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Ecopoetry and Kathleen Jamie

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Late Negotiations: Ecopoetry and Kathleen Jamie

Scottish poet Kathleen Jamie has been regarded as one of the most notable environmental writers at work in Britain since the publication of her collections *Jizzen* (1999) and *The Tree House* (2004). This reputation has been further enhanced by the subsequent collections *The Overhaul* (2012) and *The Bonniest Companie* (2015), and by the superlative quality and popularity of three prose works: *Findings* (2005), *Sightlines* (2012) and *Surfacing* (2019). It is therefore unsurprising that Jamie has already received expert critical attention, especially in terms of ecopoetics. Louisa Gairn paved the way with her discussion of Jamie in *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature* (2008), influenced by Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (2001). Lucy Collins, in her essay "'Toward a Brink': The Poetry of Kathleen Jamie and Environmental Crisis" (2010), substantially advanced this discussion, while an ecocritical focus was perhaps the major theme uniting the rich contributions to Rachel Falconer's edited book *Kathleen Jamie: Essays and Poems on her Work* (2015).

However, while it is common to think of Jamie as an "ecopoet", the many contributions to Falconer's book corroborate one's sense that her verse as a whole has no central and easy-to-paraphrase message: no manifesto emerges. Her work is marked by stylistic consistency, yet each poem does its own thing. David Wheatley argues that Jamie's poetic "declines ... to become a self-conscious 'project'" (59). The upshot is that the reader is left to be a participant in the ecopoeisis, as it were, through attentive engagement and discerning rereading.

As well as lacking a manifesto, Jamie's ecopoetry is significantly marked by irony and skepticism. In Peter MacKay's contribution to Falconer's book, he notes how the poetry seems to acknowledge that, ultimately, it can offer "little hope of

acting upon, knowing or truly mediating the natural world” (91). Indeed, Jamie’s tendency to temper imaginative engagement with intelligence was pinpointed by Collins when she described the poet’s “willingness to draw on closely observed experience at the same time as she questions the unitary aspect of such a standpoint” (156).

One might see this as Jamie’s means of refusing the illusion of simple harmonisation with nature, which might mask a form of human imperialism: a sense that nature is a mere theme for one’s musing. As Timothy Morton put it, expressing a crucial tenet of the developing field of ecocriticism, we must dismiss “the belief that there is a ‘thing’ called nature that is ‘out there’” (183). Aligned to such an approach, Collins stressed that “Jamie’s body of work demonstrates the interwoven aspect of ecological concern, its connections to social structures and personal events” (151). Given that we cannot perceive nature outside of cultural mediation, Collins argued that in Jamie’s work: “the relationship between the human and the natural represents a form of ongoing exchange” (152). This essay will attempt to further explore this exchange.

“Frogs”, in many ways, is a signature poem of *The Tree House*, not least in its mix of precision and suggestion, its striking transitions, and perfectly controlled economy (5-6). The poem begins by observing what must be one of the most dismal acts of mating in contemporary literature: “they lay / inert as a stone, the male / fastened like a package / to her back”. It’s not until the third stanza that we see some action: “When he bucked, once, / neither so much as blinked”. The abruptness of the poem’s opening casts the reader in a position *over* the frogs, as if they were on show for us “like a package”. This voyeuristic stance seems a considered move on Jamie’s part: conscious of ecocriticism’s condemnation of poetry that presupposes nature to be a thing, an object “out there”, ready to be a

passive subject matter for art. The opening of “Frogs” immediately pitches the reader into exactly this kind of perspective, while its wry images exacerbate the sense of the animals’ otherness through the detached tone with which it relates the alienating spectacle of amphibian sex.

In the poem, the frogs are suddenly run over by a passing car. But it’s interesting that there is already a vague sense of violation to this opening, before the car arrives. Indeed this beginning, observing the frogs’ mating, takes up two-thirds of the poem. Effectively, the sudden yet tonally smooth way in which the poem introduces the car places our observation of the frogs, and their death by human machinery, on the same continuum. One might have asked what’s wrong with observing animals in this manner. The frogs, after all, are doing their thing willingly on display, in their own space and time. No-one is harming them. Not until, of course, they are splattered. In this sense, the careful structure of the poem dramatises the truism that to be within the purview of the human is a dangerous business. The poem suggests there is no safe or innocent space in which humans can observe fauna, flora and landscapes, because our mere presence precludes damage.

One thinks of the old cliché that all *real* poems are about sex or death, or both. Here is a poem about the sex and death of frogs. What way are we to interpret this? Can we understand animals without reference to ourselves, presuming connection and comparison? How else can we proceed? The poem’s implicit challenge to the reader – what are we to make of *this*? – links the fate of these particular frogs with fundamental problems concerning our engagement with the non-human world.

In many ways, “Frogs” reads like a parable of disassociation. The final three stanzas read:

When he bucked, once,
neither so much as blinked;
their oval, gold-lined eyes
held to some bog-dull
imperative. The car

that would smear them
into one – belly
to belly, tongue thrust
utterly into soft brain –
approached and pressed on

Oh how we press on –
the car and passengers, the slow
creatures of this earth,
the woman by the verge
with her hands cupped.

There is a kind of zest in stressing the frogs' death as the apotheosis of their previously dull intercourse, which seems oddly reminiscent of J. D. Ballard

(making this some weird version of *Crash* for frogs): “belly / to belly, tongue thrust / utterly into soft brain”. But more crucial to the poem is its continuity between the frogs’ inscrutable, mechanically drab sex, and the equally odd, detached, grey tone as the car “approached and pressed on”. The poem itself doesn’t blink while the frogs are flattened.

Swiftly, the pun on how the car “pressed on” leaves the frogs behind, as the unstoppable car gives rise to the poem’s epiphany: “Oh how we press on.” The strangely remote quality of the poem is accentuated as the car itself receives no description, as the disparity between small animal and killing machine is elided in the poem. The affect of the poem’s tonal detachment isn’t disengagement so much as a lack of agency, a helplessness before the speed of the travesty, imparted through the poem’s rapid transition.

The brisk intrusion of the car is, in turn, deftly turned on its head as the poem decelerates into the moment of aftermath. The syntax of “the car and passengers, the slow / creatures of this earth” perhaps differentiates the car from the frogs, but also suggests the possibility that both are equally slow creatures of this earth. For all their deathly speed and power, from a certain perspective, the car and passengers are going nowhere. And if “slow creatures of this earth” unites the “car and passengers” with the frogs, it further links both with speaker and reader: all of whom comprise the “we”, who all press on with our existence, until that stops. Death smears the frogs “into one”, but their death is the only thing that connects us to the frogs, and which unifies the poem. Perhaps this is why the description of the frogs’ evisceration is the most sensual part of the poem; but also why it is posed in a strange prolepsis: only in the future, in the afterwards of their demise, will they become newly vivid, as nature takes on heightened significance only after it is already too late.

In the ramifying present-tense of this aftermath, we are left with “the woman by the verge / with her hands cupped.” Perhaps the main sense here is that her hands are cupped over her mouth, in some sort of shock (the shape of the mouth to make that “Oh” at the stanza’s beginning echoed in the hollowed shape of the hands at its end). Yet the details are vague. One thinks of the final section of Jamie’s earlier poem “Ultrasound” from *Jizzen*: “Our baby’s heart, on the sixteen-week scan / was a fluttering bird, held in cupped hands” (18). Perhaps the woman is wishing she were holding the frogs, saving them from the road? Cupped hands also suggest supplication, with a faint gestural echo of the Eucharist. In any event, the cupping gesture leaves the poem open-handed and empty-handed. The meaning of what has just happened, the gist of the poem, would seem to be cradled in those hands.

It is tempting to associate the “woman by the verge” with the speaker of the poem, through whose eyes we were observing the frogs’ mating in the first place. The conventional poetic encounter with nature has been subverted, almost parodied. What we have received is a notion of the strange otherness of nature, the alienating distance between human and animal. We have witnessed sex and death. We have witnessed the catastrophe of machine steamrolling nature into obliteration; and the unheeding callousness of the “passengers” who know not, and thus care not, what damage they have wreaked. We have witnessed an everyday transient event, a common nothing; but we have also been given enough to feel we have witnessed something calamitous. We have been asked why we all “press on” – where do we think we are going? – even while it has been implied that we, frogs and all, cannot really do anything else. In this way, the poem develops from a detached observation of “nature” to envelop all within a continuous field of interconnection, dominated by violation, shock and dawning

outrage, in which our present tense is a kind of perpetual aftermath. And we are left with an ‘Oh’, with empty cupped hands, only beginning the potentially impossible task of figuring out what to make of it.

Thinking about Jamie’s verse in terms of ecopoetics, and of how her work might inform our developing sense of this field, it seems irrefutable that the formal dynamics and stylistic effects of “Frogs” are constitutive elements of how it generates its meaning and significance. One might stress that the power of Jamie’s poem is bound up with its ability to signify so much with such economy. As Don Paterson foregrounds at the beginning of *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (2018), his hugely detailed explication of the lyric, one of the most fundamental (and often forgotten) aspects of the art form is its dependency upon an *a priori* assumption that “a poem is a small thing that stands for a larger thing” (19). One might argue that a poem’s ecological significance is generated when readers traverse the space between what it says and what it means: a dynamic and multilayered exchange.

One can see that Jamie’s “Frogs” is intensely set on representing the present tense: the “now”, or the moment of its engagement with the world. Yet it’s also clear that the poem is dramatic. The “now” of the poem is not a smooth, static or safe space. Even though it is pitched with such clarity, the poem’s emphasis on the vivid moment folds within itself complexity and ambivalence, involving densities of context. Lyric poems do with time what zip files do with the storage space of data. The lyric’s sense of immediacy and presence sets off a kind of resonating aftermath, where its engagement with the world is more slowly revealed to be a drama of collision and negotiation between differing vectors of being. The poem’s ecopoetic value is bound up with the way that its multiple

strands, trails and traces can be read for symptoms of the Real (our cultural-historical-environmental gestalt).

This structure (where the lyric's now-ness enfolds coded complexity) can be seen at work in one of Jamie's best poems, "An Avowal" (*Overhaul* 32-3):

Bluebell at the wayside
nodding your assent
to summer, and summer's end;
nodding, on your slender stem

your undemurring *yes*
to the small role life
offers you—a few weeks
seasoning the hill-foot grasses

with shakes of blue ...
You accept, and acquiesce
thereby, to any wind,
though the winds tease:

"Flower," they ask—
"d'you want to be noticed?"

Yes, yes, noticed!

"Or rather left alone?" *Yes,*

left perfectly alone! "Flower,"

they whisper, “d’you love
the breeze that wantons
the whole earth round

breathing its sweet proposals,
but does not love you?”
then laugh when your blue
head nods: *I do. I do.*

Though Jamie’s writing is often beautiful, she doesn’t seek to beautify. She doesn’t try to sell us nature’s beauty. Beauty emanates, in her verse, as a kind of ambience. “An Avowal” is a Blakean poem of innocence. The bluebell offers us a state of uncorrupted simplicity. On a superficial level, the poem parodies this simplicity. But its fuller meaning and ambivalence depend upon our susceptibility to unguarded grace. Free from the labyrinthine convolutions of cultural life, the bluebell is simply itself, untarnished by will, replete with a purity of being. We can hardly fail to perceive bluebells as a gift, a beneficence. And Jamie’s poem is notable for the unfussy, almost casual way in which this attraction – the Edenic aura and lure of flora – is evoked. Bluebells are perhaps mostly associated with collective blooms, sweeping carpets of resplendence. The solitary focus on one bluebell, here, with its “slender stem” and “small role” in life, accentuates its vulnerability. This is childlike innocence – the fact that it could be easily crushed is intrinsic to our apprehension of it.

Only in a relative sense does the poem confront this innocence with experience. The manner in which the winds toy with the bluebell brings to mind a small child being teased by older children. There is something light and playful

about these winds. Like a trickster, they bring the disruption of irony, yet they are harmoniously part of the scene, unreflectively engaged in the present moment.

The tease of the winds is already tucked into the poem's beginning, with our somewhat dippy bluebell nodding its assent to "summer, and summer's end". Indeed, the mirrored repetition of phrasing in the opening stanza (its "chiasmus") itself mimics the bluebell's nodding this way and that way as it is blown by the breeze: "nodding your assent / to summer, and summer's end; / nodding". Through this movement of the verse the reader vicariously feels the pleasure of the bluebell's easeful sway. But this subliminally supports the poem's irony: on the one hand, the bluebell is seen to be simple, understandably teased by the winds, liking one thing and its opposite; but on the other hand, who doesn't like both summer and summer's end? Who doesn't like both solitude and company? It's not at all strange that one might crave to be noticed, but also left perfectly alone. Of course, these likes and desires would normally be separated by time, as differing parts of a cycle, not articulated in the same moment. But one can see the bluebell is only unusual in that it affirms these things simultaneously. We might well love the breeze, and cannot help if it does not love us back. In many ways, we are scarcely better off than the bluebell.

One might associate the innocent bluebell with unfallen nature. As everyone knows, lyric poetry has conventionally sought to equate aspects of nature with an inner state of being in a kind of spiritual anthropomorphism. The innocence of the child signifies a prelapsarian idealism within aspects of nature, which can then evoke a sense of the lost presence of such inculpability within ourselves, keeping alive in us a subliminal awareness of the beatitude of things before the Fall, as it were. Of course, this flower-beauty-innocence trope overlaps with

broad symbolic associations linking nature with femininity, fertility, nurture and maternal averment. Whatever its ideological usage, this symbolic realm's sense of harmonious affirmation, in the face of life's bitter ironies and brutality, can be a powerfully magnetic force. Crucially, in an effective lyric poem, the affirmation feels somewhat primal or pre-rational, connoting a force beyond intelligence. In this sense, it doesn't matter that the bluebell is simple: the teasing of the winds cannot truly undermine the affective appeal of the bluebell's avowal.

But key to Jamie's poem is that it doesn't simplistically oppose nature-as-innocence against culture-as-experience. Because the voice of the wind is also an aspect of nature, "An Avowal" more accurately pitches two differing ways of perceiving nature against one another: two differing symbolisms, or tropic approaches to nature. The winds stand for nature as a form of Otherness, although "familiar". The winds are an aspect of nature that cannot be controlled by the imperium of the human self. As a manifestation of irony, they are playful within this poem, yet they suggest potentially a force of endless disruption. It might be easy to feel superior and suppose the bluebell is naïve, but if we cannot truly "know" nature other than as an ironic force beyond our ken, as the winds suggest, then how far are we really from the bluebell's gullibility? We are all potential victims of the winds.

It seems crucial to Jamie's poem that our own susceptibility to the potency of pastoral symbolism, rhythm, and verbal melodiousness, ensure that we can hardly fail, as we read the lines, to affirm that we, also, might "love / the breeze that wantons / the whole earth round // breathing its sweet proposals". It seems desirable that we might "acquiesce / ... to any wind", to go with the flow and not try to fight the winds, or attempt to impose our will against fates and contingencies we can't control. At the same time, the poem apprehends such

“innocence” through the filters of ironic intelligence. Jamie’s poetic is self-aware of the emptiness of easy pastoral, false idealism, faux Romanticism. Yet there’s something almost heart-breaking in our self-conscious distance from, or inability to fully inhabit, the state of pure asseveration voiced in the words “*I do. I do.*”

All that might be positively associated with the bluebell takes affective precedence, in the poem, while the ironic winds nonetheless pervade through the poem’s rhetorical structure. One can discern a faint pun in the title (“a vowel”) to the extent that vowels shape the airflow of language. Like the bluebell, the poem can’t exist without the air that flows through it. The poem is comprised of carefully patterned sensual sound, an open vowel music that generates the aforementioned atmosphere of beauty: a quality of language that simulates the grace perceptible within flowers. The poem’s final “you” / “blue” / “*I do*” shapes the mouth like a kiss, while its metre generally does to the sensorium what the breeze does to the world (it “wants / the whole earth round // breathing its sweet proposals”).

The poem might be said to crystallise paradox, as our normal contradictoriness (in that we might love both summer and autumn, or isolation and company, but probably at different times, or differing parts of a temporal cycle) is made kind of daft by being shoe-horned into one moment. This crystallisation or simultaneity, in turn, relates to the critic Jonathan Culler’s sense of the centrality to lyric verse of “apostrophe”. Apostrophe happens when one gives voice to things such as a bluebell, or the wind; or when one tries to have a chat with them. Culler says that when apostrophised, things “are immediately associated with what might be called the timeless present” (225). Culler attests that apostrophe might be central to the lyric more generally because it brings into being a sense of “now” which he deems intrinsically

essential to lyricism. As we had perceived with “Frogs”, however, this focus on the “now” simultaneously opens out to a kind of drama. It acts as a kind of X-ray to reveal otherwise submerged contradiction. In “An Avowal”, one can see its drama is characterised by the vivid presentation of competing linguistic tropes and formal affects that mediate between self and world.

To focus on the dramatic “now” of a poem is to add to one’s broader sense of the lyric poem as a performance. To stress the performative aspect of a poem is to focus on the extent to which its sound is intrinsic to its sense: the idea that poetic language is aesthetically patterned or “musical” language. In turn, since sound and aesthetic patterning are sensual phenomena that relate to affective parts of the brain, so a poem might not be entirely beholden to rational sense. Rather, indeterminacy and reason are brought into correlation in the affective “now” of the poem. In the beautiful airflow of “An Avowal”, something essentially intangible is generated – a contradiction is rendered complexly and subtly harmonious without being rationally solved in the “now” of the poem, or in the performance of the poem’s composed moment.

Given the intricate balance of such a poem, Louisa Gairn was surely right, in her work on Jamie, to focus on the quality of careful mindfulness throughout her writing. Drawing on interviews and prose statements by Jamie, Gairn accentuated the importance of “attentiveness” to her art, claiming: “a quality of sensitive observation has been a defining feature of her work throughout her career” (160). This insight seems accurate and germane, yet it is only half the story. Because while such attentiveness is fundamental to her poetic, this quality when abstracted from the verse can seem unduly passive. A fuller account of Jamie’s poetic would need to acknowledge the creativity and crafted skill with which her poems mediate the results of her attentiveness.

Instinctively, one might associate ecopoetry with an ethical imperative that humans should stop interfering with nature, respect the otherness of flora and fauna, and begin to regard the environment as sacrosanct. What is interesting is how this might overlap with the common acknowledgement, in conventional ideas about poetry, of the imaginative potency and creative agency of the artist. Ecological thought must balance its ethical imperatives against the obvious fact that to think about one's environment, observe or attend to it, is always to interfere with it.

Before being associated with ecopoetry, Jamie was already a notable writer: her collection *The Queen of Sheba* (1994) was one of the most impressive literary publications from Scotland of the 1990s. And some poems in that book, not least "Skeins o geese" (64), might now be seen as striking poems within the context of ecopoetics. But at the time, she would more commonly have been associated with the exploration of socio-cultural themes, especially regarding gender, class and national identity. In this, Jamie's work shared affinities with that of Liz Lochhead, Carol Ann Duffy and Jackie Kay.

Regarding verse from the 1980s and 1990s, amid the rich diversity of Scottish women's poetry, one can see a predilection for dramatic and narrative poems that elide the lyric's conventional, confessional binding of the "I" with the poet, in favour of a play with personae: a thirst for voices. There is an overriding interest in basing poems upon dramatic scenarios, stressing the provisional nature of identity, in a performative redress of the gendered oppressions of Scottish social reality. Here, the imaginative exploration of the self is freed from the limits of autobiography while plunged into a socialised world, which is itself re-examined through an imaginative push back against its gendered inequities. In this way, subjectivity-in-culture is dramatised and explored. This verse is often

characterised by its wit, immediacy, accessibility and subversion, frequently combining a central preoccupation with presence – the assertion of being and identity – with crucial elements of complexity, self-questioning, and ambivalence. These latter aspects characteristically resonate in the aftermath of the verse’s initial immediacy, arising from each poems’ subtle affects and contextualisation. The total effect and meaning of the poems is generated from the dialectic between these two counterpointing features: the performative “now” and the dramatic resonance.

Jamie’s title poem “The Queen of Sheba” (9-11), with its carnivalesque gusto, is perhaps the highest achievement of this poetic mode and moment in Scotland. Among other things, the poem revolves around society asking the young speaker, and by extension the young women of Scotland, “*whae do you think y’ur?*” On the one hand, this announces the theme of kicking back against oppressive cultural conventions that seek to put one in one’s “rightful” place (“no too cliver, / no above yersel”). But at the same time, there is a bottomless existential challenge to the question, which penetrates to the core of Jamie’s lyric enterprise more deeply. Of course, once you start self-reflecting on who you *think* you are, you will inevitably start wondering about the relation between this and who you *really* are, since the two might not necessarily coincide.

Crucially, in the thematic and stylistic field of “The Queen of Sheba”, Jamie’s attentiveness to, and observation of, culture were no doubt necessary factors. It’s a poem that thrives on sharp observational details, such as in the description of “Vi-next-door”, the glamorous neighbour “whose / high-heeled slippers / keeked from dressing gowns / like little hooves, wee tails / of pink fur stuffed in the cleavage of her toes”. Yet no-one would argue that something more than attentiveness is at work in this poetic mode. One accepts that the poet, here, also

gets her hands dirty, is imaginatively in the mix to a point where observation and invention become inextricable, bending and twisting the codes and conventions through which we understand the world, with a view to changing these, or at least pushing back against them, forestalling them, doing something more than passively observing.

Moving back to ecopoetry, the problem is that such imaginative manipulation, when it comes to the environment, fauna and flora, can hardly fail to seem dubious. Here, any potential anthropomorphisation can seem like interference, and possibly violation. In response to our self-created ecological catastrophe, it seems imperative to respect the otherness of non-human life, and to refrain from co-opting it into an imaginary harmony that might make us feel good while cloaking our horrific defilements. The predicament of the poet is to balance the mind's enormous imaginative capacity against the restraints of ethical responsibility.

But what might be instructive for ecopoetic discourse generally is the way in which Jamie doesn't seem at all anxious about anthropomorphisation. Her imagery freely uses human life to come imaginatively closer to non-human life, and vice versa. This can clearly be seen in a trait that runs through *The Tree House*, which shows an unmistakable fondness for extended, audacious metaphors and similes. In "Rhododendrons" (33), a bunch of the titular flowers in some water is described as: "a handful of purple baubles // reflected below the water's surface / as comfortable and motionless / as a family in their living room // watching TV".

In "The Glass-hulled Boat", the speaker on the eponymous boat sees jellyfish: "luminous bowls / like lost internal organs, / pulsing and slow". For a fleeting moment, the world within ourselves and the otherworld beneath the sea become

instantly, organically connected, the way a person is to their liver or kidney. That “luminous” detail possibly reminds us of how the unknowability of undersea life frequently evokes its own particular brand of subaqueous psychedelia, which feels oddly apt for our inner body’s workings also. But as this poem proceeds the undersea world becomes increasingly anthropomorphised. The jellyfish are joined by some bladderwrack: “in the green gloom / swaying sideways and back / like half-forgotten ancestors”. And this trajectory of personification sets up the poem’s central image:

It’s as though we’re stalled in a taxi
in an ill-lit, odd
little town, at closing time,
when everyone’s maudlin

and really, ought just to go
home ...

In a book championed as ecopoetic, one doesn’t quite expect human culture and the animal world to be linked by a casual perception that each is mutually naff. To think of the jellyfish and seaweed in terms of this “little town” is downright non-eco-friendly: anthropomorphism as insult. But nonetheless, within the exasperated, disappointed familiarity of this phrasing, one also detects a degree of affection. Of course, this image tells us nothing “real” about aquatic life: it is more revealing of the human mind and its habits of perception. Through a glass-hulled boat we might catch a glimpse of underwater life, but it remains alien. Our perception simply bounces off such intractability and takes recourse in its

existent sense-making abilities. The result is a one-sided concoction, improvised from taking whatever small insight we can gain from our limited contact, and mixing this with our pre-established tropes and patterns of thought. The result tells us much more about ourselves than the non-human world, yet it also shapes our knowledge and understanding of that world.

Perhaps ironically, this is crucial to why poetry might remain of interest in the context of the Anthropocene. Because all reality is mediated and we never have full access to it, scientific knowledge may well be more “accurate” than poetic knowledge, but must eventually admit its own limits in terms of human consciousness’s interaction with the world. Poetic knowledge is of a different kind – playful, performative, provisional and exploratory. Of course there is a danger this point might be simplified and misconstrued as a kind of reactionary refusal of science. But it is not the case that one diminishes one’s rational apprehension of the world when acknowledging that our minds frequently work in ways not observant of scientific rigour. Poetry nor faith will save the world, but each might retain their importance in our struggle to counter environmental catastrophe. And poetry’s value regarding ecopoetics must surely be bound up with its richness as an arena for expressing and exploring our sense-world and the experience of our subjectivity. As a species we cannot stop perceiving the world in an emotional and imaginative or fictive fashion, whether consciously or not. And since no communication or understanding is possible outside of our linguistic and tropic mediations, the poetic act is arguably of immense value since it raises the conjectural, susceptible and codified nature of our engagement with the world into an exploratory art form.

“The Glass-hulled Boat” establishes an encounter between worlds, but shows little interest in reifying the terms of this encounter into some form of

permanent contract. Rather, one might say the main effect or “meaning” of Jamie’s poem resides in its subtly open-ended tone. The speaker of the poem feels a bit “above” the maudlin little town, just as she is literally “above” the jellyfish and seaweed in her glass-hulled boat. The boat has become like a “stalled taxi” – stuck there, in the banal. But what was the speaker expecting? Why should the encounter between human and nature be enlightening? In any case, in the final stanza the speaker says she “almost” envies the jellyfish. Then their encounter is cut short when the boat engines churn, and its passengers are “spun out ... / on some sudden new trajectory, / fuddled, but unperturbed”. In spite of the speaker’s rhetorical confidence, as she is spun off on a trajectory over which she has no control, it would seem she is not even alert to her own lack of agency and insight, “fuddled, but unperturbed”: on the same level as the jellyfish, the maudlin villagers.

This final, implicit irony revises and complicates the tone and ultimately the meaning of the image, and of the overall poem. We have discussed how the lyric’s overall structure involves both the immediacy of an intensified present tense, where the encounter between mind and world is emphasised, but also the unspooling of symbolic significance and ambivalent ramifications from this dramatic point of contact. Jamie’s extended images show how this process is enacted at a kind of micro-level through its imaginative figuration. Through its playful game of identity-and-difference, imagery involves a process in which subjectivity and world come to be dynamically merged. In this, we can enjoy a partial but crucial release from responsibility towards things, because the poem is dealing with the words for things, not the things themselves. And especially in the world of poetry, words are saturated in codes and conventions, connotations and echoes, all of which are composite with gradations of socio-cultural reality.

In this manner, there is no formal difference between the kind of processes and dynamics involved in creating the social poetry found in *The Queen of Sheba*, and the ecopoetry of *The Tree House*.

Image-making in a poem entwines attentiveness and distortion in a process that involves emotional intelligence, associative playfulness and artful discernment. This is a realm of open-ended provisionality and exploration, where all the possibilities of interconnection are up for grabs. The demand of the art form asks for ideation to be coupled with linguistic sensuality. As such, when a poet attempts to create an image of, say, a heron, she is not communing directly with the bird, yet the dynamic nature of her linguistic entanglement with that bird will ensure she is inventing a kind of concord that has its own reality: one that creates space for affective intensity, reflexive adaptability and the semantic elasticity of ambivalence. A poem about a heron will not affect the heron, but might begin to alter or widen the framework through which we attempt to ‘know’ the heron. In this way, poetry interweaves self with world by deepening our mediation, prominently imbricating perception with sensuality and emotion as the poem builds its affects. A game of codes, it is not a “mastery” of the world, but is instead a vibrant reconnaissance of our always provisional contact with the world, which nonetheless enlarges and intensifies the experience of our subjective engagement, and awareness of our inextricable enmeshment.

In the poem “Gloaming”, we read: “The sky’s the still / pale grey of a heron, attending the tide-pools of the shore” (20). If the sky was simply the grey colour of a heron, we might understand the image as literally descriptive – a visual matter (the sky was *that* shade of grey, then). But how do we process this extended image? To understand how the sky was the colour of a heron “attending the tide-pools of the shore”, we need to visualise how proximity to the

tide-pools of the shore might affect the exact shade of a heron's grey colour. We're left to imagine this grey in relation to a specific quality of light. One can imagine how the tide-pools reflect the sky, how down-below and up-above mirror one another, the ground and the heavens mediated by the bird's flight, making this "still / pale grey" pervasive. Meanwhile, the "tide-pools" is a pun on "tide pulls", implicitly summoning the moon, whose spectral illumination then further infiltrates this gloaming. The "tide" suggests motion, yet the poem's greyness is "still", just as the heron that we might instinctively associate with flight, at first mention, is subsequently moored to attend the shore, as the poem's final extended image unravels itself.

The poem tells us: "It's not day, this light we've entered, / but day is present at the negotiation". Just as the "present" is described as a "negotiation", the scene described is both static (it's all grey) and shifting; things are betwixt and between, intermixing and mutating. The gloaming is *the thing* described by the poem, yet this, in turn, effectively describes a broader environment of interconnection, where any one thing can reflect and have an effect on another. The subtle complexity of the final image helps generate the subtle weirdness and delicate evanescence of the whole. Leaving us at that liminal space by the shore, between elements, with flight encoded within the light, the nature of the gloaming is spectral or somewhat phantasmagoric: a place where the literal is interfused with the figurative. Here, there is nothing to stop place and poem, landscape and consciousness, environment and state-of-being, fact and affect, from collapsing into one another.

Criticising Robert Macfarlane's book *The Wild Places* in 2008, Jamie took pains to stress not just the otherness of nature but also its threat. She argued that "wildness ... is a force requiring constant negotiation", adding that, "in the end,

we won't have to go out to find the wild, because the wild will come for us" ("Enraptured" 27). And as we have stressed, Jamie's own poetry remains self-aware and self-vigilant about any unchecked idealism. It's as if her poetic has permanently internalized that skeptical questioning of "The Queen of Sheba": "*whae do you think y'ur?*" Obviously, in that poem, this was something to be repelled: patriarchal ideology aimed at limiting the horizons of femininity. But by *The Tree House*, an ingrained scepticism has become ethically enabling, stopping one from getting carried away. If each poem dramatises an encounter with things from, or aspects of, the natural world, each poem implicitly asks "what do you think of this?" which further involves us asking "what do we think of ourselves?" Moreover, for each poem that asks "what *can* we think of this?", what is signified by "this" will always be the bluebell or jellyfish or heron specifically named, yet "this" will also ultimately signify the entire mesh of our tarnished global gestalt.

In such a way, it might be argued that individuality (one poem at a time) and scepticism are specifically Scottish attributes that Jamie brings to ecopoetry. The poem "The Tree House" (41-3) reflects on the personal cost of motherhood, family and holding together a bourgeois home. Escaping for a night into the tree house of the title is like perceiving what a free solitary life might have been like, or at least having more free space for the contemplative mind. The sense of sacrifice, of lost possibility, is insistent. Yet the poem also veers assuredly away from solipsism. In a brilliant turn the speaker, musing on "other possible lives" and dreaming of escape from family and responsibility, imagines getting a taxi headed "for elsewhere", only for that taxi to bring the speaker "here", returning to the homestead where the family tree house has been built in the garden. Now the symbolism of the tree house of the title changes in character to figure this different, familial life and habitation, which the poem has set up to be "fallen"

and that precludes loss. The writing is insistently unsentimental, yet, for all that, a molten core of emotion burns through the tonal restraint. Here, all of a mother's attachment to her family and home is framed by a sense that what the poem earlier calls the "complicity" between nature and culture (tree and tree house) unavoidably involves damage. The tree house is already literally dead while it symbolically houses human life:

a dwelling of sorts; a gall
we've asked the tree to carry
of its own dead, and every spring
to drape in leaf and blossom, like a pall.

Here nature serves to decorate its own funeral, perpetually and inescapably, in order to provide us with the means of our "dwelling". The "complicity" between ourselves and our environment (the basis for human life and love), however it is to be negotiated, will take place within the disturbance of that "gall" / "pall" rhyme.

Jamie's poetic demands we make the best fist possible of our encounter with the world, but does so with a remarkably clear eye. The scepticism of her verse is of a corrective kind. Regarding the possible role of poetry in the context of our vast and urgent ecological distress, one can imagine this poet suggesting, first and foremost, that readers might well set down their poetry books and join their local activist group. But parallel to that, reading her verse is to enter a special art-space in which we can immerse ourselves in heightened nuance, re-

encounter the provisional now, the mess of our mesh, and reopen imaginative negotiations in all their complexity, with the world and with everything at stake.

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