



Of my Neighbour the Severn



The Severn. Photograph by Nicola Knoop

by Rogan Wolf

Of my Neighbour the Severn

(i)

I must speak of my neighbour the Severn,
its majesty and turbulence.

I turn and think of Brexit, or tonight's meal,
or look east to the steep edge of the Cotswolds
where Tyndale stands sentinel, behind his bars,
or to the motorway on its speed-bound axis ;
but even then, the Severn lurks in my mind,
in my words, in all my moments here ;
it claims a temple in my days, like a god,
with its vastness and banked unrest ;
It offers somehow a benediction.

(ii)

It's a task beyond me to accomplish,
I cannot do justice, words fail.
The Severn seethes and stretches
a few fields away from our pebbles
and rose petals. It carries two nations' weather
systems along its back, and two nations'
memories and guilts run deep in its underworld.
To put words to all this
is like throwing a net into the torrent.
The Severn's furies continue
their timeless practices.
The net snaps.

(iii)

Suddenly the hedgerow, steeped in its own
mingling of history and rose-hip
neglect and blackberry
gives way and there it is
across a sodden field,
the wide water, the dangerous
grace of it,
and my spirits lift
as if released, as if some constriction
has been withdrawn and this is where
they need to be, these far reaches
their truest extent.
They rush to place themselves
on station.

(iv)

Of course the Severn runs
to the sea,
yet where does "sea" begin?
Is not the Severn
sea itself?
Many rivers
open into its argument,
joining its currency
and unrest -
the Avon, the Wye, the Cam.

They void themselves
into a greater sovereignty
adding to its under-flows
the warp and weft of them
the pulse of their progress
under the sun and moon.

(v)

They know the Severn so well,
these faithful few I met.
Like pilgrims, they attend each year.
Let others head for the far exotic beaches
notching up the place-names
the selfies, the “likes.”
The faithful camp just here
for their fortnight off the pace, the Severn
their only company,
seething yards away.
It recognizes them.
It knows their teasing.
It knows one day it will gather them in,
enclosing them,
immersing itself in them.
They enter the water
and the mud clutches at them
but still they remember the footholds,
the hidden platforms underwater,
and the times when tide retreats, and leaves the salmon
captive in the pools.
Before the tide turns,
The faithful dance in the muddy water.

“She disappeared yesterday,”
he said. “She missed the ledge
our feet have learned to reach for
and I had to pull her up again
by the hair, laughing.”

(vi)

That ferment to the west,
fingers spread wide, writhing,
the rays of each sunset playing
on its surfaces, burnishing,
brazen, bringer of peace,
yet knowing no peace itself
and having no purity
of texture... The eye searches
for the undefiled, the transparency
we find in waters untainted
by human agency or earthly detritus.
But here it's mud and clay
disturbed, scooped up and dispersed
by the torment of the currents.
The Severn's fish are full of Severn mud,
they breathe it, and the shore birds
trip across it like ballerinas
as it gleams greedily at low-tide.
And the Severn's *waves* are full
of these scourings from our land,
mauve, bronze and copper,
shimmering along its surfaces
as it spans the millennia.

(vii)

Sweet Severn,
I came from afar to hear your song.
Hear mine.
We cannot run softly.

Rogan Wolf
14th October 2019

NB. The short last section of this poem refers to a line by the Tudor poet Edmund Spenser : “Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.” The line is from his poem “Prothalamion.” Four centuries later, it was quoted by TS Eliot in Eliot’s own poem “The Waste Land.”