

WONDROUS LESSONS

(for Sophia Nugent-Siegal)

Todd Turner



The Sophia Lexicon Press
2026

To 'die into life'—
as the trial-prevailing and apotheosised
Apollo did, in Keats's epic, *Hyperion*—

was borne out of the underworld of loss
from which the poet arose. Upheaved,
the fallen brilliancies glisten on the page:

'Knowledge enormous makes a God of me'.
'Who had power to make me desolate?
whence came the strength?' Who would've

thought that to 'feel and suffer in a thousand
diverse ways' could be 'a wondrous lesson',
that to 'die into life' was the only way through?

In the scrolls of ancient mathematicians,
linear and quadratic equations translate
the reunion of broken parts. To solve

the value of the unknown x , the sum of parts
must prove to be level in a balancing act
of an equivalent whole. In language terms,

'the vale of Soul-making' could be translated
into an algebraic phrase: $\text{pain} \leq \geq \text{perception}$.
For the equation to hold, we must experience

the former in order for the latter to change...
—Switch the air. Convert the static into mode
and movement. 'Be a verb among a world of nouns'.

Split the grain. Clear the slate.
Tune the low-key to the highest degree.
Now sync to the self-tapped rhythm

of a quiet mind, and disconnect—
then move within your wellspring depths
where breaking and entering

is not a crime—but natural law.
Here, silence asserts healing
is suffering—yet harder still if you

do not heal. So step with ease, my friend,
honour the limits and chart your return.
There aren't many keys to the door.

When Sisyphus resumed to find himself
in the same place for good, he began to ignore
his disdain for the rock. Instead, he made

use of it, embracing the uphill task at hand,
channelling his energy into the boulder
as if it were a God-given means to the whole.

Out of the mundane, things had started to click—
and over slow-wheeling time, eternity-&-the-present
instilled as one. Not only did Sisyphus begin

to feel his burden infuse with fresh-labouring light,
he also began to turn inward, shape-shifting
the face of the mountain and the mountain slope.

What form does spirit take shaking off
its ash and dust: fight, flight or freeze?
Once, I froze—blind-sided—

struck down and mugged under a blown-out
lamppost by the river. I coiled hard
under the brunt of that animal beating,

yet stood without wings to defend myself,
and staggered wildly into flight.
But as I moved, headlong in defence,

I entered the shadows of a newfound dark,
and in a later plot to ambush revenge—
I hit back with blind forgiveness.

And there I was, on the verge
of crescendo, lodged in a time
of stillness without reprieve.

Yet what I needed was an edge
to work with—counterpoint to redress
the weighing up before weighing in.

So, in bearing up or letting go,
when the weight is beyond measure,
let the hour armour you within its hold,

and let the surplus strain to compose you
until the light of truth marrows in absolution,
and you yourself step firmly into being.

The stories of nerve roll-on
in their zillions. You'll never hear of them.
Day after day, all over this world,

people wake up and simply get on with it.
Like the motherless fatherless child
who must raise their siblings,

or the frail who fade in hospice alone.
It is said, courage is 'grace under pressure',
that the fruit of the loom is a resistance to fear.

Here, beside my father in ICU, I pare
the hardened rind, before faithfully sharing
the temperate fruit to the hands of a ticking clock.

Sounding out an ounce of solid sense,
he'd say, 'Take a leaf from spring and graft it.
A time to reap is a time to sow.'

So whenever those out-of-season
shoots had forked the loam,
I'd double down to till the rootstock.

And if the rot was a tough row to hoe,
I sowed the mistletoe and just kept going.
Yet in grafting the gist of my father's words,

I learned to strip the wood and earth the wonder
—to pluck a leaf from the golden bough—
and harvest the day as if I had lived it twice.

Keats 'never quite left his vocation to heal'
and transitioning into the 'realms of gold',
he conveyed with a 'surgeon's insistence

that knowledge can be only gained
through observation'. Open-eyed,
and 'fit for life', he effused of a world

that owed him nothing but the molten
elixir of imagination. Full of intent,
he emerged from an ever-greening grit,

a 'selfless moral dream'—intuiting a more
real than rich remedy to treat human grief—
to cast tidings into stone.

The path from the arduous to the wondrous
is through what: oblivion, prospective hindsight?
Perhaps the wisdom beyond the wise might be

that we only enter the river once;
yet transformation, the one true tenet
is nothing but inborn. What I want

is to wade within the lapping waters,
steadfast against the hauling tides—
where making headway, tuning the mystery

to a common marvel, is finding delight in the grip:
like dipping your hand to gauge the current,
and pulling from the river, a fish.

Notes:

'Wondrous Lessons' takes its title from the line, 'A wondrous lesson in thy face' from *Hyperion, Book III* by John Keats.

i

'die into life'

'Knowledge enormous makes a God of me'

'Who had power to make me desolate?

whence came the strength?'

'a wondrous lesson'

From: *Hyperion. Book III* by John Keats.

'feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways'

From: John Keats's letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 February - 3 May 1819.

ii

'the vale of Soul-making'

From: John Keats's letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 February - 3 May 1819.

'Be a verb among a world of nouns'.

Adapted from: 'The Poet' by Sophia Nugent-Siegal.

vii

'grace under pressure'

From: Ernest Hemingway's letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, 20 April 1926.

viii

'to pluck a leaf from the golden bough' is a direct reference to the golden bough in Book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

ix

'never quite left his vocation to heal'

'surgeon's insistence that knowledge can be only gained through observation'

From: the online article 'Keats's medical notebook' by Sarah Gillam. Royal College of Surgeons of England.

'realms of gold'

From: 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' by John Keats.

'fit for life'

From: 'Lamia' Part 1, line 39 by John Keats.

'selfless moral dream'

From: *Keats* by Andrew Motion (p.218). A phrase used to describe Negative Capability as a deliberate act of empathy and 'medicine' for the world.

x

'We only enter the river once' refers to the Heraclitus fragment: 'No man ever steps into the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.'