John Kinsella

The True History of the Lyrical Self

1.

All shadows laid to rest
once unfixed from surfaces:
we want them at no cost
to follow us, like promises.

There's no reward where bush
once was, just the dark crush
of light where light was sparse,
where plants with dense

foliage drank the shadow
and ash was a deadly slough.

2.

The wagtail scintillates
when the wind blows a gale,
wattles split and heart rates
race as the bird exhales

into the leaden deluge—
though I have closed doors
on stark skies and rouge
soils, the homing that gnaws

at others on census night
takes hold and leaves me intestate.

3.

From the top of the building
he sees far off, though it's swaying;
but not over the line of hills
which block the way to where he's going.

Concentration is culture,
the gulls squawk at him—teetering
on the brink, looking
into the other direction:

far out to sea, curved over
to where the world gets lower.

4.

The storms have torn the shade-cloth
away from its anchor in one corner:
it flaps violently in the wrath
of the strong western air-

flow, every now and again
a whip crack, also like gunshot
from a small calibre weapon.
The stress it puts on the heart

is a recoil of memory: hunters
after foxes, shooting close to us.

5.

Artifacts limp and taut
tessellate like bark: the pattern
of bark, a mosaic I grow distraught
over — staring with lantern

eyes that shed no light
on anything in particular:
so much there to get right
and I remain insular.

A mantra lifts nothing out:
it's better left inviolate.

6.

The wet wattle burns
but smells like piss —
make use of what falls
at your feet. He spurns

what's on offer and chops
down a great flooded gum—
we watch in pain as he lops
thick limb after thick limb.

And a desanctified church
spurns the soul's search.

7.

Disinterring a sleeping snake
the shire makes roadside margins,
damning symbols and phonetics,
they stretch *all* sleeping skins.

Of snake's J-shaped stomach
and lengthy oesophagus,
upturned trees and dislodged rock
enact the dead as amanuenses.

Drawn out into the slashing cold
snake's soul can only fold and fold.

8.

The axe shatters the mirror
wood so glossed with water
rain has shaped the terror
and rankles against the killer

who won't have anything said
about what he eats and whose pleasures
satirize those who've bled
while his pen writes in nuclear

florescence — all those states
of his union, all those aliases.

9.

I was never easy with games
we played amidst the wodjil:
making tunnels with *de trop* names:
all was more and still

we hacked away: a labyrinth
that altered the bush's face.
Now a few wandoos plinth
that hollowed space:

but I played with gusto;
this stark manifesto.

10.

The food cart is merry by the river
as the cold snaps at the Gardens:
we are summoned from our
sleeping places, cradled

among the roots of Moreton
Bay Fig trees. As the pious
hand out drinks in polystyrene,
steaming like the surface

of the river, we are indebted,
scald mouths with gratitude.

11.

We push his chair from city
centre all the way to St Alban's Church:
it's inspiring weather and we search
out the best food for Clarrie.

The minister's handmaidens
serve us, and we don't say a word:
too many thankyous hardens
you to starvation and the absurd.

We've cleaned up old Clarrie — even pinned
his trousers about his stumps. O we *have* sinned.

12.

It is lonely with Kurt Schwitter's
Mertz pictures, and the world
turns only one way — it deters
nothing in this, and coiled

like a clock-spring I dream
letters the shape of dead trees:
dead trees where the galahs scream
and nest and lay purchase

to what comes up out of the earth
and what flies so close to its birth.

13.

In my mind's eye I am on a track
where railway lines have been lifted
and a bed of pressed cinders laid
at our feet. I carry a sack

of disbelief while mythical birds
swoop trekkers and bystanders:
deciduous trees are demigods
and an ambiguous river

meanders, carrying the dross
of that city. I increase my pace.

14.

This perverse ontology I make
wounds from is a parliament
of circumspection — forsake
me deity, please, no heaven-sent

gratuities: the quarry grows
daily as the granite is cracked
with chemicals. They'd
use explosives but the cows

and sheep in nearby paddocks
might give up the ghost; retract.

15.

The scorpion, disturbed, struck
while it was raining: I was out at
the wood heap, scurrying in muck
and bark, laying hands on bats

of wood: it arched its tail,
a drop of rain from its telson,
a drop of poison or just wishful
thinking—there's no reason

why I'd take my right
to remain silent.

16.

Replacing bones with branches
and strips of iron, I fortify myself
for outdoor work: there are tranches
of citrus to pick, and shelf on shelf

of preserves to make. Already
the olives we picked are doused
in brine, but I was steady
on my feet back then. House-bound

the window has become a mirror,
and this android-stare my nature.

17.

When I heard the doves coo-cooing
I thought it had all come together:
the television was tuned-in and singing
birds had a perch. But I'll never

make such assumptions again:
the song became a roar and tinnitus
destroyed the image: rue the disdain
we bring with confidence—

lichen helmets the boulders
like a Louise Brooks bob. Ah, Pandora!