

a **loss** of **poetics**

JOHN KINSELLA

To write poetry you don't have to like it. I've been increasingly recognising that language and its correlatives in music and art are not the pure coordinates or sole arbiters of poetry. There are two issues evolving out of these comments that seem pivotal to me. The first pertains to the suggestion that poetry might happen either out of necessity, or, paradoxically, incidentally. The second, that poetry does not rely on an aesthetic response to the tensions involved in reconciling interiority and articulation of the external world. These two simple principles are becoming the turning points for a personal re-evaluation of what constitutes the poem for me as a reader, or more precisely 'experiencer', and what it means for me as a maker of poems.

On the surface, I am inclining towards poem as gesture or utterance arising out of the pre-cognitive, or maybe out of the half-realised. I have often used the expressions 'error zones' and 'anchor points' to describe the tautological discomforts that drive the written or spoken poem for me—the error zones being ambiguities that arise out of apparent errors in syntax and form, out of parataxis and enjambment, a disturbing of the rules of prosody, juxtaposed or interacting with 'realisms', points of concrete and external referentiality that clarify and focus perspective—anchor points. This is the hybridising of the unified self and the disrupted or displaced lyrical I.

So in writing poetry I have tried to merge, say, a reference to a specific moment in time, recording with subject-object certainty, and a sense of linearity, with a series of, say, tense or syllabic or syntactical disruptions. The wandoo tree covered in pink-and-grey galahs morphs into an exploration of something metonymically associated with tree or bird that might then evoke a series of historical or etymological associations and so on. In other

words, it's a poetry of digressions and associations based largely—though by no means exclusively—in one language, having a point of reference common to the whole work in the epistemology of the language itself. And even should the work digress into other languages, the process of orality becomes the unifying signifier-signified construct. So that's how it's been, but it's no longer that way.

Two words best sum up the shift in my poetics. Mimetics and mnemonics. Poetry, in form and in language, in how it is said and why it is being said (which is desirably at best, at least partially, inexplicable on the surface level of 'meaning'), is a process of imitation and reproduction. The word itself derives from the Greek 'mimesis', and in many ways my mimetics is really an adapted and 'personalised' mimesis. Maybe the medical meaning of mimesis is even more relevant: symptoms appearing *without* the actual disease. We might compare the process to watching a mime play, and recalling it later as being rich with language, with voices. We can hear the movements of the players. The same happens for me in the creation of a poem. The poem forms as a series of sounds and images and associations that seemingly have no specific register in language—that is, words don't necessarily correlate to what is being seen or heard, nor is explanation offered. But when it comes to placing them on the page, creating an artefact, or to speaking it aloud—that is, reciting it—language finds its dynamic equivalent, and the poem that was sounds and images becomes an imitation, a mimicry of the original language-less poem.

Sometimes this emerges as the short imagistic poem, distilled, such as the Finch poems:

Finches

Salt Paddocks

Down below the dam
there is nothing but salt,
a slow encroachment.

Fighting back, my cousins
have surrounded it
with a ring of trees.

At its centre
lives a colony of finches,
buried in tamarisks.

Finch Colony

The leaves, like wire, are so tangled
we dare not venture too far into their heart
where flashes of song and dull colour
betray a whole family of finches.

We hold our breath
and become statues.

Is this fear of disturbing their peace
or of a delicate raid from unknown spaces.

Finch Flight

To join the finch
in his tenuous kingdom
amongst tamarisks,
the hot snow of salt

You must gather
trajectory and direction,
sharp summer flights

Exile yourself
from the wind's hand.

Finch Death

The dead finch lies on salt,
tight-winged and stretched.

The others shimmer
loosely in heat

the salt's white mystery
coveting tin cans, skull of sheep.

Slowly, death rides this hot glacier
further and further away.

At others times it flows in a more cinematic way, and with less pause or hesitation. It's like too much information trying to distil itself but shifting rapidly from one (often metonymic) connection to another. This is not simply a problem of the synapses, brought about by the excesses of my youth, but a life-issue associated with insomnia, hyperactivity, and a mobile mood register. Poetry becomes tied up with the chemical balance and imbalance of the body.

One of the problems I live with, and which has certainly been compelling my mimics and their attendant inverted mnemonic transliterations (I write to unremember, not to remember—it's a matter of rearranging the flood of information into art, not into confession or nostalgic reconnection), is the constant interruption of past moments of my life into the present. I can be sitting in a park in St Louis, thinking about an Elizabeth Peyton image, and I'm instantly in King's Park in Perth, with my wooden sailboat, scratching at the rust around the mount for the mast. I can taste the rust, smell the sail that has been soaked and dried dozens of times over in heat that will eventually lead, one day when I am older, to the removal of skin cancers. I can see the twenty-eight parrots exploding emerald and sapphire and yellow in the eucalypts. There are interpolations—a banksia blossom from another time and another place, a heightened emotional moment. There's no biography to this in the strictest sense, the incidents are too fragmentary. But the tactility of the moment is preserved.

A few years ago I wrote an autobiographical or anti-autobiographical work, *Auto*. The experiences are fragmentary, the narrative shifts around. Issues of duration become pivotal when a brief moment extends into pages, and massive events (on a personal and historic level) are glossed over in a sentence. Time is not as it should be. But then sometimes the words move as they were chronologically enacted. As author, I retell my own story from a variety of points of view, never stable. What is truth—as remembered by whom? My mother's version of events will most often be different; my brother's closer, but still different. And so it goes.

You bypass circadian and diurnal rhythms. The cave is open to light, the Fremantle Doctor fills it with fresh sea air in the late afternoon. You stay in lit places at night. You close your room off to the light in the day. Jet lag kicks in and out. It's midnight and cold out on the hundred acre. The fuel is metal cold as it spills over your hands, the funnel slipping. The heavy soil is sticking to the tines and a fox is barking up towards the Needlings. You grow groggy. The tractors light glow silver and orange. Another two hours at least, the figures of eight that cut out the corners harder and harder to do—the light inadequate, the body hard to steer. Your lift back down to the city arriving at first light. A serepax to link the events. Night seeding & notions of property.

Dizzy with figure-eighting
the corners of his fields, the drills
filled with seed & super

and closed over under
the tattooed rash of night,
foxes' muffling barks

& fighting to cover tracks
with a starpicket the axis
of a compass whose North

is wire-guided & lethal: silver
tennis balls exploding in their spiralled
swing on totem-tennis poles

for here stillness shivers & moves
like frost moves the shattered
flesh of quartz

over the wasted plots. A clear
dawn is soluble anyway
& the tractor gnaws,

its queasy stomach
turning slowly & coldly
with winter:

dispossessed

the farmer moans—a sudden downpour
shaves his precious topsoil.

The ghosts clamour about the microwave
& television set, the stove broods
in this sauna of politeness.

City people are expecting billy tea
& damper & the sheep to bleat
in unison. Nous regrettons parler.

There wasn't a kangaroo to be seen.
Night-seeding, the tractor's floodlights
are blood-red & ovarian—

nurturing the cloddish soil, & always
the farmer working the wheel, hands
gnarled & frostbitten & large.

Katherine can't sleep. Think of something nice, you say. Think of Walsingham, of the Shrine of Our Lady. Of the Stations of the Cross. Of the Catholics and Anglicans taking tea together. Can't sleep. Go to sleep. John Kerrigan has invited us to lunch out at the cottage. A vegan feast. Daddy falls to sleep after he's been awake all night. He falls asleep on the couch listening to the stereo and watching the television. He watches the television when he's asleep. Can't sleep. Go to sleep. I can't go to sleep because I'm worried I'll be tired in the morning. I don't want to think, thinking keeps me awake.

Dear S

Is it possible to have a series of dreams? Well, in keeping with a theme, I dreamt last night that you came to a meeting in a large colonial house (with necessary wrap-around verandahs) to discuss the compilation of a new international anthology. The publishers were trying to convince you to do some television appearances to give the anthology a nudge. Why the dream was set in Australia I'm not sure but our family property—'Wheatlands'—was the setting. It had a sad atmosphere of decay as the property has been broken up over the years and in many ways it is my writing it that keeps it conceptually 'together', and retains the family ties. Fortunately, its proudest moments—the reclamation of land ruined by salinity ('the hot snow of salt' I wrote in 'Finches')—has been safeguarded. It's like a wildlife reserve and a great achievement, if somewhat ironic given that the family originally cleared it, drove off the indigenous peoples, and destroyed it in the first place. But times have changed, and there is a distinct effort to make amends. Not an excuse, but something important all the same. Anyway, in this dream, when there was a break I managed to catch your eye and you came over for a chat. I asked if you'd read Simone Weil, a thinker I really admire. I had a copy of *Gravity and Grace* in my hand. You began to weave an incredible poem that tied the colonial situation in Ireland with the colonial situation in Australia, weaving the different landscapes in and out of each other. 'Every separation is a link, every separation is a link ...' repeated itself like a prayer or mantra. Suddenly my sight began to blur and I couldn't see you, only hear your voice ... and I woke. Well, a strange dream, eh? Best, JK

My head is going fast inside. Go to sleep. Think of the walk to the Slipper Chapel, the fighter jets cutting in over the coast, the ear-tags of cows destined for slaughter as the mist lifts from the field and the thistles dry and the world begins to glow.

What I did in *Auto* which, like Dante's *La Vita Nuova* in this one respect, searches to understand love—maybe a lack of self-love—with prose commentaries cutting across poetry texts, was to imitate or mimic systematically the experiences of my life as I remembered or re-remembered them. These experiences were presented in different shapes, with different prosodies. A system of mimetics tied them together, but the imitations constantly shifted. As a reversal of Dante's guiding principle, though, I make tangential commentary and illustrate with a verse by the object of my subjectivity:

Last year I bought my wife a new flute—to replace the one I'd hocked and lost at the beginning of our marriage. As a teenager I'd hated body fluids and dirt and loss of control. I then devoted a dozen years to overcoming these phobias. That's one way of looking at it. Andrew Burke turned up with Tracy at my flat in South Perth near the river. I was pretty far gone. I said something about fucking Tracy and Andrew was disgusted. When I did, or maybe I already had, I burnt the curried vegetables and shaved the hair from around her cunt. She'd written a poem called 'Hair' which I'd published in *Salt* long before I knew her. It went:

The length
of my body is an odd
nudity, what is it
doing there, how
did the hair
get pared down
to just
these patches
we cultivate
like fetishes
meant to excite
when we want
to play animal
or we control
to stress and make
the difference between sexes
as if otherwise
we couldn't find
ourselves.
I can't force
what once was

to grow now
in a strange season.
I'm caught
between
the dreams of before
that paralyses
and the need
of my own nakedness
which is there,
which is there.

Back to the park. The poem forms between the moment I actually occupy and will occupy, with the short-term past and the imitated (but highly 'real' to me) past that interrupts my thoughts with painful and disturbing clarity. I know every revisiting of this that's foisted on me, though I recall them as being identical, is mediated by the place and context of where they occur. As with the text read in a different place, or the poem you've read a dozen times, meaning never remains stable or consistent. It shifts.

Maybe this is why I see the draft as the most relevant part of the poem, why a poem for me is never completed. It's part of an ongoing conversation in which a dialogics forms between the text and the unwritten 'seeing' of what that text might become as conditions of production and reception change.

The mnemonics also has a personal angle. It won't fit the poetry-definitions volume. These are associations that assist memory. They're tools of remembering and remembrance. For me, they become tools to lose the moment so I won't have to revisit it compulsively. Now, I've just said that poetry gives no closure to me, that it's an ongoing series of drafts, a revisiting, a reanimating or mimicry of tensions between the past and present and future, of the real and imagined, of the perceived and conceptualised. All of these. But now I am suggesting that I don't want any of it. And I don't.

I DO NOT WANT TO WRITE OR READ POETRY. I am addicted, compelled. I cannot stop. This is mental illness of a sort, and not inspiration (or delusion of this), but compulsion. What we've tracked so far is the subtext of the poem, the reason it might come into being. Moving along, the process of transcribing or translating or transliterating this compulsion into a form (visual or oral—or never uttered but seen or heard in the head) is a very different process. This is where un-mnemonic becomes pivotal for me. I encode my work in traditional ways—often using traditional rhythms that I disrupt with colloquialisms and dialect, using set forms from a variety of cultural spaces (conscious of the appropriative issues therein)—but also encode it with un-mnemonics that cause a disintegration of sense upon rereading, especially as context shifts and changes.

Those points of ambiguity become increasingly larger, and suddenly the anchor points don't hold. The repetitions and patterning of words, which assist us in our ability to recall them, become unstable—an apparent volta is seemingly not where it should have been, a noun is really a verb, and so on. The stock epithet isn't quite the same each time. When I read aloud I do so mainly from memory, with the page of the book as a rough guide. No two readings of mine have ever been the same—not only in tone and performance quality/style, but also in actual textual consistency. I try to be inconsistent. Only slightly. A changed word, a reshaped line.

I can close my eyes and see the poem on the page because I have that kind of memory, but I can also see the drafts that led to that version, and the versions of the poems I should write. They are key points of memory in the poem—specific words that have a texture, a strong form-and-function association, or that are emotional triggers. Some fit an idiomatic pattern that comes with being brought up in a specific space. The mnemonics are where I try to disrupt, to subvert the poem.

Mnemonic systems can work by abstracted repetitions or patterns of association as much as by, say, a string of music, or a series of visual or verbal prompts. For me, it's a question of disturbing juxtapositions that come out of having witnessed animal cruelty or death, or say some natural phenomenon that is inexplicable: glowing fields, ball lighting, will-o'-the-wisps. Patterns build up in my subconscious, repeat themselves in recreating the poem I have mentally formed onto the page, or in recitation from memory. A chair, a table, a tree, might trigger locations and patterns of words, help in the recreation of a poem resembling what I have 'thought'.

Location Triggers

The pillared porch, Corinthian
because it's easiest from books,
plastered, upholding world's ceiling
that goes through to the next story
always colder in winter, maybe cooler in summer,
airflow and loveseat, swinging
where foliage redresses trees
in gendered avenues, sweeping uphill
as around flat fields, the grey rot
of corn stalks, Japanese beetle

driving towards modification, it's said,
avoiding upper rooms where heat unsettles
small windows, vicarious
and remembering a purple rising light,
hillfolds and outcrops bettered
by kites and glider, their freedom
paramount over scrub and small animals
they'd destroy, farmers alarmed
by drop-ins, all land there
like thermals and updrafts, but suddenly
undercut, we resist calling it revenge,
colluding with indifferent Nature,
visa and permit, green card
as crops spread: they won't let me
into their pastoral entirely,
invited to ride the header,
to harvest cobs and interiors
that exchange chemical appearance,
protectionist policies and markets
fill supermarket aisles, fill
hunting and trapping magazines,
fur around collars, covering
cold ears, addressing steers
on Texan clichés, clinging like ideas
of Kansas. We take back leaf-litter
stirring in warmer years, lack of snowdrifts,
birds chopping and changing
or not there at all: correlations so easy,
suppressed to keep mystery
intact ... or fenceless plurals
full of Wallace Stevens,
growing randomly and imitating
gardens, as if you'd fly straight
from Columbus to Paris, or get diverted
to New Orleans, or Baton Rouge;
I track these infinitudes,

connect nouns from an uncle's paddocks
in places threatened by closure,
by tariffs, sucked into global
silos and temptations,
cantons and guilds and red barns
lit by nuclear light,
as fission is comradeship,
alliance, the blind leading the blind,
and grain swelling on lightless nights,
Biblical texts written with a human hair
on rice, as faith makes cars run
and the fringes shutdown:
deny all access.

Having spent a lot of my adult life living in various countries other than that of my birth, and being doomed (against my wishes ultimately) to be a perpetual wanderer, memory and the associations of words with a specific place tend to be disrupted. Maybe that's why I also persistently write over the place I come from. That's where most of the flashbacks take me. But it's no longer the story of that place I'm telling, that place has changed and become something else, I am telling in poetry the story of hybridisation, of dislocation, loss and disruption. My poetry is full of death, and maybe this is why. It shifts register dramatically. Maybe this is why. I don't feel comfortable in any 'school' or 'camp'. Again, maybe this is why. Poetry, for me, is an ecologic structure: a dialogue between disparate parts of myself, most often centred in the rural, and conflicting cultural inputs. Characters are speaking through me—sometimes characters close to myself, but they are all mimicking someone from the real world. They are not real. It's all a simulacrum.

I see romanticism in revival. There are obvious culturo-historic reasons for this, and the threat of war (we have been in a state of world war for a number of years now) always brings on a search for a sublime, especially in a world where nature is increasingly being destroyed or disturbed, or can be undone in extreme ways, instantly. The end of language poetry and the rise of new lyricists such as Lee Ann Brown, Lisa Jarnot, Lisa Robertson, and Jennifer Moxley, with their strong consciousness of the tensions between deployments of tradition and the fetishisations of linguistic innovation (especially regarding 'class' alienation), illustrates a shift in receptivity not only to environmental and social concerns (also pivotal to language poetry), but to a concern about the ecology of language and meaning. Consider Lee Ann Brown's poem 'No Melpomene':

No Melpomene

Re: Lone poem, pen nomme

Pommel pope poop

Olé, Olé, Ol' Pop Pomp

Pelé mope

Mono men pole, lop me

One pen open poem

Peel 'em:

La Pomme, pome, pommelo

Moon pone molé

There is no lyrical self, mediated or otherwise, located textually here, but there is a subjectivity in the texture and immediacy of address. This lyricism locates itself in the implication of song, the implication of self, without being dictated by the unified self. These are poets who do not wish to lose referentiality, or to deny it entirely. Here's the end of Shelley's over-quoted 'Defence of Poetry':

It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations; for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

The abovementioned poets and other innovators, steeped in the historicity of their poeties, the environments their languages arise from, might be forced into this mould. I say *forced*, because their individual intentions and agendas couldn't be bent in this way. It's the convenience of the overview. There is an emphatic belief that poetry can make a difference. The mere production of it suggests this. Despair hasn't closed the door to utterance, though, of course, it might in the future. Their significance is in the recognition that the moment of self is undeniable within or outside a political intentionality. Their

poetry is a poetry of purpose, they have something to say: it is semantic and linguistic legislation, even if it's a civil or linguistic disobedience.

I would like to consider myself simpatico with them as poets, though more recently my despair has driven me away from cause and effect, and certainly beyond the ironies of engaging with the sublime. Prayer is still poetry for me, and poetry prayer, but nature can't even work as a mimetic construct. The paper I use, the books I read, mean suffering for this 'nature'. My existence as a print poet becomes a process of bad legislation, and consequently denial. I wrote a poem when I first became a vegan called 'Of':

Of emulsifiers and preservatives
extracted from boiled-down animal,
of houses with walls of horse hair
and thongs of leather to restrain
the tortured awning,
of feet covered in dead cow,
kangaroo, crocodile ...
the business of pig-skin briefcases,
of those whose guilt lay in fish,
of those sucking the nectars
of sacred beasts,
of the differences between clean and dirty flesh,
of those who seek truth in the burnt offering,
of 'perfect and upright' Job, slaughterer
who sought to appease over and over,
of *Julius Civilus With A Dead Cock*
arrogantly accepting what is
over and over, back and forth, to and fro.

I don't enjoy polemical poetry, but then I wonder if all poetry isn't polemical the moment it is written or sung or spoken. There's another kind of politics when it stays in your head, even if fully realised, but more relevantly, a less explicable politics when it remains half formed. Literally, for me, poems are a series of mime enactments in which characters are never given names. They are dumb eclogues. It's the stone, the leaf, and the made object. Okay, that's easy. Not original. But it's a truth for me. I wonder what it is I am articulating outside my own chemical disconnections and odd internal wiring. As an anarchist, am I legislating, laying down a series of commands for others to follow? If so, I should stop, stop now. But here's my quandary: I don't want to stop the stone, the leaf. My interpretation of a bird's flight, a baby crying, creates a series of associations that struggle

to separate themselves from the thing as thing-in-itself. Past memories burn back. I can't dispose of the connections. I don't want to be part of a poetic experience, but I am. If there is a 'modern sublime', then maybe therein lies part of the necessity of this contradiction.

Can we reclaim, revamp, and reprise the sublime? Consider it a viable literary tool or mode of expressing a reverence and awe born out of terror for nature. To give an alternative name and face to beauty? Yes, if Edmund Burke's 'ocean' with its terror is sublime not only because of tidal waves but because of heavy metal saturation, butchery of its life, oil spills. The sublime of the polluted, the sublime of the greenhouse effect. It's an angry irony. The sublime never worked as more than an idea. An exchange with God or nature that can be transmuted into artistic expression is simply a version of mimicry.

The sublime becomes the space-travel or stargazing experience in an environment disrupted and destroyed. As a subtext of deep ecology, the sublime may work as an inspiration, but the layers of contaminants and the paucity of wildlife and forests work against it. The mountains become engagements with different kind of contaminants. There was rubbish for Coleridge and Shelley, they were tourists—they made rubbish and were tourists themselves. Nature has overwhelmed me in its infinite complexity in places like Bluff Knoll, or The Gap, both in Western Australia, but simultaneously I feel its loss and destruction.

The sublime is a textual displacement, and divergence, in a cautionary tale of not what will happen, but what is happening and has happened. Time shifts. The duration doesn't match. We express caution in the reading of who we are. That it might not translate into the way we treat each other. But it does. The transcendent that cannot be pinned down in words, despite the movement of the self towards its possibility, the veneration of the path to an unrealisable actuation. Beauty is isolated, and we grapple towards it. The majesty of the sublime remains, necessarily, unobtainable.

I would argue that the sublime has been rendered as trope, as construct that is obtainable insofar as beauty has been forced into subjectivity by modernism, and becomes the ironic footnote in a world perceived in its wholeness as having been made increasingly ugly. The sublime, outside text, rests in the lens of the Hubble, and a cracked mirror is corrected so it can be maintained. The need is there, but it is textually subservient. Maybe it returns to John Dennis, to the 'sublime object', simply an issue of style. The separation of the sublime and the beautiful is a tension in modern poetry. The beautiful is a fetishised advertising construct that, even in private moments, we are required to question. The sublime suffers the same fate. In isolation they exist per the moment as well, but constructed in the poem a consciousness of language and its history renders 'purity' impossible.

Here's an extract from Edmund Burke's essay 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful':

THE passion caused by the great and sublime in nature is astonishment, and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. The mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor reason on that object which fills it. Astonishment is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; its inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect. No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as terror; and whatever is terrible with regard to sight, is sublime.

It is impossible to look on anything dangerous as trifling or contemptible, so that even serpents are capable of raising ideas of the sublime. The sublimity of the ocean is due to the fact that it is an object of no little terror. How closely allied are terror and sublimity we may judge from the Greek language, which has but one word for 'fear' and for 'wonder,' another for 'terrible' or 'respectable,' while a third means either 'to reverence' or 'to fear.'

And:

The last extreme of littleness is sublime also, because division, as well as addition, is infinite.

Infinity fills the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the truest test of the sublime; and succession and uniformity of parts, which constitute the artificial infinite, give the effect of sublimity in architecture. But in regard to the sublime in building, greatness of dimension is also requisite, though designs, which are vast only by their dimensions, are always the sign of a common and low imagination. No work of art can be great but as it deceives.

Another kind of infinity also causes pleasure, as the young of animals are pleasant because they give the promise of something more, and unfinished sketches are often more pleasing than the completed work.

The loss of the sublime is in the idea of a universe—expanding but finite in content; but it remains in the idea of the 'unfinished work'. A resistance to closure can be an act of sublimity. I write only drafts, and that's a sublimity? It fits the category of mimetic sublimity. It relies not on nature, but a human construct, or an interpretation of a damaged nature. The ocean is still a place of terror, but we are led to believe it is being controlled. Science works to harness it. It resists, and the sublimity is retained in this. Or a meteorite hitting the planet. The beauty I find in the white wastes of salinity that have

destroyed the farm. So it's there, just reconfigured. This from Lisa Jarnot's 1996 p(r)oems, *Sea Lyrics*:

I won't go to the waterfront anymore, I am basking on a beach far from the army,
I am pointing to a thousand speckled birds, I am watching the salads roll down to
the shore, I am on the grounds of Mission High School with the murderers, I am
near the edge of all the bungalows, I am reaching toward the pineapples to reach, I
am dreaming the dreams I hardly know and know I have tattoos, I am in the
ambulance at dawn, I am in this town beneath where you have jumped from
bridges row by row, from the midtown light, I am in the dreams Lucretius, I have
helped you to assemble all the mammals on the lawn.

Parataxis, rolled text, and pollution of beauty make the sea as sublime terrible before the sea is actually considered. There's a displacement of the sublime by the terror of the incidental, the matter-of-fact. Sublime still, but brought down to ground. The awe has been de-familiarised.

The ur-text of the sublime is now believed to come from the middle of the first century AD, Longinus's *On the Sublime*. Here's an extract from Chapter 1:

3. As I am writing to you, good friend, who are well versed in literary studies, I feel almost absolved from the necessity of premising at any length that sublimity is a certain distinction and excellence in expression, and that it is from no other source than this that the greatest poets and writers have derived their eminence and gained an immortality of renown. 4. The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport. At every time and in every way imposing speech, with the spell it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion gratification. Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer.

And an extract from Chapter 9:

Now the first of the conditions mentioned, namely elevation of mind, holds the foremost rank among them all. We must, therefore, in this case also, although we have to do rather with an endowment than with an acquirement, nurture our souls (as far as that is possible) to thoughts sublime, and make them always pregnant, so to say, with noble inspiration. 2. In what way, you may ask, is this to be done? Elsewhere I have written as follows: 'Sublimity is the echo of a great soul.' Hence also a bare idea, by itself and without a spoken word, sometimes excites admiration just because of the greatness of soul implied. Thus the silence of Ajax in the Underworld is great and more sublime than

words (Odyssey XI. 543 ff., at Perseus) 3. First, then, it is absolutely necessary to indicate the source of this elevation, namely, that the truly eloquent must be free from low and ignoble thoughts. For it is not possible that men with mean and servile ideas and aims prevailing throughout their lives should produce anything that is admirable and worthy of immortality.

It is easy to see how the latter is undermined with every modern irony. Aesthetically, it's the mean and ignoble I search for in language. The Warholian piece of trash, the art that is Cicciolina rather than the Venus or David. These are the contemporary registers of popular culture, of the new sublime. These elements of the 'filthy' sublime, as maybe we could call them, become codes and triggers in my personal mimetics, another form of mnemonic mapping. My effort at confronting the irreconcilability of the classical and modern, though the conditions of oppression, environmental destruction, and cultural destruction share much in common, is 'Bluff Knoll Sublimity', a poem more about language as object and a construct of sublimity, than about the sublime in nature:

Bluff Knoll Sublimity

for Tracy

1.

The dash to the peak anaesthetizes
you to the danger of slipping as the clouds
in their myriad guises wallow about
the summit. The rocks & ground-cover
footnotes to the sublime. The moods
of the mountain are not human
though pathetic fallacy is the surest
climber, always willing
to conquer the snake-breath
of the wind cutting over
the polished rockface,
needling its way through taut
vocal cords of scrub.

2.

It's the who you've left behind
that becomes the concern as distance

is vertical and therefore less inclined
to impress itself as separation; it's as if you're
just hovering in the patriarchy
of a mountain, surveying
the tourists—specks on the path
below. Weather shifts are part of this
and the cut of sun at lower altitudes
is as forgiving as the stripped
plains, refreshingly green at this time
of year. You have to climb it because it's
the highest peak in this flat state,
and the 'you have to' is all you
can take with you as statement
against comfort and complacency:
it's the vulnerability that counts up here.

3.

You realize that going there to write a poem
is not going there at all, that it's simply
a matter of embellishment, adding
decorations like altitude,
validating a so so idea
with the nitty gritty of conquest.
Within the mountain another
body evolves—an alternate
centre of gravity holding
you close to its face.
From the peak you discover
that power is a thick, disorientating
cloud impaled by obsession, that
on seeing Mont Blanc—THE POEM—
and not Mont Blanc—THE MOUNTAIN—
the surrounding plains
with their finely etched topography
can be brought into focus.

As the horrors of the twentieth century are exacerbated and perpetuated, I am guided
by Adorno in the belief that I cannot but work towards silence. What I am performing is a

mime, enacted to a tune in my unconscious, while sublimity raises its polluted head and becomes the acceptable, the desirable awe.

JOHN KINSELLA is a prize-winning poet, novelist, critic and publisher. His work has appeared in *Poetry* and *The Paris Review*, among many others. He also teaches at Cambridge University and is editor of the international literary journal *Salt*. For further information see www.geocities.com/SoHo/Square/1664/kinsella.html

References

- Edmund Burke, 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful', www.publicbookshelf.com/public_html/Outline_of_Great_Books_Volume_I/edmundbur_bhi.html.
- Lee Ann Brown, 'No Melpomene', epc.buffalo.edu/authors/brown.
- Lisa Jarnot, *Sea Lyrics*, Soho Letter Press, New York, 1996.
- John Kinsella, *Auto*, Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 2001.
- John Kinsella, 'Bluff Knoll Sublimity', *The Radnoti Poems*, Equipage, Jesus College, Cambridge, 1996.
- John Kinsella, 'Finches', *Poems 1980–1994*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Perth, 1997.
- John Kinsella, 'Location Trigger', *Poems 1980–1994*.
- John Kinsella, 'Of', *Peripheral Light: Selected and New Poems*, introduction and selection by Harold Bloom, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Perth, 2003.
- Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1899, classicpersuasion.org/pw/longinus/index.htm
- Tracy Ryan, 'Hair', *Salt*, vol. 1, 1990.
- Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Defence of Poetry', www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/shelley-poetry.html.