

There. Not. There.

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The waters are not there. Nowhere to be seen. Instead, receding, indistincting perspectives of flats and oozes, banks and ‘stones’ and channels—all patterned, as if by millions of restless hands. But the waters are coming. As sure as night follows day, or rather, as moon follows moon.

What will be their mood? What will they carry? What will they do? What will they say? Where will they go? And try to go?

There waters are muscle and sinew, straining and flexing. Animated anatomical drawings, as stretches of current push and pull and twist and swell then relax through, over, around and under each other. On occasion, bulging up fleetingly as a sleek smooth tendon through the wildly patterning surface. The surface, the patterns; dazzling swirling, monochromes of shapes and curves, forever morphing.

The tides are high today. In fact they are some of the highest tides of the year. The idea haunts me. A slight feeling of unease, or frustration, running in the background as I move through the day. I am not there. I should go to see, somewhere. But that would mean an hour’s drive, through the dreadful, grubby, trafficy entrails of Bristol. And I have seen the high tide so many times before. Why go? With what purpose? And where to exactly, and when, exactly? Well, because the world feels deeper when the tides are high. The estuary feels self-possessed. Maybe I do too for that moment.

The highest high tides, the springs, wash swiftly up the Severn Estuary with a lot to do. The lowest tides, the neaps, just wander up sauntering, little to do. The high tide itself, the moment of flood, of high water, that amazing pause when the waters stop, pause briefly, then turn on their heel and begin to ebb back out to sea, is at different times along the estuary’s shore. Maybe forty minutes between high water at Avonmouth and Sharpness Docks some miles upstream. The ships, the few that remain, are restless, like horses waiting in stables, sensing something is up. High tide.

If ever there was a moment in a landscape pregnant with possibilities, implications, questions, ramifications, it is this—high tide. Many novelists, from Conrad to Banville to du Maurier, have used a high tide as a motif for the opening of a novel, And even, in the case of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a motif to end the novel too; the whole story related on a yacht moored in the Thames Estuary between one turn of the tide and the next.

The waters are coming. The light is changing, the air is changing, the sound is changing, flocks of birds are moving strategically. The patterns are gathering, sinews stretching. Ropes are readied. Farm animals, grazing on the saltings, are moved to safety.

The waters play. Indecently inquisitive, looping around anything in their way, like gangs of writhing otters. Wakes of repeating patterns of their movement, carry off up or downstream, depending on ebb or flood. I call these ‘tidal wakes’. I have made films of these, standing on Clevedon Pier. Ebbing spring tides, coiling around the pier legs, then echoing in swirls as they trail away downstream like receding laughter.

The waters are heavy. Thick and velvety brown. Not dirty, more like wholesome, nourishing. You would not drink them though.

The waters are skinned. Astonishing patterns. Textures, rubbings of the wind and the moon. Moiré upon moiré. Not so much ‘here today, gone tomorrow’, like you could say about the waters themselves, rather ‘here, now; gone, now’ on repeat, with variation. These are not the patterns of the sea and the wind or the patterns of the waves. This is something totally different. This is kaleidoscopic but more feral than that. This is tiger sliding to leopard; this is old tree bark sliding to elephant skin. It is all a magic trick, slight of hand by the moon and the spin of the earth.

For some periods of my life I lived in places right on the bank of the Severn Estuary and its tidal rivers. And at other times close enough to the shore for trips to the coast at high tide to be a matter of necessity for the family or exploration in other instances. While the necessities were work for my father and older brothers, for me, tagging along, it was a matter of excitement and wonder.

The waters sculpt—amazingly so. They do so every night in the high tide dark. Then, the next day, the ebb throwing back the covers of the sea to reveal the restlessly wrinkled and puckered bed. The sands, and/or mud, patterned by the waters running hither and thither over them before ebbing away.

And there are other dilemmas. What time of day are the tides high? Will it be dark or very early in the morning? Bigger dilemma still, to visit at low tide or high tide, or some time between? Those who know about tides, for one reason or another, take it for granted that the highest tides also mean the lowest tides. These are the Spring Tides or in America, the King Tides. And if high tide is a profound landscape moment in psychogeographic and ecological terms, when on a still summer day the landscape seems to hold its breath with the whole estuary full to the very brim, gleaming and softly seething with swirling currents, or the sea whipped up by a strong wind, battering or even overtopping the sea walls, then the following low tide is equally, but differently, a moment of the deepest profundity. This world feeling not so much shallower, but calmer, open, at peace. “Its funny” I wrote to Heather in an email “I have always thought that high tide is THE time to go see”. But I suppose that low tide might be so because there are more possibilities of explorations, discoveries, other variations and patterns to see. Low tide is an openness, an invitation.

James Joyce, in his first published novel, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), uses a walk on a beach at low tide as a scene of dramatic climax.

The waters are memory. They remember the marshes and streams lost to concrete and steel, cog and earthen bank. They remember mudflats and their teeming populations before barrage or land reclamation. The waters are history. They have carried so much, both human and non-human freights. The Severn Estuary Partnership once reported that, at a spring high tide, maybe 30 million tons of silt is on the move, suspended in the water column. The power, the implications are profound. The terrible trades of slaves and coal for the empire were borne upon the tides of the estuary’s ports.

The Severn Estuary, as other tidal landscapes, is truly remarkable and has attracted the attention of poets, painters and many others. They realize that to really grasp it, it needs to be seen over time, at different times, repeatedly. The contrast between high and low water is startling. The photographer Michael Marten has created an art book in which he took identical photographs, at high and low water, at forty locations around the coast of Great Britain, including looking out into the Severn Estuary from under the first Severn Bridge.

Perhaps, more than any other country in the world, Great Britain is a land of tides. Because it is an island with nowhere more than seventy miles from the coast, and because the entire coast is punctured by bays and estuaries and river mouths into which tides slide in and out each day. Through cities, through coastal plains, up coastal valleys, up all the rivers, like fingers sliding in and out of gloves. It feels fecund.

To casually visit the Severn for a short while, or to glimpse it from a train window or from a car crossing one of the great bridges, is to see it at one moment, which on the face of it, may not be that remarkable. It is the change over time, over the space of hours in the day, also though the month, and through the seasons that is so remarkable.

The waters are a matter of—are matters of—all at once—rhythm and pattern. Rhythms of patterns. Patterns of rhythms. Space and time and light. Rhythm-patterns.

I told Rose, a PhD student at Bristol University, researching the history and archaeology of Hook Cribb and estuary floods, that in my papers I have a report by the Wentlooge Drainage Board, maybe from the early 1980s, showing a photograph taken at a January high tide, on a stormy day, with the caption ‘Waves overtopping the seawall at St Brides’. Rose was keen to see it. I reached for where I thought I would find it on my anything-but-ordered office shelves, but it was not there. My mood swung to resignation that I might never find it. I have a huge amount of material about the Estuary. But I persisted in looking through folders, press cuttings, academic papers, boxes of photographs. I wanted to help, and I did find it. The waves *were* breaking over the seawall. Somewhere, nearby, behind where the photographer had stood, is New Dairy Farm where my cousin Hugo still farms. A little further west was my family’s farm and my first home, until a flood of houses from the edge of Cardiff swept over it.