



A September Night On The Sea-Wall at Dengie

By Robert Macfarlane

At six o'clock that evening, I decided I would sleep out on the sea-wall, so I walked out to a remote curving stretch of coast south of St Cedd's, where only fifty yards of saltmarsh separated the wall from the high-tide mark. The wind had died away, and there was the smell of grass and salt in the warm air. Inland, the sun hung low and yellow over fields, diffusing a rich gold light that oiled my hands and face with its colour.

The sea-ward side of the wall was quiffed with a line of thick high grass, which hid me from the thousands of migrating birds – dunlin, redshank, oystercatchers, curlew, gulls of several sorts – that were gathering out on the mudflats and bright white cockle-beaches. The incoming tide was moving the birds closer to shore, concentrating their numbers. Big waves would send them up in sudden clouds, and then they would rain down again onto the mud a few yards nearer to me. From my hiding place, I could watch without disturbing them.

High tide was at about six o'clock. Half an hour later, dusk began to settle on the land, and as the light fell the grasshoppers began to stop

their chirring, until I could only hear five or six, then two, then one, then none. I was lying on my front, watching the birds on the mudflats and shingle prows, when the sky above me filled with a creaking noise. I rolled over, and saw a vast flock of black-backed gulls – two thousand, perhaps three – flying over me from the west. They reached the waterline, and turned in a single shoaling movement, their white bodies flashing as they caught the last light of the low sun, and then they spread and settled on the sea just off shore, turned to face the wind, and formed into a loose bobbing line, one bird every yard or so, that stretched away up and down the coast as far as I could see in both directions.

Full night came; moonless but clear. I lay on my back, watching the silhouettes of the birds as they flew over, and watching the stars pricking into view: first one, then two, then five or six, then too many to count. A scatter of meteors fell – the Piscid showers of September. Then I started to notice other lit bodies, moving fast: the high blipping orbital paths of satellites, but also others, lower than that, visible only as fixed moving lights against darkness. They were passenger planes coming into Stansted airport, still at a high pitch, ten thousand feet up or more. I realised I was sleeping in the middle of two flight-paths, two migrations: one avian, and one human.

St. Peter on the Wall
Photography: Robert Hallmann