

Agoras

John Kinsella

I have a poem in mind. A 'late' Jam Tree Gully poem. It will be called 'Agora' and I will get to its first lines shortly.

Why late? I haven't ceased being connected with Jam Tree Gully, nor have I ceased writing it. Maybe because I am thinking about its spaces in different ways now, from afar. I often write from 'afar', and as Tom Bristow has highlighted, I write poetry of 'in situ' and also 'at a distance', but as I have said to him, this is a complex equation with no binaries; they are both elements of the 'cloud' that makes up 'International Regionalism'. And I am not simply co-opting a techno-fetish by saying 'cloud', though I might be ironizing it. In essence, the ecologies I construct around the lens to biosphere collapse, the 'damage done' as I wrote in *The New Arcadia* (WW Norton, 2005), are silhouetted through the costs of technologizing. I have written 'neo-Luddite' texts in the past, deploring what I see as unnecessary technologies—especially those where 'product' takes precedence over 'necessity'. Under the rubric 'necessity' I would put certain medical advances, the basic technologies of sustaining human life (from the shovel, scissors, through to—maybe—comparatively low-impact modes of transport that don't exploit animals). Advances in computer technology are largely driven by corporate capitalism, and change is interminably linked to sales and profit. All advances, all product developments, cost the biosphere. My aim is constantly to reduce the ironies of consumption—to own less, to 'change' product less, to resist the sales pitch. For me, place is entirely contiguous with how it is or isn't 'sold'.

Jam Tree Gully sits about fifteen kilometres outside the town of Toodyay. There are no shops nearby and even the local wheatbin is no longer in use. It might, of course, come back into use, and is kept at the ready. Last season was a 'bumper' one, despite the ravages of climate change. Late, unseasonal rain and heat boosted the crops. The temptation to bring the bin 'back online' was probably strong. But the harvest could just as easily have been a disaster. From one extreme to the other. What's interesting about Jam Tree Gully and the other 'small rural holdings' in its locale is that they are gazetted 'rural residential'. This is to prevent large scale agri-business in the area. Of course, we are on the border of the shift in size in holdings, so within a very short distance are large farms with massive machinery. It's not a liminal zone, but the opposite. It's abrupt, and the vast wheat-growing area that is Victoria Plains tilts the psychology of those where we live into an anxiety about not being 'legitimate' big-scale farmers but rather small-scale hobbyists. The tension is rarely generative, and small bush holdings are readily cleared and cropped (though zoning-wise, such 'farmers' shouldn't be profiting from their land in such holdings), and industrial-scale poisons and other chemicals are readily used to 'control' the surveyed and apportioned spaces.

Jam Tree Gully sits alongside 'public space' (in essence a reserve). A couple of years ago the Shire, in its wisdom, 'control-burned' the area and destroyed stands of flooded gums that were hundreds of years old, with trunks wider than three or four or five people could link hands in a ring. The classic implosion of Australian fire 'protection'—the 'preventative' fires that destroy everything other than human homes, and sometimes (as in Margaret River a few years ago when over forty homes were burned to the ground), sometimes those as well. Fire is wielded as a weapon and is feared as the enemy. People build houses amongst trees, then pull the trees down because they are a fire-risk. The

irony is crushing and traumatising. We are all for fire-readiness, and we practice it at Jam Tree Gully. In fact, I just wrote a poem about being absent when leaves need clearing from gutters, in case a spark or ember should ignite and thus destroy the house if the horror of fire became a reality. Here's an extract, including the refrain, which is written in seven-syllable lines (because of the early Irish stanza in which I am working at present):

Tomorrow, the Guru is going over
to Jam Tree Gully to clear the gutters
of dead, dry leaves. They congest
without style, embellish with urge,
the pragmatism of making a growth
medium: in summer easterlies red dust
falls as the true rain of modernity
and tumbles into the leafy bed
already set in aluminium conduits.
If fire comes, a stray ember or spark
will make rocket fuel of this process.

No ember or spark has come
to ignite dry-leaf coffins;
No ember or spark has come
to make heat that can melt steel;
No ember or spark has come
to leave soft beds of grey ash;
No ember or spark has come
to the gutters, though it might;
No ember or spark has come
but you will clear leaves in case.

Thus even in absence, we are there. So 'late' isn't 'past', but something else.

At the dinner table Tim, just turned eleven, was talking with Tracy about Gaeltacht areas in present-day Ireland. He'd asked his teacher at school about whether the Irish dialect in Leinster was different from, say, in Munster. She pointed out that it didn't really have its own dialect, disturbingly, because that part of Ireland was so intensely colonised by the British (arable land as opposed to the rocky Western areas that kept their Irish language to a greater degree). She was talking about a deletion of language right to the core. Indigenous language around what we call Jam Tree Gully was and is Ballardong Nyungar. Nyungar people are working to reconstitute Nyungar language across the south-west, and in that process elements of Ballardong come into use, or are emphasised by speakers with family background in the Ballardong language area.

Our neighbours at Jam Tree Gully are from many backgrounds, but mainly Anglo-Celtic or European 'stock', and loudly so. But no picture of ethnicity is that simple. What is simple, though, are declarations of rights and exclusion. Those who object to 'boat people', those who make snide remarks about land rights, and those who differentiate on the basis of who is authentically rural and who is not. That's because a lot of land holdings in the region are 'weekenders', or belong to people who do a long commute to work in the city (about two hours' drive away), and those who live permanently local feel an 'investment' in having a 'say' that goes beyond paying land rates. But this rarely means conservation of bushland and native flora and fauna, or in fact any flora and fauna other than those which bring profit or pleasure (the pleasure of being a weekend farmer).

It's easy to accuse another of lacking authenticity, and it is common to find the accuser usually has a loathing of indigenous claims to land. The crisis of possession that haunts some of us certainly doesn't haunt others. Okay, a paranoid reading of their day-to-day conversations would yield indicators of anxiety, but too often that's because of a fear of getting less than they feel they're owed. I have to point this out before talking about 'past' and 'present', about writing of the moment in the place ('in situ') and when absent ('at a distance'), which I've always found the most clarifying way of seeing. But not so much now. Absence is a lack of activism. And that's where 'late' comes in. I am writing from the Mizen Head Peninsula in County Cork, Ireland, in a retracing of origins that's tied up in readings of the 'rugged', less colonised/controlled, versus the arable colonised, an

inversion I find necessary in order to complicate, not ease, my issues with dispossession and possession in Australia.

My great-great paternal grandparents left after the Famine. Elsewhere I have written much on the dynamics of the oppressed becoming oppressors themselves. Here, in Cork's towns of the 'Anglo-Irish war', civil war and ambush, there are the unmarked graves of conflict's victims; there are also earlier famine mass-burial pits, and the ghosts of British Imperialism—and what amounted to a policy of genocide—emanate through local histories and Halloween, through gossip and national decision-making. The sanitising of colonisation is Australian default social policy. Jam Tree Gully of course is built on the bones of indigenous dispossession, and this can never be denied or minimised. So I am writing poems at a distance, but sometimes I dream terrible dreams and am actually at Jam Tree Gully, seeing the peripheral effects of poisonings by Shire and neighbours (herbicides, pesticides, rodenticides, fungicides), the shooting of roos, and the constant burning. An hallucinatory in-situ brought out of guilt of absence, ironic, since were I there at this moment, that's precisely what would be happening and what I would be resisting.

I write a lot about fences. And the removal of internal fences—we removed many (all) when we took 'custodianship' (temporary—the land is *NOT* ours and never can be) to allow free movement of wildlife, and to show our desire not to have 'property' marked by the keeping and control of animals. That's what fences do—they are a protocapitalism. Interestingly, to prevent roos eating vegetables (hard to grow with the lack of water—we are not on mains water), we do 'fence' the plants in, but in such a way that the roos are not hindered in their passage, nor will they injure themselves if colliding with the barrier. Locals would just say—rightly—kangaroos just jump the fences. However, having had to remove dying roos from fences where/when they have caught their legs hopping over and twisted/broken their legs in the process, I have seen this theory come unstuck. Also, we had some very high fences at Jam Tree Gully when we moved in—built to prevent 'stock' climbing rocks and getting out. We removed all interior fences (some of them were close together, which really traumatised local animals; they'd been put in by earlier occupants for coralling sheep and horses), and created entry points in external fences on the side of the reserve. Up front, roos move through two 'openings' between posts on the external fences running along the bitumen. It's interesting to note that they always select this mode of entry—a clear passage—rather than jumping fences, when given the chance. Now they will only leap the fences when startled—a fear reaction. So it's a complex picture!

Agora. How far I've strayed. Well, maybe not. You see, Agora for me isn't just a meeting place for humans, the open space of the village or city where markets and political debate, arts moments and consensus might be enacted (an anarchist, I can only believe in consensus), but also a place of non-human interaction and consultation. There are many such agoras at Jam Tree Gully. Firstly, there are the insect meeting points: bees in the hollows of great York gums, or swarming and hanging in fuming teardrops from acacias before moving on to permanent residence; ants in their colonies with open spaces around their entrances/exits where conversations constantly take place when the colony is active; from which nuptial flights depart; in which fundamental decisions about threat and 'welcome' are enacted. There are bird agoras—down in the gully where the magpies define their territory in such auditory ways, tops of dead trees where pink and greys cluster before flying into the top right paddock to pick seeds between the replanted York gum saplings. There are the kangaroo day-sleeping places under trees, the open areas where they graze at twilight and just before dawn. These are agoras where decisions are made and we have moments and points within those interactions where we are permitted entry and even discussion. You learn to 'read' and be 'read' by ants, bees and roos. A colony of ants 'adapt' to your movements, and you to theirs. Roos learn that you won't hurt them, and come to the bedroom window at the same time and sniff through the flywire. They tell you things if you know how to listen. They will stay in their rest-place as I pass because the moment of passing is an agora-like moment.

At times I have suffered from agoraphobia. Not just being 'inside', but being inside Jam Tree Gully. Outside is threat, or rather, things I love and respect are threatened. Inside Jam Tree Gully, I feel roos and other animals, should they choose to rest or stay there, are safer than elsewhere. I have a crisis of boundaries and possession, of inside out (the name of the last book of my *Jam Tree Gully* trilogy): I don't wish to own, but I wish

to allow the agora its moments, its desire lines that bring all to the conversation which is safe ground, which is inside. This thinking is how my agora poem begins. I link it across to earlier years of addiction and being bullied, of anger and violent protest. I have been a pacifist for decades now, but when I was young I was aggressive in my objection to capitalism, to bullying, to imperialism, to greed. The agora was a place of confrontation for me. Sometimes I fear this kind of agora is always there to encroach on Jam Tree Gully.

I am not painting Jam Tree Gully as an island, it's not: really, I am talking about a concept of infinite space, of mutual respect, aid and sharing. Of the right of all animals. Of the biosphere to define its own terms outside the capitalist competition of human desire to thwart thanatos, to gain some kind of immortality. Hunters who blast away (illegally) in the reserve, have the greatest lust for life. They have twisted ritual into greed for more-than-life. This is not 'living off the land' (which is a complex equation and is tied to totemic ancestral rights in so many ways), but making the land comply. It's about control: like the neighbour who, with green fingers, plants many new trees by poisoning and destroying vegetation and insect life already there.

Gardening is too often an antithetical biosphere. Growth should be unhindered and define its own terms. Seeds should find their own beds. It's all about the seeds' access and rights to work it out! The threat to agoras. I have a reason. The 'neighbour' (some can be quite distant and rarely seen), who threatened to bury me (literally), because he thought I was one of those up-themselves, green, reading types who was probably from an inner-city suburb (whereas before living at Jam Tree Gully, I lived outside York, another wheatbelt town). I don't object to his anxieties, but I do object to his bragging about earning more money than anyone else, and being able to bury people like me. He stood on my boots and had his face millimetres away from mine as he yelled it. I thought I was dead. The agora was bleeding, and not working for humans, the animals and plants were at risk as well. We negotiated our way out of the crisis and the result was a welcome to come on to 'his land' any time. The agora expanding? Probably not, but the crisis might mean that something survives out of it. The thinking is leading me somewhere. A poem about space and maps. I have been spatially configuring Jam Tree Gully to find my way around my own prejudices of location: privileging the 90,000-litre water tank we rely on, the granites from which I have a sublime view. Agora.

Here on Mizen Head Peninsula, it's the sea that preoccupies me. Crossing the sea, the cost of doing so, the distance between here and Jam Tree Gully, the power of water and swell. It is so dry at Jam Tree Gully, despite the burst of spring rain. Spring rain. There is only one season there now: it burns all year round. As I wrote in an early poem, 'things burn in rain'. But distance is not adequate in the configuring of place and belonging (or not, as I fear). Wedge tombs, stone circles, old red sandstone, passes through mountains, massive Atlantic swell, grey wagtails, dead hares on the roads. Each is a connector and each is an 'alienation'. The wedge tombs might be those of my ancestors; Australia, however close I feel to the land there, can be home only to my post-'settlement' ancestry.

I don't invest authority in ancestors (though I respect that others do), because it's a centralising of authority, but I do accept connection to place through inherited knowledge and experience. For me that's a deep science that matters: acquired knowledge. But knowledge that is trapped in a damage cycle is false knowledge. Knowledge needs knowledge and a map of awareness created: just because ancestors cut turf doesn't mean that it's a good thing to continue doing as the biosphere chokes on carbon! In the agoras of place, we need to meet with other knowledges, other life forms (as well as try to respect and read the inanimate). Each a co-ordinate for a psychotopology: a connecting through ancestors, literature, news, history, one's own life, with the passings through and the anchor points. I map here through there and vice versa. What else can I do? I belong nowhere. I live in my head but have obligations to the biosphere (I will respect as well as I can). I am writing agora poems. Not just a poem entitled Agora, but agora poems in which life draws up maps timeless and instantaneous. It's not the Whitman's contradiction; that's too easy and lacks obligation. It's the contradiction of responsibility. To witness, to translate, to understand. To remove the fences. Open the agora; create a non-profit marketplace—a place of exchange.