

# Of my Neighbour the Severn



*The Severn. Photograph by Nicola Knoop*

by Rogan Wolf

# Of my Neighbour the Severn

(i)

I shall 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  
minglings 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has been withdrawn and this is where  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 innocence, the transparency  
we find in waters untainted  
by human agency. But here it's clay  
disturbed, scooped up and dispersed  
by the torment of the currents.  
The Severn's fish are full of its clay,  
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 its clay,  
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.

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