

## **‘The Name Blossomed’: Landscapes, Habitats and the Botanical Poetry of South-West Australia**

**JOHN RYAN**  
**Edith Cowan University**

*Someone came. The name blossomed. ‘Eremophila,’  
he said, ‘or Desert Loving’*

Alec Choate, ‘Poverty Bush’

### **Poeticising the Botanical World**

Commonly detailing physical interaction with nature, some forms of poetry narrate moments in which the human senses intermesh with ecological processes and phenomena. In the following discussion, I will characterise sense-rich, ecologically networked poetry as ‘habitat poetry’. In addition to sensory-fullness, another defining quality of habitat poetry is its representation of the lives of people, plants, animals and fungi within their ecological complexes. Furthermore, habitat poetry also conveys the poet’s grappling with scientific discourses.

These three aspects of habitat poetry (ecology, sense and science) will be articulated in the context of the South-West of Western Australia. The works of South-West poets Alec Choate (1915–2010) (*Gifts; A Marking; Mind*), Andrew Lansdown (1954–), and John Kinsella (1963–) (*Poems; The New Arcadia*) use sensory language to express their experiences of nature and to convey the dynamics between science and poetry. The habitat concept furnishes an interpretative framework for reading Choate, Lansdown and Kinsella. The three could be described not only as landscape poets but, more precisely, as habitat poets, a distinction pursued in this discussion through the analytical frameworks of Cosgrove, Elliott and Giblett in particular. Whereas landscape poetry tends to prioritise visual experiences, habitat poetry demonstrates human engagement with the natural world through sensory plurality and an acute awareness of ecology and science. Focusing on these three South-West poets, this article calls attention to poetic works that address flora through broad ecological understandings, or what will be referred to as habitat awareness.

The South-West’s biodiversity is of international significance and the region is one of the most floristically diverse Mediterranean ecosystems in the world. The South-West extends from Shark Bay in the upper northwest corner to Israelite Bay east of Esperance in the southeast corner of Western Australia, and includes metropolitan Perth (Fig. 1). In the late nineteenth century, botanist Baron von Mueller identified the South-West as a ‘botanical province’ due to its distinctive floristic communities and high rates of endemism (Beard 107–21). A global biodiversity hotspot, the South-West possesses remarkable floral and faunal endemism (Hopper ‘An Australian Perspective’). Moreover, the South-West is the only globally recognised Australian hotspot (Conservation International). Thirty-five percent of its plants are endemic, or found to occur in uncultivated conditions only within the biogeographical boundaries

of the region. In fact, the South-West province accounts for 80% of the endemic plants of Western Australian, including iconic species such as the Underground Orchid (*Rhizanthella gardneri*), Mangles Kangaroo Paw (*Anigozanthos manglesii*), Poverty Bush (*Eremophila alternifolia*) and Christmas Tree (*Nuytsia floribunda*) (Paczkowska and Chapman). The genesis of the region's botanical diversity can be attributed to its nutrient-poor soils and intensely dry and hot summers (Corrick and Fuhrer). The South-West's plant diversity often figures prominently in the works of poets writing with the kind of habitat awareness that will be described.



**Fig. 1** Map of the South-West Botanical Province of Western Australia (in red), stretching from Shark Bay in the north-west to Israelite Bay east of Esperance in the south-east (Source: The Encyclopedia of Earth)

### Landscape Poetry and Habitat Poetry

Unlike animals that move, gaze and vocalise, plants are commonly perceived as static objects or two-dimensional surfaces (Hall; Hallé; Ryan; Trewavas). Geographers Russell Hitchings and Verity Jones observe this cultural tendency in arguing that ‘vegetation is something passive in contemporary understanding: to be in a vegetative state is to be without mind. Yet the root of the word ‘vegetative’ is associated with activity and enlivened animation’ (11). Published in 1927, *The Lure of the Golden West* by Thomas Sidney Groser demonstrates the common perceptual tendency to appreciate the flowering plants of the South-West for their visual and vegetative qualities. The following excerpt from Groser exemplifies the language governing visual appreciation with such phrases as ‘lovely picture’, ‘prevailing colour’ and ‘glowing pageantry’. As it is prose and not poetry *per se*, the rhetoric of ocularcentrism with regard to plants is plainer and more evident:

There is scarcely a more lovely [*sic*] picture imaginable than a West Australian Bush in the Springtime. Pink is perhaps the prevailing colour—certainly where the ‘everlasting’ predominates ...The rich green undergrowth of Spring-time [*sic*], and the evergreen and flowering eucalyptus trees, form a rich setting for this glowing pageantry of colour. (216)

The speaker emphasises the springtime colour and form of flowers. The represented scene implies the two-dimensional fixity of the observed plants and their separation from the pollinators or landforms co-occupying their space. Groser's extract treats flora—lovingly and appreciatively still—as objects of art. This writing—which I will refer to as landscape—focuses on the visual impact of flowers, privileging qualities possessed by a plant only at certain times of the year, namely the beauty of flowers

Groser's language has its roots in a landscape tradition in which sight alone is enough to generate spiritual, emotional and aesthetic experiences of nature. The Romanticist subject, informed by a highly ocular modes of appreciation, tends to construct nature as a vista, prospect or vantage point—in other words, a landscape—through the primacy of the sense of sight (Giblett 68–72). John Barrell argues that the word 'landscape' was introduced into English 'from the Dutch in the sixteenth century to describe a pictorial representation of the countryside' (1). Nature writing in English owes its origins to the works of landscape poets such as Wordsworth whose early writings in particular reflect an ambivalent relationship to 'the bodily eye...the most despotic of our senses' (Wordsworth qtd. in McKusick 56). Romanticist poetics often privilege landscapes of various aesthetic kinds – the sublimity of mountainscapes, the picturesqueness of valleys or the beauty of well-formed natural objects, including flowers: 'But lately, one rough day, this Flower I passed/ And recognized it, though an altered Form/ Now standing forth an offering to the Blast/ And buffeted at will by Rain and Storm' (Wordsworth). Although Wordsworth's celandine exhibits some agency in 'standing forth', the flower is recognised simply as one of nature's forms, impacted upon by the elements, rather than a plant-as-subject producing physical sensations that impact the poet intimately through touch or smell.

Simply put, landscape poetry involves a way of seeing the natural world that reflects certain conventions of sight and language (for further background, see Berleant; Cosgrove; Elliott; Heidegger). Brian Elliott in *The Landscape of Australian Poetry* defines landscape as 'the visible scene about us, the subject-matter of descriptive picture-making' and confesses that when seeking synonyms 'I have sometimes employed the term *topography*, or referred to the *vista*, signifying what is seen by the eye' [*italics in the original*] (xi). In similar terms, the geographer Denis Cosgrove (13) understands landscape as 'not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world.' A way of seeing implies modes of viewership; the resulting language is of beautiful flowers, sublime forests or picturesque heath lands (Berleant). Extending Cosgrove's notion, landscape poetry could be theorised as a way of constructing the world as image (see also Heidegger 207-23).

A conceptual distinction between landscape and habitat allows various aspects of human engagement with the botanical world to be identified and better understood. Is the poem set back distantly, painting a 'lovely picture'? Does it communicate intimate sensory contact with plants through embodied acts of tasting, touching, smelling, listening attentively and looking carefully? The work of cultural theorist Rod Giblett (*People and Places*) provides a framework for teasing out the nuances of difference between landscape and habitat poetry. According to Giblett, landscape poetry inherits the difficulties of the landscape concept (*People and Places* 66-68). In particular, the categories of the beautiful, sublime and picturesque involve the viewing of nature's surfaces and the formation of value judgements (Giblett *People and Places* 57-94). Landscape implies, most commonly, an externalised scene or visually demarcated object. Here Giblett differentiates between writing that constructs landscape through vision almost exclusively—propounding a Kantian hierarchy of the senses—and writing that engages the complexities of nature through diverse (and often messy) sensory entanglements:

Landscape writing that aestheticises the static surfaces of nature can be contrasted with nature writing that celebrates its dynamic depths. I define nature writing as the creative, written tracing of the bodily and sensory enjoyment of both the processes and places of nature. (26)

Whether through the creative intent of the poet or not, poetry that emphasises the surface features of plants reflects a landscape mode of perception, according to these environmental thinkers.

On the other hand, habitat refers to ecological interdependency and sensory plurality. This is not to say that these qualities will always be absent in the representation and experience of landscape; sensory plurality, however, can be constrained by the privileging of vision (see Crary; Jay; Levin). The term 'habitat' is derived from a Latin verb, 'to live, dwell', developing into a noun, 'dwelling place' (Harper). Sense-rich writing about flora—entailing embodied human experience of plants—could be described more broadly as nature writing, a literary form that engages the processes, patterns and sensations of a place and its inhabitants (Buell; Elder and Finch 19-28; Murray 10). As a genre of nature writing, habitat poetry references plants in close relation to fauna, rocks, water and other natural and cultural features that constitute the land. As it will be propounded in this discussion, habitat poetry comprises three interweaving characteristics: ecology, body and science. Conveying the network in which the plant is situated as a subject rather than an object of research (in particular, see Latour), habitat poetry enlivens the reader's awareness of biological rhythms and interdependencies.

In many of the following works by South-West poets, a general curiosity about a plant in its habitat leads to an embodied investigation: smelling, touching, tasting, listening and looking carefully. In the examples from Choate, Lansdown and Kinsella in the next section, landscape and habitat modes work hand-in-hand. Ecological, bodily and scientific interest in the plant removes the barriers of detached visual spectatorship. For the nineteenth-century American prose writer Henry David Thoreau, who is credited with the emergence of nature writing in North America, botanical habitats, such as swamps, offered comparable participatory immersion in ecology through the senses (Giblett *Postmodern*; Thoreau). In this regard, Thoreau wrote of habitats rather than landscapes exclusively. His sensory entanglement with botanical nature countered the physical detachment often at the centre of the landscape mode, as the previously cited example from Groser suggests.

### **Reading Lansdown, Choate and Kinsella as Habitat Poets**

The works of Alec Choate, Andrew Lansdown and John Kinsella convey habitat awareness of South-West plant ecologies. In sum, their poetry is about process, sensation and science. As these examples will intimate in different ways, their work engages directly with botanical science through references to taxonomic names and anatomical terms. Simply put, plants evolve in these poems, and are represented as part of a dynamic, changeable nature. Expressing habitat awareness, human perception synchronises in their poetry to the poïēsis of the plants over a span of time. Their writings include visual and non-visual experiences—although not always both—as a way of representing the multidimensionality of plants and human sensory experience of plants.

Andrew Lansdown (1954–) was born in Pingelly, a regional town in Western Australia's Wheatbelt. His first published collection, *Homecoming* (1979), underscores his sensory interest in Perth-area plants and animals. *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-century Poetry in English* characterises Lansdown as 'a miniaturist, a poet attentive to the smallest details of nature' (Grant). Haskell and Fraser describe Lansdown's work as 'reminiscent of Wordsworth and Coleridge' ('Lansdown' 122), although I argue that Lansdown is more sensorial and embodied than the Romantic label can afford. Recent publications, including *Birds in Mind: Australian Nature Poems* (2009), further round out Lansdown's thirty-year identity as a nature writer of the senses. 'A Few Weeks Later I Return To Find' from *Homecoming* exemplifies his sensory curiosity about South-West flora. In this poem, visual appreciation is linked to the ecological processes of the balga flower (Fig. 2). Tactile interaction between plant and poet makes the work palpable and intimate. Lansdown moves between bodily encounter and visual analysis of the balga's morphology and symmetry. Moments of sensory contact mix with a kind of taxonomic itemising of the flower:

Centred in the stamens,  
the shorter stylus – surrounded,  
and at times, 'covered  
by a glistening glob of transparent nectar  
which, in turn, was caught in the cup-pit  
of the six guardian stamens. (lines 11-16)

After an anatomical inventory of the flower's stylus and stamens, Lansdown engages his other senses. The poem tracks up and down the balga stalk, indicating an ecological awareness of this particular *Xanthorrhoea* as a mutable individual. Straightforward morphological descriptions are infused with playful curiosity. Throughout, Lansdown employs bodily tropes like 'tiny yellow vulvas of pollen' (l. 10). Inquisitiveness and sensory openness reach an apotheosis when:

I thought each flower had mysteriously  
caught last night's dew,  
so I put my tongue to it  
(Descartes would not have approved) to see:  
it was a powerful, honey-thick  
nectar. The odour was a heavy  
sweetness. I wiped the pollen from my nose. (lines 17-23)

Lansdown's poem expresses a kind of light defiance of scientific knowledge construction and objective methods of knowing – 'Descartes would not have approved' (l. 20). Such sense acts could be read as deconstructing scientific epistemologies. Scandalous intimacy with the balga calls into question the notion of objective detachment: 'so I put my tongue to it' (l. 19). The poet's whole sensuous body participates in—rather than distantly views—the manifestations of the balga's ecology. Vision ('to see' (l. 20)) links to taste ('a powerful, honey-thick/ nectar' (ll. 21-22)) and to smell: 'The odour was a heavy/ sweetness' (ll. 22-23). The poet's response is embodied: 'I wiped the pollen from my nose' (l. 23).



**Fig. 2** Detail of *Xanthorrhoea* (Balga) flower. Admittedly, visual images of these species could contradict a position for heightened sensory experience of plants through tasting, touching, smelling and listening closely, rather than through the pleasure of sight alone. However, my hope is that these photographs become a point-of-reference for the readers outside of Western Australia who may be unfamiliar with the plants poeticised by Lansdown, Choate and Kinsella (Source: commons.wikimedia.org)

Opposing qualities of touch tend to characterise many species of South-West flora (Seddon). For example, several dryandra bear down-soft flowers surrounded by stiff and thorny foliage (Collins). The balga also offers a range of sensation to human experience. After using its colloquial name ‘blackboy’ as a direct address of the plant, Lansdown notes subtleties in how the flower stalk feels to touch:

Blackboy,  
the compact, coarse sandpaper  
of your flower-spear  
has turned to softness. (lines 24-27)

Judging from the phrase ‘flower spear’, Lansdown registers the balga’s capacity for autopoiesis, from coarseness and armour to softness and suppleness. The poem’s title also intimates an awareness resulting from the experience of plants (or the same plant) at different times through the seasons. The balga *in situ* is not a fixed object of perception but rather a highly dynamic phenomenon. Awareness of the balga’s habitat and of the balga *as* habitat is evident in the last stanza:

Later  
the seeds will come;  
then the parrots.  
I see the sharp, triangular lengths  
of your deep-green leaves  
shimmer in anticipation. (lines 28-33)



Instead of extracted from its ecology as a stand-alone, the balga in 'A Few Weeks Later' is contextualised ecologically with seeds transforming and parrots coming and going. There is both imminence and immanence.

Endemic South-West plants also figure conspicuously in the works of Alec Choate (1915–2010). Born in Hertfordshire, England, Choate spent most of his life in Western Australia. Haskell and Fraser observe that 'his poetry is distinguished by its extraordinary descriptive power, as well as by its ability to suggest, through metaphor, a mysterious chord of sympathy between nature and humanity' ('Alec' 34). Much of Choate's poetry deals with the desert regions of the state where he worked as a land surveyor (The University of Western Australia). Collections such as *Gifts Upon the Water*, *A Marking of Fire* and *Mind in Need of a Desert* exhibit Choate's ongoing fascination with the ecologies of dryland species. Poems 'Land in Flower' (*A Marking* 14) and 'Prison Tree, Derby' (*Gifts* 35) mark his interest in both botanical phenomena and cultural history. However, 'Nuytsia Floribunda' and 'Poverty Bush' exemplify, in particular, Choate's characteristic weaving of botanical science, taxonomic naming and poetic sensibility for arid country.



**Fig. 3** Detail of *Nuytsia floribunda* in flower, November 2010 in Dianella, Western Australia (Source: John Ryan)

*Nuytsia Floribunda* refers to the scientific name for the endemic West Australian Christmas Tree (Choate, *A Marking* 16). The mixing of science into poetry is reflected by Choate's choice to use the taxonomic name as the title, rather than the plant's more poetic colloquial names 'Cabbage Tree' or 'Fire Tree' (for a historical example see Lindley). The poem gives an account of the tree in its habitat. Yet Choate refrains from using technical terms like 'hemiparasite' or 'haustoria' common to scientific accounts of *Nuytsia* ecology and physiology (see, for example, Hopper 'Nuytsia Floribunda').

For Choate, *Nuytsia* is both symbolically and ecologically important. The tree in flower is an emblem of the South-West Australian summer:

This tree could only find root  
in a land whose heart belongs  
to its summer, no other

season, and where the summer  
feels bound to repay that heart  
with an emblem of grandeur. (lines 1-6)

The middle stanzas trace the progression of the seasons and set the context for the flower's arrival as the 'emblem of grandeur' and a harbinger of the hot season:

Autumn and winter linger  
to make ready as tinder  
all that is dark in their time,

the dark of life waste and mould  
and rain when blind among roots,  
the spleen of night's halting hours

or simply the crape of clouds.  
Spring is the easing of limbs,  
the young leaves winking for warmth. (lines 7-15)

In later stanzas, the fire and flower become analogues that express the colonial trope of *Nuytsia* as a 'tree on fire' (Lindley), the tree's flower signifying the beginning of the bushfire season:

But when the summer returns,  
the culminating summer,  
it breathes upon the tinder,

and from the gauntlets of green  
of this chosen tree in its  
thousands, lights torch after torch

of amber that floods to gold,  
its own heart naked as fire  
the land's heart naked as flower. (lines 16-24)

As homophones, fire and flower represent the long-term regenerative processes of the land (for a classic account, see Hallam). Described as 'amber that floods to gold' (l. 22), flower colour alchemises as the season progresses. Rather than an eschatological end, the golden blossom is a culmination—or even crescendo—of a string of interactions between 'waste', 'mould', 'rain' and 'roots.' Here the flowering *Nuytsia* is not isolated from its habitat. Instead, the beautiful blossom is positioned within a broader network of agents—a habitat. By the poem's end, fire is no longer a trope or metaphor; it is the material reality into which *Nuytsia* projects upward in flower. The poetic effect is not the representation of the tree as an object of study; metaphorically and ecologically, fire infuses flower, flower fans fire and the tree's life is revealed:



while from skyline to skyline  
the haze is a secret's veil  
that a fierce trust has shredded. (lines 25-27)

The 'fierce trust' shredding the haze of smoke is the uplifted, golden canopy of the *Nuytsia*. The flower is entwined with habitat, ensuring that the regeneration of the land continues from season to season. In this sense, the poem represents ecology imaginatively as a pact between humans, plants, animals, landforms and the elements of fire, wind and water. Metaphysically, trust makes possible the cycle of decay and growth, flowering and firing. Choate's layered reading of the *Nuytsia* flower is a striking contrast to surface-oriented appreciation of flora.



In 'Poverty Bush', Choate (*Mind* 94-95) comments on the historical misperceptions inscribed in botanical names vis-à-vis the desert plant *Eremophila alternifolia*. Poverty Bush is concentrated on the arid eastern edge of the South-West. *Eremophila* is from the Greek roots *phila-* for 'to love' and *eremo-* for 'lonely places' or 'desert' (Spooner). The poem opens with two tercets that associate the plant with love for the desert, as its scientific name indicates, but the love is tainted by thwarted hope, as its common name denotes:

**Fig. 4** Detail of *Eremophila alternifolia*  
(Source: commons.wikimedia.org)

The desert cries out for love,  
and no shrub answers  
With more heart to return it

than this whose vast sisterhood  
is far from the name  
and seeming of poverty. (lines 1-6)

Poverty Bush is perfectly adapted to desert country, but the same soils in which it prospers retard colonial pastoralism. Choate historicises the common name as the misunderstanding of European settlers:

Poverty of mind rather  
was theirs who crammed mouths  
on the pastoral reaches

and who when the ground feed died  
so named the shrub, it  
being no browser's standby. (lines 7-12)

With tough and spiky foliage, Poverty Bush is resistant to grazing by animals. On the one hand, plant names are linked to the conversion of Indigenous land. On the other hand, the metaphorical nuances of scientific names reveal the plant's affinity for desert ecology and its adaptation to dry conditions. Towards the end of the poem, the act of

naming involves the messianic arrival of a botanist who redeems the plant from cultural misrepresentation:

But someone came, someone saw  
     it lacquer its leaves  
 against the wind's rainless lips,

scatter its seeds and trust roots  
     to the rust-red sand,  
 saw how it decored itself

in wool, a ripple of scales,  
     a mantle of hair,  
 or posed sepals as petals,

its means, and its miracles,  
     for coming to terms  
 with skies and their gaze of stone.

Someone came. The name blossomed.

    '*Eremophila*,

he said, 'or Desert Loving'. (lines 13-27)

The technical name indicates the ways in which the plant has adapted to the same conditions that repelled early settlers. This considerable poeticising of ecology reveals Choate's familiarity with processes in phrases such as 'scatter its seeds' and 'posed sepals as petals'. The habitat is austere. 'The wind's rainless lips' evokes the parched earth, whilst 'skies and their gaze of stone' is the omnipresence of the desert sun. The final tercet suggests that scientific names often have poetic hues, thus animating taxonomic knowledge with imaginative and figurative meanings.

Poetic attention to plants also figures into the works of John Kinsella (1963–), a prominent Western Australian writer and critic who lives near Northam in the Wheatbelt east of Perth. His poetry often displays an acute visual awareness of place and ecology. Unlike Lansdown and Choate, Kinsella is known for upsetting the notion of landscape as a pastoral idyll; indeed Kinsella's landscape is a deeply fragmented yet beautiful one, a polarised habitat for people, flora and fauna. Kinsella's poetics has been self-characterised as 'poison pastoralism' or 'anti-pastoralism', the latter a term proposed by Terry Gifford to denote the tension of 'how to find a voice that does not lose sight of authentic connectedness with nature, in the process of exposing the language of the idyll' (55). In contrast to a Wordsworthian sense of aesthetic harmony, Kinsella deploys sensoriality, knowledge of ecology and linguistic disintegration (see Haskell for an analysis of Kinsella's pastoral poetics in *The Silo*) The outcome for Kinsella is habitat poetry rooted in regional ecological crisis and not limited to speculative distance and visual appreciation solely.

The slippage between construction of a landscape as image and appreciation of land as moving sensation is evident in 'Everlastings' (*Poems* 29-30). The poem opens with bodily references and depicts a family gathering wildflowers:

A couple pick flowers  
 while their child lies

cribbed in the dry rustle  
of stalks & petals. (lines 1-4).

Whilst tactile, the harvesting of wildflowers is now considered an ecologically unsustainable way of engaging with indigenous plants (see Summers). In the poem, the habitat is protective and nurturing as the flower stalks and petals cradle a small child (Fig. 5). Bodily tropes connect people and plants; the everlastings are 'broken-necked', for example. Similarly, the short poem 'Paperbarks' (*Poems* 174) uses bodily language: 'skins peel and flake/ about the grasping roots' (ll. 6-7). The exfoliated exterior is like a skin peeling back and is the most distinguishing visual characteristic of the paperbark: 'absorbent skins will not extinguish when voice/ falls and memory lingers, for these are ghosts' (ll. 9-10).



Although human experience of everlastings is not extensively developed in the poem, 'Everlastings' employs bodily imagery to assemble a scene that ripples with sensation. The 'painting' (l. 17) of the flowers comes to life as the breeze animates 'rippling waters' of everlastings:

**Fig. 5** Field of everlastings near Lesueur National Park, Eneabba, Western Australia (Source: John Ryan)

The breeze stirs the feeling  
deep inside the painting,  
the sun flickers  
& is passed over  
by pumice clouds, bunches  
hanging rigid in the shade,  
mock-glorious in their brilliance. (lines 16-22)

Through lyrical play, the scene is presented as fluid rather than rigid and flat. The visual qualities of the everlastings are appreciable as 'White pink rose scarlet' (l. 9). The colours, however, are synaesthetic and rippling with motion: 'cool almost ice their swayings' (l. 10). Moreover, allusions such as 'Bees, laden' (l. 12) and 'the sun flickers/ & is passed over/ by pumice clouds' (l. 18-20) reveal Kinsella's habitat awareness: the everlastings in their ecological network. Similarly, 'The Bottlebrush Flowers' (*Poems* 174-175) augments visual descriptors, such as 'bristling firelick' (l. 11) and 'a spiral of Southern Lights' (ll. 11-12), through allusion to the habitat embeddedness of the bottlebrush: 'I've also seen/ honey-eaters bob upside down/ and unpick its light in seconds' (ll. 12-14) (Fig. 6).





**Fig. 6** Bottlebrush in Cervantes, Western Australia (Source: Gabriele Delhey, commons.wikimedia.org)

‘Exposing the *Rhizanthella gardneri* Orchid’ (Poems 227) is exemplary of Kinsella’s habitat poetry. The poem’s multisensoriality allows a reader to connect language and orchid ecology. Language here progresses according to the senses, revealing slowly the unusual events in the Underground Orchid’s life cycle. The opening stanza describes the orchid’s associations. It requires mutualistic arrangements with other plants; without human intervention, it will never be exposed to sunlight and lives its entire life underground (Brown et al.) (Fig. 7). In order to survive without photosynthesis, the peculiar orchid depends on the roots of a host tree:

Above the roots  
of a Broom Honey Myrtle  
the beak of an orchid  
tastes the acrid air.  
Its mouth sweet with flowers.  
Termites roaming the pollen. (lines 1-6).

The word choice is gustatory: ‘the beak of an orchid/ tastes the acrid air’ (l. 3-4) and ‘its mouth sweet with flowers’ (l. 5). The visible parts of the orchid are observed, as well as its ecological processes, including pollen dispersion by termites. In scientific terms, Kinsella outlines the specific relationship between the orchid, the host tree and the mediating fungus:

Saprophyte,  
and guest-host  
to a root-invading fungus,  
its liaisons go unnoticed  
as the scrub is peeled back,  
and are only half-revealed  
with the lifting  
of the surface. (lines 7-14).

The unnoticed 'liaisons' (l. 10) are the time-worn mutualisms beneath the 'surface':

Excavated,  
its leaves unfold  
and termites roam the pollen,  
its dark heart  
reddening  
with exposure. (lines 15-20).

Motion infuses images of the orchid as 'its leaves unfold' (l. 16). The flower reddens while termites, one of the few known pollinators of the orchid, distribute pollen. The poem moves between the above-ground act of unearthing the flower and the normal buried state of the orchid; words are formed at the margin of the superficial and the subterranean. A preoccupation with vistas or broad-sweeping expanses is clearly not evident in this example. Instead, *Rhizanthella gardneri* is vested with ecological intricacies and the sensory openness of the poet.



**Fig. 7** *Rhizanthella gardneri* only occurs near Corrigin and Ravensthorpe, Western Australia (Source: FloraBase, florabase.dec.wa.gov.au)

## Conclusion

As these excerpts reveal, South-West habitat poets engage with ecology, sense and science. A thread unifying the poetry of Lansdown, Choate and Kinsella is conscious critical awareness of the scientific conventions surrounding plants. Indeed, integration between poetry and science is one of the trademarks of a habitat poem. However, the sensory language deployed in some of their poems vis-à-vis plants at the same time deconstructs the exclusivity of scientific knowledge by embodying the poet as mediator in the environmental network of the plant. I have suggested that ‘habitat’ is more than language or discourse; it is a way of interacting corporeally with the world—and with plants in this instance—through the many senses, just as landscape is a way of regarding the earth visually, as ‘a composition of that world’ (Cosgrove) or as an act of ‘descriptive picture-making’ (Elliott). In ‘Borrow Pit’, Kinsella (*The New Arcadia* 142) concludes with:

I borrow words  
from before I could speak, the tones of wandoo and mallee  
intricacies of roots, and palettes of gravel  
that stare us in the face, trunks horizontal, pallel  
to the rippling undersurface, those winning ways. (lines 87-91)

Attending to ‘the rippling undersurface’ and the ‘intricacies of roots’—in other words, the complexities of the unseen—habitat poetry infuses language with ecology, the senses and the imbrications of botanical knowledge. Unlike poetic language that might replicate visual experience only, Lansdown, Choate and Kinsella write across ecology, botany, process, place and human sensation.

The selected works of these South-West poets help to underscore habitat poetry as a form of nature writing concerned with associations between a plant and other plants, animals, rocks, elements and people. Yet not all habitat poetry is alike. For instance, Choate’s ‘Poverty Bush’ is a trenchant commentary on the idiosyncrasies of naming, but few of his poems deal with body sensations. Lansdown’s ‘A Few Weeks Later’, in contrast, entails a playful critique of scientific knowledge through the poet’s embodied experience. Invariably, the botanical poetry featured in this article is more multi-layered than the category of landscape poetry. Hence, there is a need for habitat as a framework for interpreting ecopoetry. In a biodiverse place like the South-West of Western Australia, poetry has the capacity to instil appreciation for the botanical world by shaping the ways in which people regard plants and by distilling ecology into a palatable and palpable form. Through a blend of sensory, scientific and ecological language, this sample of habitat poetry from Lansdown, Choate and Kinsella celebrates the adaptive successes of the South-West’s indigenous plants.



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