

HORTON

Out of the deserted car park, through a lightly grassed cleft in the dunes and on to the beach: that sudden heart-stopping rush of light and space; the scoop of shore, a dazzling meniscus of smooth, firm sand under marine heaven. A beach that is always *the* beach. As wide and inviting and warm underfoot as it was back then, in the bathysphere of dream where it remains first sight every time.

My responses, on this bright September day in 2014, are predictable, obedient to the genre of the Celtic return: the crumpled boyo skulking back to the shop-soiled plot of innocence, after years venturing in murky elsewherees and making them so familiar that the inherited racial compass is completely wrecked. The shooting script of the Gower shoreline, in late afternoon, approaching the golden hour, feels pre-written, but not quite redundant. I'm eager to blow the dust from the top of a slim volume of autobiography left on the shelf for decades. Sonar echoes are muffled, but Dylan Thomas-infected prospects of the sea are overwhelming. I call up the famous photograph of the poet in the BBC studio, leaning on an elbow, puffy-faced; a turtle-necked bohemian confronted by a microphone as threatening as Nuremburg.

‘The afternoon was dying; lazily, namelessly drifting westward.’ Memory-spill tame as a wet bank holiday. ‘A wince and whinny of bathers dancing into deceptive water.’ The past is a sandy tablet for sketching and charming and not paying bills for the guilt of prolonged absence. We are looking for private islands, coming in half asleep on some rattling bus, and finding no good reason to leave. Language pirates, raiders, gatherers up of other men’s rescued trifles.



If I were to recommend the walk that gave the sharpest jolt to my imagination, it would not be in London. Those Thames bank expeditions were prose: laboured documentation back-channelling a selective mythology. Ejaculations of hopelessness. The walks that truly haunt, and hurt, are the ones that walk you. They anticipate future projects known before the first fatal step is risked. So the day’s expedition – and it is always a day – is the recognition of the distance to be experienced but never understood or captured or made safe.

Horton was a self-contained village on the edge of

amnesia, situated at around the mid-point of Port Eynon Bay, on the southern ledge of the Gower Peninsula. My family had a caravan with a hillside perch in a farmer's field, shared with five or six others, overlooking the spread of shore. Sunset was an event worth stepping outside, cup in hand, to witness. This was where, in my teenage years, I spent my holidays, in remission from the strictures of boarding school, the regulated existence within a hometown where everyone knew everyone else's business. The blessing of this 2014 return was in being anonymous in a new place, open to all its undiscovered magic. In this village, in the caravan days, it was a privileged form of camping: milk and water to be collected from the farmyard, hissing gas lamps to be managed. Soft glow over the foldaway table of paperbacks and board games. The lost-life pictures are still there, but they are crisped and seared like Polaroids that have faded, for lack of interest, in a locked drawer. Physical sensations, odours especially – puddled, stone-floored byre, chemical toilet, melting tarmac, clover dunes, bubbling chip vats – invoke home-movie episodes as they might or might not have happened. But the *real*, the authentic grip of locality, is in the rocks. The arms of the bay. The muscular headlands of Oxwich Point and Port Eynon Point. And the straggle of cliff paths between them. And that vision, when the tide retreats, of Carboniferous wave-cut limestone pavements: fractured, monochromatic. An alien planet revealed, submerged, revealed again. A lunar colony with no traces of past or future inhabitants. A terrain that is, simultaneously, before and after any whisper of civilisation.

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We travelled from London, making the unfamiliar drive along the northern rim of Gower, down the Loughor Estuary, after coming off the torrent of the M4 at Junction 47, on the approach to Gorseinon – where I'd been sent, aged seven, to stay with relatives, as a trial run for boarding school. What I remember is nothing to do with the strange bedroom I was allocated or my well-disposed temporary guardians, but the novelty of that blue-grey road, promising so much, running to who knows where, beside tidy houses and the occasional mysterious shop. Setting out to walk a few hundred yards of highway somewhere beyond the hungry sprawl of Swansea was a harbinger for much that followed. I relished it more than the compulsory Sunday nature-trail tramps through the sand dunes that formed part of the routine of the prep school in Nottage, a village on the outskirts of Porthcawl. My preferred nature studies were abandoned tin works, landfill quarries, feeder pipes, slag heaps, rust-red streams, overgrown railway embankments, and not the approved catalogue of rabbits, hawks, herons, butterflies, beetles, spiders, mallow, rock spurrey and gentian.

Gower has a proud otherness. It claims to be a severed English community, in exile from the 'true' side of the Bristol Channel; close-bred, tight with its cash, upgraded from the era of fishers and wreckers to the condescending exploitation of seasonal visitors. Now, as we discovered, after completing our walk and moving on to Swansea by the old coast road, through Penmaen and Parkmill, the principal source of income for the area was not tourism but parking fees. Traffic was unremitting. The celebrated beaches at Oxwich and Three Cliffs were advertised, but no drivers could slow down

long enough to read the road signs. Before you could so much as unfold a map, you needed a parking permit. Even roadside pubs charge you for the privilege of walking across gravel to inspect the menu. Convenience stores make most of their profit from migrants trapped in their vehicles, too frightened to buy an ice cream, or essential supplies for the caravan, without losing a ticketed slot. This was the route we used to cycle, as we relished coming to terms with the Peninsula's assertion of difference, those narrow lanes and high hedges.

Arriving by a new route – we were staying in a country-house hotel, near Reynoldston – offered easy access to the ritual of acclimatisation first experienced in the late 1950s and early '60s. Sheep paddling on salt marshes. Cockle harvesters at Penclawdd. Solitary stands of evergreens. Novelties taking us away from our London lives. I knew that the ashes of Ernest Jones, the psychoanalyst and approved biographer of Freud, were buried at St Cadoc's church in Cheriton. But that was for another day. Jones, a man of wide interests, publishing on ice-skating and chess, was the person responsible for having Gower declared an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'. He helped to bring Freud out of Austria to London.

Slowing down, stopping to inspect the coastal view or check on another closed pub, we were decontaminated after the centrifugal thrust of the motorway. The novelist Rudolph Wurlitzer has a nice title for the liminal terrain in which we found ourselves as afternoon light shifted gracefully through the f-stops: *The Drop Edge of Yonder*. Without closing my eyes, I had the feeling of returning to the wrong body, or

the wrong place, that comes after the short, sweet blackout of a deep afternoon siesta. Wurlitzer quotes the Lankavatara Sutra: 'Things are not as they appear. Nor are they otherwise.' He speaks of a recurrent dream: 'A long endless fall through an empty sky towards a storm-tossed sea.' The figures standing over him, when he returns to consciousness, are hungry ghosts clutching corpse candles.

Our approach to the hotel is not like that. There are no humans on the road and few markers beyond suspect grey stones that resolve into affronted sheep. We are the only ghosts, hungry for stories to infiltrate, confirmation of a past that never happened. If we do not find a holloway path into a landscape sanctioned by some previous authority, we are left in the limbo of creatures without tribe or history.

Our ivy-draped refuge, with its legend of recovery from ruin, its tactfully restored bedrooms with views across shaved lawns where television interviews are now being staged, insulates guests in a subtle cocoon, as if nothing they touched should be hard enough to bruise. The selling point is a temporary suspension of reality, straight back to an Edwardian summer, with weekend guests paying for hospitality. The only residue of the known is that film of the motorway: steel mills, blast furnace, smoke columns, crematorium. Abbey, sculpture park, storage units. Tight-packed terraces, pegged to a blue hump of hillside, masking the former mining town where I grew up.

I wanted to get straight out to the beach, to fix my bearings before, early tomorrow, we started the walk that held all the answers: Port Eynon Point to Worm's Head and Rhossili.

Those few miles, scrambling, descending, poking into caves, were a memory map, as much invented as catalogued. I did it the first time when I was about sixteen and holidaying with two friends in the Horton caravan. Nothing quite fitted with the impressions I dredged up, fifty-six years later. The village was so white, so brightly painted. Some of the old synapses still fired, other pieces of the cortical jigsaw had been forced into the wrong slots. I remembered walking slowly down a winding road from farm to sea. Driving, talking to my wife, everything happened too fast.

The mechanics of opening the car door, finding a towel, getting the right coins into the slot for our parking fee, helped my orientation. The quiddity of Horton is not as pronounced as that of Laugharne on the River Taf or New Quay in Cardigan. The inhabitants are not as eccentric or potentially perverse. Dylan Thomas could not have inflicted his postmortem dreams on this sequestered stretch of the Gower. The rocks are too old, too active. *Under Milk Wood* is an estuary piece; tidal, convulsive, squeezed out of money-terror, alcohol, sleeping pills, cortisone, performance sweat, last days, sirens, ambulances. Pre-posthumous. The play belongs in the fond sleep of the burying ground where Dylan was photographed, in rehearsal for mortality, by John Deakin. It is not the slow layering, heaping up and scratching away at reference and cross-reference, of *Finnegans Wake*. Which does not begin at the beginning, but way out beyond the end, in transit: *riverrun, swerve of shore*. Graves open for Dylan, as for Stanley Spencer, on the local; known individuals who become types and archetypes, ready and willing to give him welcome. He sleepwalks through a lack of structure.