

The Tide is High by David Bradley

Madalief watched from atop a crumbling embankment as a fox hunting on the fen below leapt suddenly into the air. It arched its back and as its brush quivered, gravity took hold and its forepaws pounded the damp earth and the creature thereon; the last heartbeats of the tiny, anonymous prey beneath.

The wind was soft and poured a mist over the land to set on the fen, shifting ambiguously as if in time with a far-distant tide. Ignorant of that ethereal and nonchalantly poetic endeavour, the fox moved on, ever hopeful of sensing the subtlest lub-dub of a murine heart or catching the fiery breath of a Devil's coach horse.

Madelief imagined that it was her lowland ancestors who had taught the English how to drain the vast marshlands of this region all those years ago. The drains that crisscrossed the acres with their incendiary gases and their feverish ague. Ancestors that helped erect windpumps at strategic intervals between the inland island settlements whose inhabitants traversed their world only by coracle and causeway in times gone by. The V-shaped veins took the rains away to the north, pumped with the lie of the land.

Across the fen, a barn owl fretted over the encroaching mist and headed silently away from the tide to its nocturnal roost. Its face mirrored the full moon that dimly spanned the horizon veiled by acres of mist. There would be no hunting in this lowly crepuscular light.

Madelief ploughed on, a solitary walker, espying an occasional otter or a grass snake taking to the water in its wake. They would sidle aquatically across the ripples for a moment or two before quickly disappearing from sight. They would take routes so strange that water will flow uphill to the sea from here on out. The sea that refuses no river.

The darkness was coming and with it, the occasional will o' the wisp and more worryingly those insistent bearers of the ague. Madelief shuddered as if with an oncoming fever at the thought of catching her death and strode on. She ignored the skulking black shape of a fen tiger...there were no fen tigers, she knew that...it was merely mist-enshrouded shadows dancing to the devil's tune in her imagination. She had a place to be, she had a message to deliver.

With each stride, the pulse of the tide pulled her on. On towards the settlement, the name of which had been scribbled in charcoal on the bare inside of a sliver of bark grappled hastily from the crumbling façade of a tree, a plane, ironically enough. Scribbled just as hastily but almost illegibly was a name. Refuge was that name. Somewhere safe to stay. Somewhere dry. Somewhere she could unroll her message.

Madelief had walked for miles along the muddy crests of those V-shaped veins, heading inland away from the tides, her journey charmed by the occasional grass snake or a vulpine pounce. Her message was all in her head, it was plain and simple and yet it was likely no one would take heed, Nevertheless, deliver it she must to those who might still care, to those who might know how to engineer a new solution to an old problem. The problem of how the full moon can give new land to the tides.

By degrees, the mercury had risen. Inch by inch so too the tides. Year by year, the air had somehow grown thicker, more cloying. It had taken on a new viscosity, soaking up the rays and staying them lest the winter be chilled once more.

So now, where Madelief fancied she could see a distant windmill on a rise it was not to be. There were no sails on this windmill. This windmill, surrounded by water, was strangely a far more ecclesiastical affair, an ancient translucent tower, reaching up, cutting the sky from its aquatic surroundings. A vitreous spire pointing accusingly at an angry God that once offered his people famine and flood. A shard...