



Dear K, it's light that makes the river flow, or seem to flow.

Efflorescence skipping from crest to crest as though it were a school of tiny fish

and disappearing beneath a bridge. A bolted, welded, seconds-long eclipse and then it flickers back again.

It's harder to count than stars. More subject to vagaries, fancy, the weakness of belief. Is it matter

or does it depend on matter's movement, the hardly more substantial lifting it and losing it in troughs? Most of the time

I think like this, unsure what can exist without an imprint. My reflection stutters in the windows of a speeding train and then I'm looking at a field of sheep,

black-faced and lazily intent. The glimmerings are flecks of time.

I can't decide whether they are truly in the moment or moments out of time, essence or deviation from the path.

There's no conclusion here, no resolution myth. Things rise up and fall away as if they never were, rise up again. I like the dancing light,

the scattered cloud, the river that lies potentially between its banks, the speeding train. I reach for them. They reach for me.



. . . naked and alone,
the sun's fierce warmth or needlepoints of rain,
the puny human body – new-moon nails,
milk teeth, skin soft as wax – unresisting,
sex folded or flopped between our legs.
Before our eyes the receding arcs of sea and sky,
at our backs and lurching down the cliff
the green and terrible forest. On the intervening
sleight of sand, aflame or sodden, our feet
lifted and set down, lifted and set down . . .



You know the way a snatch of song lodges in your brain and won't be shifted no matter how you try to trick it out the door?

Well, this morning 'Amazing Grace' has come to stay, just the tune and those two words; the bits about 'no sweeter sound' and 'save a wretch like me'

disregarded somewhere else. Which is not so strange as I don't believe in 'lost' and 'saved' but I do know forms of grace exist

and are amazing. I think of a dancer's grace as she glides into the air, or the diver's equal grace gliding towards the sea: the body in defiance of its limitations,

going through, beyond. Graceful, gracious, gracile, words that multiply and spread like flowering vine. Grace notes of unbelief that still restore the faith.

I'd like to be standing by the laundry door looking at snow piled high in the backyard and stretching away to distant hills, all deep silence and soft light,

indistinctions that are pliable and hint at more and more concealment. Here, today, each leaf and branch is clear, and even shadows are

unsentimentally direct. Surface is baked surface and heat haze
won't bear comparison with mist, won't let me think
transcendence.

The following is true. The water in the bay is pristine, amazing
shades of green, a random morse of light, the sea flushing
between rocks with a gentle pop and splash

that avoids monotony. But in the channel, among the leaves and
weed and scraps of paper, two dead seabirds – black and
bloated – bob in the push and pull,

their wings flared and fixed in mimicry of flight, their feet flexed
as though they were about to land.

And now I'm stuck in the feedback loop: adrift in sun, snow,
amazing grace, dead birds. The binary brain looking for a
way out or in between,

a way to celebrate without appearing selfish or simple-minded,
without me at the centre pulling strings or getting out the
bubble wrap,

without an image of the imageless, or an image of the world
devoid of people to make the whole thing work, the dream,

uncalled for, undeserved, of the present expanding as if there
is no future or the future is this presence, that leafless
tree against the sky,

the glittering humpbacked sea, the thousand flickering things
the mind lights on and tries to hold.



Gloom off to the west. And blowing in my direction like
mounting slow-motion waves are banks of deep grey
cloud.

I ride towards them. Pedal-stroke by pedal-stroke the odds of
getting wet, and soon, are getting worse.

The air now curt and chill, and in a flurry the first raindrops
are flicked against my arms, then swept away.

The body moves forward. The body holds still. Mind rattles
back and forth and catches on itself. The legs drive on.

Think ahead, I caution. Look left and right, both near and far.
But I'm stuck on the mechanics of wheels: the axle, the
thin tube of swollen air

in contact with the ground, friction's retardation, the end-in-its-
beginning rim skimming relativities between the fact
of things.

We can't go back, though we're apt to waver even as our
wheels spin on. Behind me the memory of a Malvern
Star, that hill, failing brakes, a broken chain, and flying

backside-down-feet-first through a neighbour's hedge; broken
bones and proof of the interplay of mass and force, the
physics of stop and go,

that a body in motion tends to stay in motion unless . . . There's
still uncertainty in what is certain, postulates of indecision,
laughter, or an unexpected cry.

Time flits off or closes in and the space between me and a
drenching shrinks. Wheels slip and wobble and up ahead

it's possible to see rain stiffen into spears and, more fancifully,
coalesce into a solid-seeming wall.

I race towards it expecting in some unlikely way to escape the
unrelenting clutch of earth. I'm mad, you say?

How so? Light splits the clouds in silver streaks, trees leap to cheer
me on, clap their soft green hands in wild excitement,

and the future is an endlessness of blue. On the road behind me, a
ghost bike takes up the chase. It's closing fast.



It appears we are machines to manufacture words,
each weighted with deliberation or floating crosswise
on currents of uncertainty. Seabirds swoop,
plunge through an interlocking edge, come away
with wriggling fish between their beaks or nothing,
either way a penetration of that collusion,
surface-glued-to-surface, which signals difference,
one side, the lean, light-strutted transparency of flight,
the other a grayscale, ever-deepening dark: at best
a hard-won buoyancy. Lie back, you say, trust
the density of matter, the way the sun can warm
even as the sea enfolds you in a cool embrace:
displacement, though it almost feels like home.
Words leave. Air and water rush to fill the space.



I can eclipse you with a wink, Donne wrote
and yes, when we close our eyes matter melts
into the absence behind our lids as if, blindly,
we were staring at, or were, eclipse, a dark centre
and the dance of flames around the rims, imagined heat,
imagined light, one step closer to becoming not hollow
but invisible, figures whose existence must be inferred
by sound, by the accoutrements we drape around
our formless forms, or by consequent disturbance
as we pass, an effacement so complete we cease to be
or exist as emanation, that sense we provoke in others
of otherworldliness, a thing which can't be thing
but still is thought to be, that sees but is not seen.



I almost understand this resonance, this hum
or echo which I can only picture as a frequency,

oscillations expanding and diminishing
from a single source. And the sometime static

which crackles and interrupts, which implies
another source, another thought or possibility.

It comes when dragonflies shimmer in an afternoon's
blue heat or when you're watching drifting birds

and say to yourself, silently, aloud, their wings
absorb the sunlight, make deals with the wind.

It's like that curious deep-breath sensation when,
diving on a weed-enfolded reef, you surrender

to the slew and sweep of swell and your body,
that bounded, unreliable, actual fact,

loosens the skin's tight grip so you are
and, simultaneously, you are not.

It's not persistent but too here and now
to be dismissed as fleeting. We are called back to

our other selves, to the commonplace again.
My grandchild stirs in the back seat of the car,

rubs his eyes then settles down to sleep again,
 his chest rising and falling as the air

slips in and out, in and out, through that
 open mouth and snaggle teeth. This day

is wet and hot and beads of sweat
 have collected on his forehead. His tangled hair

is as orange as a mimic sun and his fingers
 rest upon his knees like dreaming lizards.

And here's Mark Strand, my while-I'm-waiting book:
 so many poems about expecting to die,

and night and dark and, yes, a little light.
 When my grandson wakes we'll race into the pool,

he'll splash and squeal and burble and fling himself
 off the edge, kick his legs and almost swim.



Is this now the Anthropocene and are we passing through it
mesmerised as dinosaurs? Is this apocalyptic question

as naïve as an expectation of the Rapture? Is rapture
with its after-shadow the just word for a carnal end

to the carnal life we know? I think of an unchanging world
day by day into years, sun and rain and the fables we invent,

turning next, next, an inadvertent thumbprint suggesting passage,
suggesting pause. Here someone stopped to eat,

to read the signs and re-consider whether to go on.
The sun still shone, the rain still fell,

maples shed their leaves in a stricken burst of colour,
and bare branches had something silent to say of winter,

of beauty in this other guise, of not expecting
beyond what is likely to occur. Is quiescence

a realistic human virtue? Wisps of thought drift
in two directions as though contrary winds contend

at different heights; gradually clouds accumulate
and darken to massed thunderheads

which dissolve in the hoped-for cheerfulness of dawn.
An orange sun slips the horizon's grasp

and I glance west to see a loitering, washed-out moon.
In a thousand million or a million million

or an unimaginable measure of the years
there must be consummation. 'Where death is,

I am not. Where I am, death is not,' Lucretius wrote,
thus inducing calm. Penguins swim further every year,

fish sometimes rotting in their stomachs
before they reach the young at home, unreliable ice receding

in the blue-warm wash of seas. King tide this morning,
wind-whipped, scum-topped waves churning in fractured lumps,

the rip sweeping back against the break and losing its way
behind the reef. No one's out. We just look and wonder

if we could survive, wish for shape, consistency.
Nothing's untarnished though still the bright dreams come.

I taste the frozen ice of Mars, listen as the koel
calls its split-note name again, again, again.



It's when the plane takes off, climbs, banks sluggishly
against the wind – below, the steel and terracotta suburbs,
the dense green canopy of national park and,
seemingly immobile, the blue-grey river's length
splitting land from land, and then the indented coast,
blue waves flopping on scoops of sand – that white light
bounces off the sea to swamp the moment in sudden glare.
The engine's like a vacuum cleaner in another room.

~

'The sea is a useless teacher,' I've just read, as are light,
rain, wind, those birds whirling in patterns sensible
only to themselves. Fish learn and remember, monkeys laugh
and misbehave, elephants weep, and I sit strapped-in
listening to time, and time past, to the things I've said and done.
Someone shouted, 'Shark!' There was a flurry for the shore
and my younger, slower sister was left behind. I did swim back.
She was brave. But there was a trembling in her voice.

~

Every sound that's ever been may still exist,
muffled ghosts shuffling from street to street,
ear to ear, huddled in doorways or drifting one by one
into the noise of time, the reverberating putt-putt-putt
of a motorbike struggling up the hill, lorikeets screeching
from one grevillea to the next, the changing pitch
of something coming near and drawing far away,
memory's evidence wavering in an interrupted breeze.

~

What's the job of memory? To re-invent ourselves
or apprehend the invention as it stands, to run away
or run towards the heart? I'm older than my parents
ever were, have children twice as old
as I was when my mother died, and still I wonder
what it is I've learned and what I should remember.
Light years, sound years, the senses marking out intensity,
warm air, cold air, wind that makes the scintillating stars.

~

When I was ten and my brother eight I buried him
up to his neck in our backyard. He was already
painted red from his ankles to his chin. It's funny now,
but why did I do it then and how did I persuade him
to comply? My father chased me down the street
with a potstick in his hand. Later I lost my brother
at the Easter Show and wandered home alone.
I hear my father's voice. See the confusion in his eyes.

~

Eyes give meaning to night and day, bless both
the hunter and the hunted. And ears? Ears gather,
all the noises that have meaning. Must screams be first,
or the strangled cries of making love, a stutter,
a whisper, exhalation that is felt as much as heard.
The skin has ears, antennae. 'Little Deuce Coupe'
is playing in the background and I am caught, my hand
on the bikinied breast of a girl I'd never see again.

~

The trace of a sensation, the echo of a feeling, latency,
suspension, the rustle outside your tent, the rising wind
that wakes you from deep within the night, yourself
calling to yourself across the years – that awkward face,
the frown and scrunched-up eyes, ears that make you
look a little like Prince Charles. What might you say
to your older, wiser self? The fears are still the same.
I am the rememberer now but how am I remembered?

~

When my son popped up from beneath tight-fisted foam
his first words were, 'I'm alive, I'm alive.' His twin sister
whom I'd pushed into the face of an earlier wave before I turned
and failed to grab my son – I couldn't hold him – was paddling now
with a group of surfers three times her size and trying not to cry.
God help them, they were only six. I lied to my mother
just days before she died. She didn't speak, only closed her eyes.
An unvoiced sentence hovers now. His startled cry. Her surprise.

~

'Reality is a sound,' Anne Carson wrote, we must tune in.
I think she's right, though the reverse is more simply true.
This light-weight guilt is carried on the wind, along with doubt,
longing, nothing more than dust, clouds, rain, squall after squall,
as if wind intended to drag the whole Antarctic north,
reflective sounds, ricochets of light, the sharpened syllables of ice.
My ears are turning blue, my eyes are streaming.
What I can't comprehend is more potent than the merely understood.

~



I walk among the dead. Trimmed and untrimmed graves,
symbols I think are Gaelic, and hosts of Guardian Angels,
some with heads lopped off, chipped smocks, shattered wings.
The morning sun flings light across the sea and, to the eye,
each cross is turned to black. Here lie the much beloved
unknown wives, adored fathers, children gone too soon,
vaults and edifices where family feuds subside.
Six mostly intact angels stand beside one pathway.
All their heads are bowed but this one presses flowers
to her belly, this one scatters blossoms from the basket
of her gown, this one's arms are folded on her breasts,
and this one's palms are lightly pressed in prayer.
This one shelters one child, this one two. And on this last,
brown head twitching, a sparrow has momentarily perched.