Almost imperceptible decisions and perceptions may enter into the landscape of language and take on the efficacy of the miraculous. The even surface of the current is suddenly revealed as having depth and power. The ostensible vacancy of a site shifts, not disclosing the contours of presence but marking the passage of an entity that won’t otherwise be named or circumscribed. In a world obsessed by the gaudy and the sensationalistic, Thomas A. Clark’s poetry unravels our excess to show us how to “come to our senses and to learn to live in the space they open up.” Offering the sensual markers of wood, water, birdsong, and flora, Clark opens perception to elements that dwell within and beyond the senses.

In his brief essay, “On Imaginative Space,” Clark writes that what “we think of as reality is neither literal nor virtual but imaginal, an array of images, invested with fear and desire, which we are constantly engaged in composing.” In his most recent book, Of Woods & Water, Clark beguiles us into this composition with quatrains of the utmost simplicity. His writing is so acute and subtle the inattentive reader will have to heed Clark’s gentle admonition that “you will have to stay/with it to know it.”

At times the seeming stillness of the poems promises to lull the reader. That’s the trickery of a magic spell. It is worth noting that the book’s subtitle is “Forty Eight Delays,” and it’s in these quiet delays and displacements that the reader is reoriented, sometimes slightly dizzied, and thus brought into the poem’s continual composition and recomposition:

what you thought might take place
is what thought will displace
the trace of a presence
a thrill through the grass

In “On Imaginal Space,” Clark discusses the possibility of reclaiming “sites of imaginative transformation: such places are not as they appear to be but as they are imagined or declared to be.” The particular import of this statement, as in the poetry itself, is Clark’s confidence that the declaration is a central constitutive event within the reality of the poem. To assert it is to make it so:

small birds in the branches
bullfinch chaffinch warbler
these names are wrong
small birds in the branches

The reader must take on faith that the “names are wrong” because the poet has averred that they are. It seems a modest declaration, not an authoritarian announcement. Indeed, Clark’s poetry might at first blush feel primarily like descriptive song, “a broken branch/leaking resin.” This is where the poems partake of almost gleeful nuance, disappearing into themselves, leading the attentive reader down a haunted trail. Description, it becomes clear, is not static but the compositional mode of an adept. Things here most certainly happen not merely because Clark
says they do, but because in saying so he is entering an imaginative terrain that, in his own words, “will be involuntary and astonishing.”

The sense of delay or hesitation, the pause or the “few steps that might take you/to what the branches defer” demonstrate the patience and humility required to transgress the border of imaginative space. Clark has become a native speaker of a tongue that is both intimately familiar and profoundly strange. His “delays” help the reader attend to that borderline and to join him in discovering “the calm of a completed form/to ripple away from,” onward toward a new or at least varying discovery where

shade is the candour  
of a modest revelation  
an immediacy hidden  
in continual mediation

This continual mediation is not toward ultimate balance and clarity, but what Clark describes as “new models of order.” Such, he says, “can be conceived, realized, maintained and dissolved.” His poetry, then, makes a keen use of dissolution. The reader is lead to the possibility that to order is to mediate. Mediation in turn prefigures a further dissolve and remaking. In Clark’s keenly measured lyrics, this evanescence is his revelation and his truth. He won’t soften it, but he will compose a poetry that allows for palimpsest and pause, for the ambiguity of shadow and trace. These sites of relative imbalance suggest a new imaginative order that can right itself in the dance of disequilibrium. As Clark writes in “On Imaginative Space,” “The issue is not transcendence or escape, but to realise that we do not confront an objective and final reality.” The negotiated, imaginative space between perceptions offers an almost indiscernible silence during which one can ask “is there a shape you recover again/when what moves you leaves you.”

This deeply valuable book bears many rereadings, opening as it does, each time, to a new page: a faint startle as the reader discerns anew that

when you come up out  
of shadow, for a moment  
you are lost, prised open  
by light, without content