

Robert Lucas Scott

Keston Sutherland's Break

Keston Sutherland's poetry is noisy. Its lexicon incorporates the unmelodious jargon of industry, economics, pornography, and other specialisms, alongside amplified soundbites of the viscera of consumerism, imperialism, poverty, and war. Its syntax interrupts the passionately lyrical with the ugly and distended, or else crushed. There is also occasionally the visual but otherwise abrasively silent noise of purely functional languages. Take lines like "©" and "them cap with your 1.6 way mirror • new tarsals, • •" from "Falling in Love Cream Crab" in *Neocosis* (2005). Or else a line like "-0.08 -0(.31+0.)" in the short run, "Once' ' -0.5(0.(-0." from "The Proxy Inhumanity of Forklifts" in *The Stats on Infinity* (2010)—potentially unparseable lines which radicalise the kind of "wrong poetry" (as Sutherland describes it) written by Wordsworth in "The Thorn" when he deigned to give the dimensions of a pond in which a baby may have been drowned ("three feet long, and two feet wide"). The poems are perhaps at their noisiest, though, when the lyric subject and its dream of a for-now-impossible intimacy strains to make itself heard through cacophony.

I keep dreaming about you every single night last
night I you making love Stan, I didn't know him then
it hurts, and I disappear but the nights stick.

Abner Jon Louima Burge Cheng

→ Ab ... etc.

(*Hot White Andy*, 2007)

If a single theme, even motivation, can be attributed to Sutherland's poetry, it is this insistence upon an intimation of life and intimacy in spite of the extrinsic, inhuman operations of globalised capital. Sutherland turns up the noise of the world's alien machinery and violence, while also increasing the noise of human imagination, desire, love, and hatred, as they resist being anaesthetised, commodified, sublimated, or atomised—revitalising as far as possible through

lyric the full extents of experience and expression. Not because poetry can save life from alienation, or compensate for its belittlement, but because it can intensify the contradiction between what passes for living right now and life as it might be, and so urge us to transform the conditions of wrong life to enable something better.

The fourth and final “scherzo” of Sutherland’s 2021 *Scherzos Benjyosos* marked a break, at least stylistically, not just from the preceding poems in that collection, but in the development of his poetic work so far. For the first time, Sutherland’s verse approaches quietness and stillness, with a stark purity of expression and feeling: plain direct language; often monosyllabic words; and (at least to start and end with) compact tercets of heptasyllabic lines which preclude the explosions of noise we have come to expect. Only the incessant enjambment of these tercets gives them a fluidity beyond the fetters of the verse constraints, the combination lending the poem a sense of diminishment and frailty, but also resolve. Gone is the hyperlexia, bewildering jargon, hurtling shifts in register, and radical grammatical extensions. The result is a kind of verse closer to W. H. Auden than to j. H. Prynne, with whom Sutherland’s poetry is more often compared. Here are the opening lines:

I cannot pretend to be
Done yet with this random life
That you never wanted for

Any thing that can suffer
Either. I can’t write except
In a stupor of the time

We got wasted every day
With no other idea why
But that the intensity

Makes up for the pain at last
And that love is easier
In a blindness really lived.

I will be forgiven this
In a sensitive abyss
Too long not missed, in the way

Your sound will turn out to be
Hid in every other sound,
Not even mine. Listen out:

This final scherzo is also, at least at the point of its publication, arguably Sutherland's most confessional (notwithstanding the autobiographical forays into childhood sexual experiences in *The Odes to TL61P*, 2013). It addresses the irony of living an alienated life more directly and with greater specificity than ever before: it is concerned with real individuals, loved ones, who live, or have lived, but for whom the conditions of continuing to live threaten to prove, or have proved, too much; as well as with loved ones who make life worth living. As one of the two central prose sections of this final scherzo concludes: "I know, despite even now having no idea how to stop wanting to destroy myself, that being with you, and being able to feel in every part of myself that you are there, and being here for no imaginable greater purpose than to love you, the way I truly do, is also how to justify my life."

Meditations (The Last Books, 2024), Sutherland's remarkable new collection and his first since *Scherzos Benjyosos*, in many ways affirms and radicalizes this break. Comprising 54 numbered prose blocks (his first book to be written entirely in prose, though *The Odes and Scherzos* came close), it contains stories, modernist parables, jokes, delirium, and, among other things, what I think is a demented rewriting of Shelley's "Ozymandias" about a bust of Stalin (16). It also contains seven sestinas "crushed to prose," as the blurb has it (4, 13, 22, 31, 40, 49, and 54)—a verse form with six sets of six "lines," followed by a three-line envoi, using six recurring end-words in a recycling pattern—one of which (54) is a sextuple sestina that uses the same six end-words throughout, the only such sestina in English, so far as I know. There are also, for reasons I haven't yet worked out, lots of geese. But what is most striking about the collection are sustained passages of almost reckless immediacy, candour, and vulnerability. The first meditation in part

functions as a kind of private manifesto, announcing this shift or departure, which is as existential as it is stylistic. It begins like this:

But it is now time to stop. Today, as I walked out, I said, But it is now time to stop, today, now, and I did. For once, how I would let it stop, at once, and not go on. Here, or as if here, and only to consider what it meant, and find nothing, or only this, that it is now time to stop scouring reality for unthings whose meanings don't exist, and embrace what is real. It will be the last thing I find. It's the last thing I will want to find. [...] The idea was that this must never be hurried, but, by trusting to instinct, executed truly, calmly, one step at a time, lamppost by lamppost, just as it comes, however you can. And I began.

The renunciation of "unthings" is repeated: "it is high time to disaffiliate from the purblind, clonic, flaccid confabulators of absurd, old, stomach-churning syntheses of unthings." The noise and detritus of this world which deliberately littered Sutherland's old style are refused. These unthings, it seems, have served as a defence mechanism from addressing and "embrac[ing]" as vulnerably as possible what Sutherland dares to call "what is real"—a naive phrase that might sound as abstract and empty as an "unthing" but which, throughout this collection, takes on a crushing weight of concrete meaning and reference. Both of these things are suggested as he renounces the "unthings" once again:

And I am well, in a way, no matter what I say next. Yet I must say something next that it will not be easy to hear. I will say something in a moment that it will not be a simple thing to hear, something that will threaten to stop all the doing well and stopping and make it harder than ever to resist cracking out the old, forbidden syntheses of brainsick, indigestible unthings, like a water-bed caked in the sun-dried shit of porcupines.

What, then, is "real," in spite of the "indigestible unthings"? Principally, and at its most simple, it is the compulsion for a full life, and the equal, often greater draw of ending the life that one has. Almost every poem in this collection is about the will to live or the will to die, or both. More specifically, *Meditations* responds to

the suicide of a loved one, and the intensities and blockages of grief, and inherited suicidal urges of the one left behind: “Long ago you let off in my head a voice that tells me everyday to kill myself. It’s doing it now. Right now, as I type these words, I am listening to it.” (8). This is Sutherland “embrac[ing] what is real:

I pleaded with you to stop shaking your head and let them put the mask on, but I have to tell you, part of me wanted them to leave you alone. I didn’t want you to be fobbed off with the life you had so nearly succeeded in ending, when I had to show up and extend it and the firemen put the axe through through your door and I burst in and now you’re being carried away down the stairs and out the door of the ambulance. (52)

Meditations is at times almost unbearably painful to read. It is not, however, morbid or without hope. Just as his earlier style combined the deathly jargon of capital with passionate lyrical effusions, so now the reality and draw of death is repeatedly, if at times only momentarily, for now, disrupted by the resolve to keep going. One meditation repeatedly insists, pedantically and flippantly to start with: “You think you’ve tried everything, but you’ve never really tried everything. You always think you have tried everything, but really you never tried. You always think you have tried everything, but nobody, in reality, ever tried everything.” (10). Here, this conventional banality, repeated again and again with only trivial changes, repeats in verse the repetitions in reality of trying things, trying things to get better, to move forward, trying things which don’t work. But by the poem’s end, it is declared: “I tried it all, and now I want to live.” Resolve is the right word to describe what’s going on here. There’s not a sense that the poem has struck upon a solution, that it has “tried something” that finally succeeded. Instead, as Sutherland’s earlier poetry has the resolve to resist the alienation of capital through passionate intensity, so now his verse expresses life’s resolve to strain against oblivion. Of course, in many ways these things are the same.

In recent times immediacy has got a bad rap, provoking calls for a return in art, literature, and theory, to the detached, impersonal, and difficult work of mediation (not to be confused with *meditation*)—see especially Anna Kornbluh’s *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (Verso, 2024). While, of course, a certain kind of immediacy is the realm of the unthinking, the merely evident, and surface appearance, what Sutherland’s *Meditations* knows, and demonstrates, is that it is

only through pursuing and tarrying with the intensities of immediacy (in love, hatred, grief, depression, expression) that it might give way to mediation, to a process of working through; or else, that it might painfully intensify the blockages to mediation for which there are no theoretical or poetical solutions, but only practical ones: the resolve, for example, to radically transform the conditions of human experience and human relations so that life might truly live.