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Walking Through Wheatlands (conversations with John Kinsella)

by Glen Phillips and John Kinsella

GP: Here's a good example. Nothing.

JK: Nothing at all. I've been writing a bit lately about this, about the roadside clearing as I have done for many years, and I actually argue that by removing these visual markers you actually make the roads more dangerous because you tend to lose your bearings, and they serve to actually guide you, like in *The New Arcadia* I use the markers, the signposts on the side of the road, the reflector posts ...

GP: On the way to York ...

JK: That's right, as kinds of signs of that, but so are the foliage and the flora equally important. So what you're left with are fence lines which are barely visible and even so, in some places, no trees at all and it's just like swimming in a sea of openness. I think another topic we can go in terms of you know, theorizing this is ... we're turning now off Hospital Road onto the Cadoux Road, Koorda-Wongan Hills Road, going to Cadoux which is 22kms from here ... is that ... look at that for a cleared space, my god. That's stubble from last year with a tinge of green in it, just a tinge. A few sheep in there feeding, in fact I don't think there are any sheep feeding at the moment. Maybe in the distance.

GP: Just weeds.

JK: They're just weeds. So yeah, it's a very disturbing cleared space. Another thing we could talk about in terms of the process of ... I mean this began as a project talking about the Watershed of the Avon Valley...

GP: That's right.

JK: ... of the Avon River. And how huge it is, and I think in some senses, though we're, you know, we're on a different side of that watershed now, I think that what one can also talk about is the way that drainage and water flow and erosion are so characteristic of this zone, a relatively dry zone, where water runs for a couple of months each year. This year it's not even running. So when it runs and scars and marks the land, and the fertility that comes, comes because of the movement of soil and so on through those waterways, and, dry as it is, it's still so marked by the movement of the water— as flat as large parts of it are — this is very gently undulating where we are— in long sweeping

undulations — is that it is still a place of movement. It's not static, and when that movement doesn't happen, things stagnate, and ironically they actually erode faster. So I think there's some kind of discussion, you know a point to be made about the markings of the land by water, and how, as dry as it is, the form of the landscape is still contingent on water erosion. I think another thing that comes out of it, and this is something I've got a lot from working with the Indigenous artist Julie Dowling. And looking at Indigenous art and so on (whether it's traditional or contemporary in many different modes) it is interesting that the signs of place are so often not as we (non-indigenous people of the region) seem to think they are. So a blank paddock still has, you know, the signs— the indigenous kinds— that a viewer might pick up, or say ... oh look at the size of those rams! They were huge rams, in an old house yard. The house was falling to bits.

GP: It's the second old deserted house we've passed on this road.

JK: Yes, and they were massive rams. They were like prize Merino rams. Anyway, getting back to the subject, it is the way indigenous commentators can talk about even a piece of devastated land, which still has its markers as part of it. I think that's one thing I've learnt over the past ten years, I've always, all my life, been, you know, in and out of the wheatbelt— been able to see certain kinds of markers— well I've started to look in a different way, even at empty pieces of land, as being marked and interesting, spatially interesting. And I think that that's another aspect; that's another point that's worth isolating. I'm reading this biography at the moment of Andre Breton *Revolution of the Mind - the life of Andre Breton*, and in it there's the debate about how surrealism began— starting with the Apollinaire's first use of the expression 'Surrealism' and the different arguments that went on over who laid claim to the term. With Breton's manifesto coming out somewhat before and being the kind of definitive statement. And he did a very clever advertising thing. He'd kind of learnt well of the public thing, from Dada, his Dadaist days. He created dictionary definitions for it in the manifesto ... 'Surrealism is automatic writing ...' and so on. He had a succinct little statement, quotable-by-journalists kind of thing. And I think in some ways theorizing the land is that kind of action, almost creating a kind of surrealist manifesto. It's so much of what we do, thinking a lot about automatic writing, as we travel through the land. It's a kind of automatic viewing, you know, and we're making all these unconscious and subconscious connections. So you almost end up with this pithy little dictionary statement of what the wheatbelt is. Which isn't of course what it is, but it's the advertising part of it. Theory is so much advertising, isn't it? And I think that there's a few lines there that we can come out with, ironically so, maybe, but ...

GP: A good theory is like the gridlines on a map, and the gridlines in themselves are, you know, nothing, compared to what is there that the map represents. But they are, they make intelligible, they make the topography intelligible.

Similarly theory makes, for example, the place that you were just talking about, makes that place intelligible. So that's to me one of the values of theory anyway. But I sort of have a feeling that despite the amount of ecocritical theory there is these days, we've only just touched on this whole area of the theorizing of environment, in terms of the way we speak of environment today. So it will be interesting to see over the next ten to fifteen years — are we going to have, you know the equivalent of Delueze and Guattari, or are we going to have the influence of earlier post-modernist theorists ...?

JK: I think we're going to have something entirely new. And I think it's going to be regional. I think it's going to break off into kind of regional theories, and one of the things I'd like to do will be to get a little group of people, half a dozen people, take them out to the wheatbelt, and make them do some automatic writing about the place they're in. For like, you know, two hours solid—a surrealist kind of experiment, and then bring them back. And nothing more and then see what happens. I'd like to do that. I think that intense short interactions (intense long interactions too) with a kind of an engagement with these vast empty paddocks, especially not just the spaces where there are markers, but like out in isolation. People go out in the middle of the paddocks and understand what this vast emptiness, that's being created artificially, really is. And once they understand that, then one might be able in some ways, to fill a part of the spaces in. I mean, look here at the birdlife as we've been travelling. There's been relatively little on this journey.

GP: Very little ...

JK: And it's been twenty-eight parrots, corellas ... I've seen black-shouldered kites, crows, magpie larks and I've seen a couple of hawks, some willy-wagtails, and I just saw a weird bird I couldn't identify, as we were going a bit fast as we went past it. But I'll check. Relatively few, little bird life ... which is surprising, especially on a very fine day. That was interesting just back there because they looked like rosellas.

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