" (Kinsella, *Spatial Relations* 66). The collection expresses an acute attachment to place and an ethics grounded in kinship and empathy with local vegetation. Through epigraphs and other allusions, the poetry also strikes a temporally distributed intertextual dialogue with the nineteenth-century American botanophile, Henry David Thoreau, whose intellectual-experiential investigations of plant life feature in his posthumous books *Faith in a Seed* and *Wild Fruits*. In the poem "First Lines Typed at Jam Tree Gully," Kinsella notes with haptic resonances the "rampage / of dead and living trees, / entire collapsed structures, / signs of fire as jam-tree bark / blackened crumbles with touch" (Kinsella, "First Lines Typed at Jam Tree Gully" 79, ll. 15–19), but the reader is left to contemplate the probable causes of the burning.

I situate Kinsella's botanical poetics within the context of a radical pastoralism that recognizes the demise of the vegetal as a source of *botanical melancholia*: the poet's intersubjective response to plant-death not as an externalized phenomenon in the environment out there but as one with internal, personal repercussions for human welfare. Rather than a trivial consideration or insignificant event, plant-death—as expressed in Kinsella's oeuvre—is implicated in the fragmentation and despoilment of the once remarkably plant diverse and sustainably managed 140,000-square-kilometer wheatbelt region (for historical background, see Beresford et al.). At the onset of European colonization, the wheatbelt consisted principally of an intricate mosaic of

salmon gum (*E. salmonophloia*), York gum (*E. loxophleba*), and wandoo (*E. wandoo*) woodlands. Since the mid-1800s, the ecological devastation of the wheatbelt and surrounding areas has been precipitated by the removal of native woodland vegetation for the production of wheat, barley, canola, and sheep. As portrayed poignantly in the documentary *A Million Acres a Year* (2002), by 1968, over 130,000 square kilometers had been cleared through a relentless campaign that continued into the late 1980s (Rijavec, Harrison and Bradby). In the central part, known as the Avon Botanical District, more than ninety-three percent of the native flora has been removed, and up to ninety-seven percent of the eucalypt woodlands erased (Bradshaw 112–113). Apparent in the preternatural glow of salt ponds, the eradication of well-adapted floristic communities—particularly endemic gums that held salt levels in check underground—triggered the salinization of the topsoil, or what analysts call “the salinity crisis” (Beresford). Other factors impinging on the remaining vegetation include industrial mining activities (Latimer), diseases such as the root-rot fungus *Phytophthora cinnamomi* (Environment Australia), and introduced plant species that swiftly displace native counterparts (Prober and Smith).

Regarding Kinsella’s eco-poetics of plants, the distinction I have posited between biogenic and anthropogenic death collapses through the interpenetration of human and vegetal living and dying. For Kinsella, the plant mirrors back to us the exigencies of our demise, mourning, and melancholia. Yet the physicality and ecology of its death remain. As the regional context of Kinsella’s poetics, the wheatbelt poignantly underscores the historical and contemporary truncation of the potentialities of native plants—their deaths rendered *in toto* (as the ninety-five percent rate of clearance grimly attests), largely without ethical deliberation or expressions of care; and their lives socially constructed as impediments to modernist techno-industrial progress. Within this bleak ecological—and, arguably, anti-ecological—milieu, Kinsella characterizes his eco-poetic practice as “radical pastoralism” (a term synonymous with “poison pastoralism” and a variant of “anti-pastoralism”). To be sure, Kinsella’s radical pastoral is one in a long line of different conceptualizations of the pastoral by commentators. In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) and, later, in the essay “Does Pastoralism Have a Future?” (1992), the critic Leo Marx identified a peculiarly American version—the so-called complex pastoral—in which the pastoral idyll of the landscape intersects with ecological counterforces that destabilize the idyll. Ecocritic Greg Garrard later proposed the term “radical pastoral” as a poetics of resisting the marginalization of nature and engendering “a genuine counter-hegemonic ideology” (464). Garrard built upon critic Terry Gifford’s contemporaneous identification of the *anti-pastoral* as a counter-tradition embodying the principal tension of “how to find a voice that does not lose sight of authentic connectness with nature, in the process of exposing the language of the idyll” (Gifford, *Green Voices* 55). More recently, Gifford has underscored the proliferation of versions of the pastoral—including the anti-pastoral, postmodern pastoral, post-pastoral, and others—highlighting the incidence of historical shifts in meaning (“Pastoral”). Whereas the term *pastoral* came to denote, in the history of English literature, any work describing the countryside in distinction to the city or court

(Gifford, "Pastoral" 19), the post-pastoral attempts to reach beyond the original restraints of the pastoral (26). In particular, post-pastoral works depict a collapse of the human/nature divide alongside an awareness of the problems triggered by such a collapse (Gifford, "Pastoral" 26).

As representative of the pastoral, consider the idyllic depiction of botanical harmony in the image of Wordsworth's "[...] host of dancing Daffodils; / Along the Lake, beneath the trees, / Ten thousand dancing in the breeze" (qtd. in Robinson 38). In sharp relief, Kinsella's radical pastoralism of plants fuses lyrical impressions of the wheatbelt environment and a naturalist's first-hand observations of flora with a prevailing sense of the disruption of the vegetal idyll through "linguistic disobedience" often enacted through the insertion of poetic fragments into the text (Kinsella, *Disclosed Poetics* 127). Kinsella's botanical imagination is rooted equally in the regional (Phillips and Kinsella) and global (Gander and Kinsella) ecological crises. Deeply personal and observationally rigorous, his botanical poetics is not delimited by speculative, objective distance but, instead, is entangled corporeally in native plantscapes and histories of place (Kinsella, *Disclosed Poetics*). The long-term biopolitical campaign to eradicate native flora is an extension of the region's troubled colonial past. Despite being an ecocidal locus for plants, the wheatbelt and South-western Australia, more generally, retain vestiges of floristic diversity as islands within the pastoral, enabling Kinsella to maintain "authentic connectness with nature," in Gifford's original terms, while subverting the literary tradition of botanical idyllicism and the regional Anglo-Australian histories of habitat destruction.

Indeed, Kinsella re-interprets the radical pastoral for an Australian context. In *Disclosed Poetics* and elsewhere, Kinsella sharply differentiates between the *anti-pastoral* and *radical pastoral*. For Kinsella, the Australian anti-pastoral characterizes poets located in (or writing about) rural spaces who challenge the bucolic myths promulgated by colonial culture and literary heritage (Kinsella, *Disclosed Poetics* 9). Although, in Kinsella's analysis, few pastoral Australian poets can be described as radical, most poets exhibit acute awareness of the history and limitations of the genre as "an idyllicised representation of the rural world, most often for the allegorical delectation of urban or town audiences" (Kinsella, *Disclosed Poetics* 11). Critic Dennis Haskell characterizes the anti-pastoral aesthetics of Kinsella's *The Silo: A Pastoral Symphony* as "an exorcism" (Haskell 94) of the colonialist history of land appropriation and the poet's personal remorse in partaking in the devastation during his youth. As Kinsella comments on his awareness, "Death was a fantasy / made real / in the bush enclaves" (qtd. in Haskell 94). In contrast to the anti-pastoral, the radical pastoral upends "the norms of pastoral telling, of pastoral singing, and pastoral convention" and expresses a desire for "radical change" (Kinsella, *Disclosed Poetics* 10). In the former, "the clearing of native vegetation [and] the poisoning of land, water, and air" are textualized in their full extent and affect—rather than codified through linguistic sleights of hand—as "an active undoing of the [pastoral] tradition" (Kinsella, *Disclosed Poetics* 10–11). Additionally, for Kinsella, the Australian pastoral tradition is "a vehicle of nationalist yearning" and "the ultimate tool of nationalistic sentiment" (Kinsella, *Spatial*

Relations 191)—and, for that reason, a subject of poetic subversion at least partially rendered through engagement with plant-death. His practice of radical ecopoetics forms a sharp critique of the pastoral as a tradition underlying the ecological devastation of the wheatbelt and the related displacement of Aboriginal cultures throughout Australia (Reed).

Kinsella's poetic engagement with plant-death reflects, on the one hand, the ruination of the wheatbelt ecosystem, on the other, positive and negative environmental memories from his predominantly rural upbringing. Although Kinsella grew up mostly in the suburbs of Perth, his family retreated regularly to a farm outside York, Western Australia, where he nurtured a naturalist's ability to observe the flora, fauna, and fungi of his immediate environs (Hughes-d'Aeth 20) but also committed acts of ecological transgression, including the wanton shooting of birds (Kinsella, *Disclosed Poetics* 39). A mechanic and farm manager, his father worked the open country where industrial-scale broadacre farming eventually supplanted the unique sandplain vegetation known as *kwongan* (Lambers). An early immersion in rural places and the engendering of environmental awareness based on the interplay between life and death—"I wandered the bush as a child quoting Keats" (Kinsella, *Disclosed Poetics* 223)—certainly appears to have counterweighed any inclination toward *plant blindness* during his upbringing. Formulated by environmental educators, this term denotes the prevalent inability to notice the flora of one's surroundings or the ingrained understanding of vegetal life as the stationary backdrop to animal and human activities (Wandersee and Schussler). To the contrary, Kinsella's ecopoetics exhibits pronounced botanical attunement, but within the delimitations of the wheatbelt and as a function of a radical pastoral ethics, in the manner he has conceptualized it. Instances from his non-fiction writings point to an abiding consciousness of flora, particularly the wheatbelt eucalypts that sustain ecological interrelationships in a state of death-within-life. He comments on "the straggling York gums with their mud-encrusted termite colonies wrapping around their trunks, winding up through *the dead wood the living wood embraces* [emphasis added]" (Kinsella, *Spatial Relations* 106). Here, we are reminded of the vegetal capacity—particularly manifested by the gum trees of South-western Australia—to exist in a condition of death-within-life that is internally supportive (of its living wood) while also externally imbricated (with termite colonies). Indeed, as Aristotle noted, plants "increase or decrease in all spatial directions"—a habitus facilitated by their vegetative entelechy (700).

If the dead wood of the York gum is emblematic of biogenic death—the decline, decay, and demise of plants as adaptive, ecological beings—then the slaying of the Swan River jarrah is representative of anthropogenic death. Kinsella's ecopoetics intersects with both forms of death in the wheatbelt. Yet, to understand the poet's textualization of human impacts on vegetal life further, it is crucial to consider *botanical melancholia* as a plant-attentive expression of environmental melancholia (Lertzman) and solastalgia (Albrecht, "Solastalgia"; Albrecht, "'Solastalgia': A New Concept"). Renee Lertzman defines *environmental melancholia* as "a condition in which even those who care deeply about the well-being of ecosystems and future generations are paralyzed to translate

such concern into action" (4). For Lertzman, following Freud's well-known analysis of unresolved mourning, environmental melancholia can involve anxiety, ambivalence, sadness, loss, and despair, as well as an anticipatory sense of mourning the ecological losses to come (6). Moreover, one can be locked in a state of inactivity and isolation as a result of the general social lack of recognition of such losses. Although ecological threats have the potential to shatter traditional certainties (such as air, water, seasons, and the existence of flora), Lertzman argues that, in due course, environmental melancholia can become a source of active engagement in the protection of human and non-human well-being. Correspondingly, *solastalgia* recognizes "the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory" (Albrecht, "'Solastalgia': A New Concept" 48). Defined as the "homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'" (Albrecht, "'Solastalgia': A New Concept" 48), solastalgia entails emotional distress that is intensified through the first-hand experience of one's home-place (for Kinsella, the wheatbelt) deteriorating in the past, present, and future.

Following Lertzman and Albrecht, *botanical melancholia* can be defined as a solastalgic condition in which people who identify intimately with plants are either paralyzed or called to action by the anxiety, despair, and grief of witnessing the loss of individual specimens (the jarrah) or whole botanical communities (the wheatbelt). The model I put forward aims to offset an object-cathexis paradigm of environmental mourning, which risks relegating plant-death to a signifier of human mortality, of societal decline, or of "hyperobjects" (Morton), particularly climate change and species extinction. Shunning a human-centered paradigm of ecological grief, botanical melancholia recognizes the imbrications between biogenic and anthropogenic processes of plant-death. In certain instances, the manner in which a plant dies might not entirely concern a human mourner: the life of a plant disappears regardless of the causes. What is more certain is that the widespread annihilation of plant individuals and assemblages for long-standing, botanically-minded occupants of a place, such as the wheatbelt, can be an ongoing and seemingly inexhaustible source of despair. In acknowledging plants as percipient subjects, the model of melancholia I present conceptualizes their deaths as events that terminate the potential for more of their lives led with dignity. This entails the distinction between "plant life" (biology, species, abstraction, generalization—the social construction of the vegetal) and "the lives of plants" (ontology, experience, materiality, sensoriality—their lives to live independently of human desires and interventions). As the following section elaborates, botanical melancholia is pivotal to appreciating Kinsella's radical pastoralism as a wellspring of indignation, activism, reflection, and, even, wonderment vis-à-vis the demise of plants.

Poeticizing Plant-Death and Human Melancholia: Gums, Almonds, Wattles

I have suggested that *plant-death* is an imprecise term and have, therefore, attempted to discern between contrasting nuances of death in the vegetal world by applying the biogenic-anthropogenic typology. Whereas biogenic death involves the

demise of plants as an ecological event, anthropogenic death signifies human extermination of the entelechy of vegetal ensoulment (remember the jarrah), as well as the burden of botanical melancholia. Anthropogenic death can mirror back to us—as the perpetrators or witnesses—our complete reliance on the vegetal foundations of human existence. The perilous neglect and senseless maltreatment of botanical life can precipitate the physical, social, and spiritual decline of human beings. Of course, the biogenic deaths of plants can also prompt mourning and melancholia, but, I assert, to a lesser degree than anthropogenic (or anthropogenically-exacerbated biogenic) forms. Kinsella's poetry textualizes plant-death and the unforeseen transactions between both sides of the typology. The four-part "Idyllatry" (Kinsella, *Armour* 34–43) is representative. The poem's title amalgamates the words *idyll* and *idolatry*, signaling Kinsella's critique of the fetishization of techno-industrial agriculture in contradistinction to the traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge and practices of the wheatbelt.

The opening of "Idyllatry," a fourteen-line sonnet variant titled "*Laetiporus portentosus*," centralizes the presence of the white punk bracket, a species of polypore fungus traditionally used by Aboriginal Australians as tinder and to transport fire between camps (Clarke 64). A saprotroph that consumes the dead heartwood of living trees (Fagg), the fungus has "injected rot into the heart / of the eucalypt" (Kinsella, *Armour* 34, ll. 2–3). Conversely, the surface of the fungus "is breached by numerous / invertebrates, larvae that will interphase / with our sense of space, the air / we breathe" (Kinsella, *Armour* 34, ll. 5–8). The opening sonnet of "Idyllatry" reminds us that the omnipresence of death in nature is the upshot of ongoing evolutionarily-grounded exchanges between organisms. Ecological beingness as a function of *lives-within-deaths* and *deaths-within-lives* means that all things—animal, vegetal, fungal—are in dialogical relation and dynamic equipoise. Rather than the neocolonialist images of pastoral idolatry of the poem's successive three parts, the sonnet in its last six lines culminates with the fungus as an object of environmental veneration—a "halo we might walk beneath" (Kinsella, *Armour* 34, l. 12). End-rhymes punctuate the final sestet: "distract from grief" (l. 11) and "walk beneath" (l. 12), then a decisive off end-rhyme with "carried fire" (l. 13) and "smouldering tinder" (l. 14). Kinsella emphasizes that, for Indigenous cultures across Australia, the fungus was—and, in places, still is—a "companion species" (Haraway) that, like many plants and animals, furnishes precious means of sustenance while reinforcing cultural identity and heritage. And, so, the final two lines—"the first people here carried fire / in its smouldering tinder" (Kinsella, *Armour* 34, ll. 13–14)—invoke plainly but potently the fifty-thousand-or-more-year history of Nyoongar people's sustainable inhabitation of the wheatbelt. For Kinsella, the region's pastoral idyll collapses under the weight of a traumatic history of interlinked ecological devastation and cultural genocide. While prefigured in the sonnet, these postcolonial dimensions are more fully drawn out in contemporary terms, as we later learn of the Western Australian government's convenient forgetting of Kinsella's proposal for a "'wheatbelt forum' / where indigenous communities / could discuss their issues with white / farming communities" (*Armour* 39, ll. 15–18). The poet's desire for

reconciliation stands in startling alignment with his young son's innocent yearning to shed his Anglo-Australian identity and become Nyoongar after some exposure to the indigenous language in school (40, ll. 4–9).

With the Aboriginal underpinnings of Kinsella's radical pastoralism rendered ostensible, the poem's second part, "The View from Here and Now," consisting of seven quatrains, intensifies the consideration of belonging and nativeness in the wheatbelt plantscape. The poet relates his gazing over the Avon River from a touristic viewing platform assembled from "treated-pine" (Kinsella, *Armour* 43, l. 2)—a plantation species that, in its presence as a material in the built landscape, poignantly emblemizes the near-complete eradication of native eucalypts. The seventh quatrain laments the "plant blindness" (Wandersee and Schussler) of the non-Indigenous, settler culture in the concluding lines, "And what breaks / the bursts of wattlebloom, takes / paperbarks for granted, insert / of amenities, these local assets" (Kinsella, *Armour* 36, ll. 25–28). Allusions to the wattle (*Acacia* spp.) flowers and paperbarks (*Melaleuca* spp.)—two plant icons ubiquitous throughout South-western Australia—embody the fragmentation of the native plantscape as a consequence of an entrenched privileging of a narrow Anglo-Australian perspective on botanical (dis)order. Indeed, denigrative attitudes toward the native flora of the Australian landmass—as strange, straggly, scrubby, prickly, ugly, worthless—reinscribe historical biases based in European landscape aesthetics (Ryan 88–109). However, Kinsella affirms that the "amenities" and "assets" are the phenomenally well-adapted and primordial plants themselves, not the recent-arrivals-by-comparison colonialist infrastructures and mechanisms. The critique of pastoralist consciousness and convention accelerates in the third part, "An Idea of Disorder," comprising twenty-three quintets exposing the gruesome face of everyday country life, especially appalling for a self-confessed "vegan anarchist" (Kinsella and Lucy 11). For instance, at the edge of a woodland reserve, the carcasses of sheep have been unceremoniously dumped, "[...] Flesh and clumps of wool / detached from the frame" (Kinsella, *Armour* 37, ll. 18–19).

A prevailing tone of disillusionment closely connected to the effects of botanical melancholia is evident in the mid-section of "Idyllatry" as Kinsella scrutinizes the naturalization of perverse anti-ecological (and, specifically, anti-botanical) values. What emerges is a radical pastoral manifesto and poetic act of catharsis that troubles the ingrained logic of agricultural production: "Anyway, it's all lies. / I've spent half my life living / in the middle of this and don't believe / any of it. I don't believe in growth, / and I don't believe anyone's being fed" (Kinsella, *Armour* 38, ll. 39–43). The scene surrounding the ever-more brackish, poisoned, and desiccated river approaches botanical apocalypse, with "stands of York gum / with track-marks set by termites, jam tree / weighed down by mistletoe, a black- / shouldered kite circling above the dead / York gum, just skin and bones" (Kinsella, *Armour* 40–41, ll. 92–96). Kinsella insinuates that the anti-pastoral prospect of devastation is not biogenic but anthropogenic. The unspoken agreements between trees, termites, and parasites that upheld dynamic balance over vast expanses of time have been disrupted by the same colonialist forces that have rendered the river more saline and sent its guardian spirit, the Wagyl, into

retreat. As the York gum “loses bones / proportional to the blast” of storms (41, ll. 97–98), Kinsella’s evocations reflect Renee Lertzman’s analysis of environmental melancholia as one being “paralyzed to translate such concern into action” (4). The poet’s self-conscious dread of inaction and anxiety over ineptitude to galvanize radical change immediately follow the succession of bleak plant-death images. In a last melancholic concession, he states, “I feel no guilt not being out there, helping. / I cherish the action of the flora and fauna, / but have nothing to observe that might / traumatise those around me into / preserving the habitat” (Kinsella, *Armour* 41, ll. 102–106).

Yet, when all else fails, it is poetry that serves as the activist’s medium, as Kinsella paradoxically observes himself claiming to observe nothing as an expression of his feeling ineffectual when confronted with regional ecological disaster. Before the fourth and final part, “Idyllatry” (titled after the poem itself), the third part, “An Idea of Disorder,” concludes with a prodding allusion to a navigation marker on a hill where a rare orchid species grows—an image so resonant that the botanically melancholic poet “can’t bear to look / back at it” (41, ll. 110–111). Affective identification with native and naturalized flora is similarly palpable in the poem “Where the Almond Tree” (Kinsella, *Armour* 29) in which Kinsella grieves the interrelated deaths of an almond tree and a wattle as a corollary of prolonged drought in the wheatbelt. “Where the Almond Tree” evokes plant-death as a relational phenomenon contingent on the activities of other organisms (i.e., insect larvae and parrots). In its very exclusion of the word “died,” the title reveals emotional reluctance to acknowledge the death of cherished flora as well as a pronounced absence of existential resolution—a negation of the possibility that humans can eventually come to terms with plant-death particularly when it is precipitated on a widespread basis by ecological catastrophe. In the poem, plant-death is an intimate event analogous to the sudden sickness and decline of a family member at home. Moreover, the almond tree and wattle are deprived of dignity because of the intensity and totality of their deaths. The elegiac meditation opens with “Where the almond tree died, so died the wattle. / That parabola can take no life for long. If borers / are below the surface, / they will move on. They have killed the already dead” (Kinsella, *Armour* 29, ll. 1–4). Although exhibiting an affinity in his writings for the native flora of the wheatbelt, Kinsella here spurns *botanical nativism* as an ideology strictly opposing invasive, exotic, or non-indigenous plants (Coates 76). Instead, in their lives and deaths, the almond and the wattle forged an equilibrium, which was then fragmented by pastoral forces and abbreviated by the effects of climate disturbance. Kinsella continues, “[...] *It bothers me / the almond tree died so intensely / it lost all moisture. And the wattle / died just as entirely [emphasis added]*” (Kinsella, *Armour* 29, ll. 20–23). By the final lines, the paralysis of melancholia is not overcome by the textualized progression of grieving but by the feathers of parrots flying “at half-mast” (29, l. 27), implying an expansive, multispecies concept of mourning in which the poet is not isolated in his being troubled by plant-death: “because death is the most alive district/ to inhabit. We could say so much more/ if only we had the time” (Kinsella, *Armour* “Resurrection Plants at Nookaminnie Rock” 53).

Conclusion

In closing this investigation of the significance of vegetal decay and demise in Kinsella's radical pastoralism, I wish to underscore that not all evocations of plant-death in his oeuvre are burdened by botanical melancholia. For instance, "Resurrection Plants at Nookaminnie Rock" (Kinsella, *Armour* 53) presents a different version of plant-death and the potential for new life through the narrativization of the resilient mechanisms of the pincushion lily (*Borya* spp.), known for its ability to endure episodes of dehydration through metabolic arrest (Nikulinsky and Hopper 24). Sequestered at Nookaminnie, a boulder enclave near Quairading in the wheatbelt, the *Borya* defy, through their physiological adaptations, the "belief that the dead will stay dead / and there will be no lift, no rebirth" (Kinsella, *Armour* 53, ll. 11–12). What emerges in the midst of the poet's biogeographically-articulated contemplation of life, senescence, birth, and regeneration in nature is a plant ethics centering on intimate ecological knowledge, profound regard for endemic flora, and a recognition of the limits of proximate human-plant encounters. One must always tread conscientiously in fragile rock outcrop environments, stepping "carefully around these / wreaths hooked into granite sheen, holdalls / for a soil-less ecology" (Kinsella, *Armour* 53, ll. 14–16). The pincushion speaks to the poet—and speaks of the courting of death and the return from its brink—via a haptic, material presence, at once soft and bristly. Nevertheless, the plant "would say so much more if your boots / were off" (Kinsella, *Armour* 53, ll. 17–18)—if physical exchange could be consummated. Undergirded by sensitivity toward the granite outcrop habitats, the poet's ethics of stewardship come to restrain his impulse to sink more deeply into the inevitable mystery of co-constituted human-plant deaths. In its defiant brinkmanship, the resurrection plant exemplifies the contention that the event of death does not necessarily spell out the end of a plant's existence (Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant* 187).

More subtle in its radical pastoral subtext than "Idyllatry," "Resurrection Plants" textualizes vegetal death and near-death, principally, as a process of embodied, ecological marvel and, secondly, as suggestive of the possibility of ecosystemic renewal and social hope through respectful and reciprocal engagements with the plant inhabitants of one's place. Despite admissions of melancholic paralysis elsewhere in his oeuvre, further examples from Kinsella's botanical poetics resound with the call to rejuvenate the ill-treated wheatbelt through attentive engagement with native plants. An activist poetics resounds in the long poem, "Harsh Hakea (or Elements of the Subject's Will)," which is interspersed with fragments of planting the shrub *Hakea prostrata*, native to South-western Australia. "I will check the Harsh Hakea / planted hopefully restoratively / on the steep incline of Bird Gully" (Kinsella, "Harsh Hakea" 151, pt. 15, ll. 6–8). Foregrounding the percipience of the hakea as a subject with its own will in the poem's title, Kinsella enunciates an ideal of radical pastoralism that spurns cynicism, inaction, and melancholy in favor of working collaboratively with the inherent intelligence of the vegetal. After all, those plant taxa that have endured the harsh, arid, and nutrient-deficient Western Australian landscape must have stories to tell, lessons to impart, and actions to inspire, if only the masses would learn to listen. As such, we find

in the radical pastoral poetry of John Kinsella an empathic attentiveness to plant *life* and plant *lives* that does not recoil from their deaths and dying—biogenic (e.g., “Resurrection Plants” and “Harsh Hakea”), anthropogenic (“Idyllatry” and, to a lesser extent, “Where the Almond Tree”), and the expressions of life and death between. Circumscribed in part by the botanical denizens of the wheatbelt, Kinsella’s pastoral vision recognizes the region’s traumatic legacy of the abuse and eradication of other-than-humans—a history in which he himself once participated—while conveying, with clarion hope, the potential for more sustainable and ethically-grounded relations to the wheatbelt plantscape for the benefit of all inhabitants.

Submission received 15 June 2016

Revised version accepted 12 August 2016

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