

The Threat of the Seaxe

Scrub land runs out, yellowed and chaotic, into the mudflats and the hard, grey line of the horizon. Here, pylons cage up the sky in a frantic hum and electrify the air. Ragwort sprouts defiant on dual carriageways where the magpies pick recklessly, and decaying industry sits on dead oyster dredging along the glint of the river. This is home.

It is not beautiful. The hedgerows crouch under concrete feet of bridges, thistle thickets and nettles crowd fields empty of wheat and golden only with parched grasses. Ghosts in the soil. Will o' the wisps in the mud. The haunted buzz of those pylon nets. Land of bridges squatting over tidal water, something slithering out from under them like trolls.

The floodplains stretch across over-farmed fields, barren and scratchy with culled wheat and the air is dry and salty. Sometimes it is too hot here. Across the Thames wave the mirrored, flat plains of Kent, its tarmac moors running down to meet us from the oldest ferry on the river. We have more affinity with these neighbours than our own county-people. We share the same horizon, the hard line on the edge of things. The silted estuary, this half-sea land not quite one thing or another – too wet and muddy to be firm earth, yet not the full sea to douse yourself pure. It is a liminal space of borders, of changes that open and close, and let things out.

It is old land. There are no monoliths, no ancient oaks like lightning strikes. They are all under the mud, the gravelly terraces of the Thames and its tide that retreats and returns, inexorable, swallowing all life and coughing up new. On these peripheries and Mardyke margins, the brown river performs its rituals. We hear the call of the dead under the Queen Elizabeth bridge, the chalky soil harbouring its flint and fossils and neolithic remains,

swallowed up in a sky heavy and dirty in summer storms. Horses whinny on finite fields by the roar of roads. Unsettling, ungentle.

It is a crooked place of strangeness: childhoods play in the haunted shadows of decay. We scrambled disused quarries, tossing ancient molluscs in games, crawled the apocalypse of abandoned freight carriers at the side of the railway and hid under our beds when the defunct air raid siren still called on Tuesday afternoons. Ancient churches cower in the shadows of warehouses and oil tanks shrink to death on the river. All watched over by the four red lights of a chimney stack on the shore, straining to make out the edge between flat land and crawling river. Gull cries rip at the heart like chips – but you are not at the sea yet, it is miles out and fades into the mist when you get there so that you can't see it. It hides its old sea gods and creatures and only the gull shrieks offer their messages.

How to feel at home here? When the land exists in spite of you, balefully, goading you to wade through the marshes until you are dragged down, by witches or shopping trolleys. No grass to rest on to gaze at the river; just bindweed and hostile stinging leaves. The triple Seaxe threat hovers above your head – this land of violence steeped deep in the blood of Trinovante who condemned the Roman for deserts of peace; then Saxon, then smuggler and excise man.

I fled the stagnance of marshy floodplains for the wet green of northern mountains for university. I had never heard blackbirds or seen hawthorn; I was drunk on it. I went to the chalky hills of the Chilterns and lived by the ancient Ridgeway, on the green canal – two pathways spanning their arms across the country to bring them together. I left for Australia where green is meaningless but the sky is so blue it plucks your eyes. There the ley lines

across Ngunnawal country connect the hills with their own energy and stories, and the Molonglo river curls around it.

But the estuary is something you can't escape. It hums in your voice – betraying cadence – something inside you cannot pull out, which talks back to you, calls you.

And back you go, to the omens and ghosts that leak between spaces where nothing is solid except that thick horizon. Time weakens, runs down to Hadleigh to stand by the rotting castle and imagine the sea calling; but it hides in tangled reeds and drowns before you see it. Perilous paths near the river fight us and won't let us pass. Because there is something underneath; something enduring, spitefully, like the purple buddleia against chain link fences and the waste lands of broken lorries. Spirits in the ditches that used to be rivers, resenting us for sucking them dry and ready to gulp us back. A land that must take a bit from you, and keep it; these spirits floating, caught in the pylon nets and kept here, like the souls of bits of young fingers ripped free from the now old men that worked our factories. Where can the hedge hag take her power now? What land can she feed off, now all is tarmac? She runs free in the rabbit warrens that persist under the butter factory; she will bring it down in the end. She surges in the tidal ebbs that pull down the sacrifices of children, in the goat willow-reclaimed quarries, using pigeons for her messages that dart between green veins towards the river.

What is haunting this place? Is it these things? Or is it that it haunts me? Its familiarity falls like thunder. Wherever else you rest, this will be the only true home, the silt and salt in your blood that vibrates when you walk it, you recognise it; it knows you – you know it. Are you welcomed? No. But it concedes that you are *of* here, the river and its spaces between sky

and water carved out on this drab corner between industry and carparks, is of you, and the secrets, stories and mysteries seeping in the marshes, are yours.

Like the river, its people reconcile to escape and retreat and return – for ever. Until you endure the land as it endures you, in uneasy truce together that is something like love. As you look, you recognise and it looks back, and recognises you. You're back, then, it says. Just for this tide, you answer. But there is always another tide.