

Here Comes the Flood: an exposition

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Almost four centuries ago, John Donne famously mused that ‘no man is an island,’ and this sentiment represents a conceptual cornerstone of Peter Gabriel’s 1977 song, ‘Here Comes the Flood.’

In the lyrics, Gabriel uses the metaphor of environmental cataclysm to lament the tsunami-like approach of a posthuman era: a hypothetical future in which people no longer exist as physical entities, having uploaded their consciousness into a digital environment. He describes the forsaking of “flesh and blood” for virtual existence using language that suggests an act of God, or an expression of natural forces as inevitable as evolution or extinction.

The Flood, as depicted in the Bible, figures as a watershed for God’s chosen fauna – including humans – to survive what comprises an extinction event for the remainder of non-aquatic life worldwide. In *this* interpretation, however, the Ark is implied to be an electric one, and it is the physical human condition with which we are so familiar, that Gabriel’s vision of the Flood is poised to extinguish.

The lyrics are rich with biblical connotations, ranging from the crucifixion imagery of “as the nail sunk in the cloud” and the direct mention of “Easter tide”, to the way Gabriel addresses the “Lord” in the chorus. But the song is far from a religious one, at least in terms of what a religious song is typically understood to be.

From the lyrics’ outset, Gabriel makes conspicuous connections between nature and machine. As night falls, “the signals grow on radios”, and the “stranded starfish” we are introduced to soon afterward make it seem as if the first characters we meet in this story are radios and starfish. The “waves of steel” that “hurled metal at the sky”, and the “nail sunk in the cloud” continue the motif of technology intertwined with the natural world.

Conceptually, the way “signals grow on radios”, heralding the approach of night, is eerily reminiscent of the way WiFi traffic today tends to become more congested as evening falls and the majority of people conclude their working day. In the context of contemporary reality, this inspires a vision of human souls immersed in a sea of information, foreshadowing the theme which is explored with increasing irreversibility as the lyrics unfold.

The use of rhyme and rhythm throughout the song is remarkably intricate. Gabriel ostensibly uses an ABAB pattern in the verses and AABB in the chorus, but the actual placement of rhyming words within the rhythmic framework creates an asymmetrical, organic effect. The metre is perfectly crafted: mathematically, the stressed and unstressed syllables are arranged into neat and consistent patterns. Schematically, the rhyming is impeccable, even if there are examples of assonance and imperfect rhyme (gone/dawn, things/warnings) shuffled in among alliteration and perfect couplets (“Stranded starfish...”) as well as double rhymes (waters/daughters).

Yet the rhyme and metre are out of phase with one another, giving the lyrics a beautifully fluid, living quality, and the aesthetic result is both intriguing and captivating. “When the night shows/The signals grow on radios/All the strange things/They come and go/As early warnings...” It is almost as if Gabriel is emulating a neural network with language, using rhyme to connect ideas into structure that seems to have been *grown*, rather than built.

By linking the helplessness of the starfish at the mercy of the “swollen Easter tide”, with the resigned tone of “There’s no point in direction”, Gabriel evokes a sense of nostalgia when describing the speaker’s progress along the “old track, the hollow shoulder across the waters.” The image of taking a well-worn path above waters that are not yet threatening suggests revisiting, for the last time, a world with which the speaker is familiar.

The immediate segue from there to the “tall cliffs” where the “sons and daughters” of humanity were “getting older” brings a vivid juxtaposition. “The jaded underworld” – what better way of summarising cyberpunk culture, the early adopters of a digital age? – was ironically “riding high”. The “tall cliffs” themselves, whose vertiginous faces so closely resemble the exponential skyrocketing of technology that Moore’s Law famously predicted, poignantly evoke the sense that our “sons and daughters” are too far above and ahead of us to be reached.

From those “tall cliffs”, Gabriel shows us “waves of steel” hurling “metal at the sky”. The now-stormy, metallic-grey ocean has become indistinguishable from the waves of industry, filling the firmament with the very communications satellites that provide the network along which this flood can be propagated.

“And as the nail sunk in the cloud” – nature pierced by technology – “the rain was warm and soaked the crowd.” Gabriel’s use of the word “crowd” entails a grouping of people as faceless as the “stranded starfish” and “radios” that were mentioned earlier. Even if one does not consider the song ‘Red Rain’, released almost a decade later – in which Gabriel paints an even more explicit picture – the distinctive crucifixion imagery and the warmth of the rain makes it hard to imagine it is anything other than blood falling from the sky.

With that, the tipping point is reached: “Lord, here comes the flood.”

Gabriel makes it clear that this flood transcends barriers which might have resisted a more literal incursion of water. It is not uncommon for a flood to leave people in a position where they “have no home” and “have no walls.” But to be “a thousand minds within a flash”, for there to be “no point in direction” and no ability to “even choose a side” implies there is nothing resembling a ‘higher ground’ of safety: the flood is approaching from everywhere.

Therein lies the clincher, the turning point of the song: “We will say goodbye to flesh and blood”. But the most intriguing counterpoint to this is Gabriel’s reminder that there are “*those who gave their island to survive*”. In this context, the barriers overwhelmed by the flood are not simply the physical ones in which we shelter our bodies, but the very distinction between self and other. Thus, the “island” that must be sacrificed in order for one to survive becomes a powerful allusion to Donne’s famous metaphor.

Gabriel drives the image home by stipulating that the seas of this flood may only become silent “*in any still alive*”, rather than representing an external force. And he depicts survival as hinging on an ominous criterion: “It’ll be those who gave their island to survive”. In the wake of the flood, the deathly stillness beyond the storm, it is the surrender of one’s individuality, the silencing of one’s inner sea of self, that allows the “dreamer” to “survive”.

The tender way in which Gabriel addresses these “dreamers”, as well as the irony of “running dry” in a time of flood, continues the motif of crucifixion and resurrection, this time through the prism of holy communion. In the Bible, the God incarnate offers a cup of His own blood to His inner circle of dreamers. In this song, it is nature itself that is crucified, but the subsequent warm rain is still the trigger for the watershed of saying “goodbye to flesh and blood”.

The themes of transformation and rebirth feature prominently throughout the lyrics, despite the undeniable undertone of sorrow, loss and wistful farewell. Gabriel makes salient references to the possibility of survival, even if it is by no means guaranteed, and the sinister spectre of oblivion is always hovering nearby.

“Don’t be afraid to cry at what you see” is as much an expression of support as it is an indication that we are now witnessing the aftermath of the flood. With “The actors gone, there’s only you and me,” Gabriel creates an immediate association with all the archival footage of floods and tsunamis ever recorded, and the heartrending images of survivors comforting one another after a disaster.

We’ve seen how brutally, swiftly and relentlessly nature can overwhelm our tiny human fabrications so many times on television: for me personally, the most haunting example is video footage of the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004. Scenes such as these are particularly confronting because we know that they represent real events: there are no actors here, only people like “you and me”.

Gabriel’s contrast of “actors” with “you and me” also works at an allegorical level, as if he is describing the artifice of life being stripped away to reveal the true identity at the core of us all. His choice of the word “actor” also evokes Shakespeare’s “poor player,/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,/And then is heard no more.” This allusion is reinforced with the “seas” that only fall “silent” in “those who gave their island to survive”, saying goodbye to the ‘poor players’ of their corporeal selves, and leaving nothing but the purest aspects of consciousness.

The song’s conclusion is as poignant as it is complex. Gabriel loads the last two lines with an amazing weight and richness of meaning: through his delivery as much as the specific words he uses, he encloses the end of the song with several layers of interconnected significance.

At the most immediate layer: “if we break before the dawn”, perhaps of a new era in human existence, we are reminded that the sun will rise again regardless of whether it does so over a world in which *we*, the ‘old’ generation, still exist. But Gabriel makes a distinction between *us* – those who break, and *them* – presumably, “those who gave their island” by prophesying “[*they will*] use up/What we used to be”.

Is this the “jaded underworld” that was “riding high” on “waves of steel” earlier in the song? The “sons and daughters” of humanity who were “getting older” up there “on the tall cliffs” of Moore’s Law?

A poetry exposition must be substantiated entirely on available text, even if some degree of speculation can be made using adjacent resources. Since this poem is built from the lyrics of the song, its delivery becomes a relevant way of introducing meaning which might be conveyed differently in a format relying exclusively on text.

In the case of ‘Here Comes the Flood’, Gabriel’s strategic choice of points at which to pause when singing the last words of the final verse, fundamentally alters the meaning perceived by the listener. Compared to the linear sequence of words as they would simply be shown on the page, there is a dimension of waiting time involved. Such gradual disclosure means the listener must build new layers of meaning on previous words, and rewrite existing assumptions as developments in the story are progressively revealed.

This all happens in a matter of seconds, or less, but its effect on the listener is profoundly emotive. Instead of the words simply meaning something along the lines of, ‘they’ll expend what we once were,’ Gabriel’s pace and phrasing conspire to imply an altogether more intricate scenario. By breaking the last sentence where he does, it becomes “They’ll use up... what we used... to be”.

In other words, the meaning shifts to suggest that ‘they’ who “gave their island to survive” will utilise the same things as we did. But firstly, they will consume those resources completely, without surplus, and secondly – unlike ‘us’, who simply “used” these things – they will do so simply in order to exist.

The shadow of the simpler meaning overlaps the more complex alternative, evoking a distinctly surreal impression that those who survive the flood will simultaneously exist on the basis of the things we used, and utilise the very essence of what we once were as fuel for their continued existence.

This epitomises Gabriel’s mastery as a poet: not only does he *show* us how this flood that overwhelms self might look, but indeed, he enables us to *feel* what it might be like to experience it. By using words to create something like a sculpture of emotions that envelops the listener, he compels us to personally participate in the events which unfold within the lyrics. Considering that this underlying theme is precisely what the song is ‘about’, it becomes an extraordinary tesseract of art: by repeating its meaning in the listener, it makes that person part of its own story, thus permeating the barrier between self and other.

Refined to its purest form, this is the reason why ‘Here Comes the Flood’ is so remarkably unique: in the very act of listening to it, the listeners themselves fulfil its prophecy, as some small aspect of their identity dissolves into the collective consciousness of the artwork itself.