

Twelve River RIPPLES

Favourite Poem



As
by Robert Macfarlane

As is thin as mist.

As is as fast as gale & as
slow as tar.

As moves as owls do, hushing through the air.

As moves as hyphae do,
slipping through the soil.

As is as light as ash & as bright as foil.

Ash is as heavy as mercury.

As is as scant as goodness in conditions of scarcity.

As is as massive as dark
matter.

As is as asymptote.

As is as nothingness.

As nears Ness.

As is hopelessness.

As is forgiveness.

As is Ness.

From: *Ness* by Robert Macfarlane and Stanley Donwood, Hamish Hamilton, 2019.
(*Ness* is part-novella, part prose-poem and part-mystery play, hauntingly illustrated by Stanley Donwood.)

Favourite Poem cont.

As 2022 gets underway, I visit Orford Quay again with family members and look out at the Ness – now missing its lighthouse. I return home and search out the poem 'As' by Robert Macfarlane. It speaks to me through its spaces.

I've attended more than one poetry workshop that frowned on the use of 'as' in poetry, I find myself wondering if this is something others have come across? I ask myself – is this fair? So, here I am delighted with a poem entitled 'As' and containing an abundance of 34 ases (a possible plural form of 'as') as well as four words containing the letters 'a' and 's' within their folds: *fast, ash, massive* and *asymptote*. *Asymptote* – one to look up – and I find it is defined as *a line that a curve approaches, as it heads towards infinity* (Wikipedia).

I see this as a list poem – with a list of analogies about what the word 'as' could be likened to. I enjoy the pleasurable analogy of *owls ... hushing through the air*.

I have a horror-love-awe relationship with Orford Ness, its geology and natural life juxtaposed with its recent history of the development of radar and, later, the atomic bomb. For me, it has been a place linked with family memories: water-skiing, swimming,

barbeques, stone-skimming, bird-watching and searching for hag stones; all the time aware that my father-in-law had worked on the trigger mechanism for the atomic bomb on the Ness in the 1950s. So, I find myself personalising the words *As is as light as ash & bright as foil* which remind me of the ash of our barbeques and foil wrapped baked potatoes on the one hand, while on the other hand they speak to me of the bright flash of an atomic explosion and the aftermath of ash settling on Hiroshima. The two opposing ideas are discombobulating, and I need space to move through *nothingness* to *hopelessness* and finally reach *forgiveness*. I realise each of these three words has the suffix *ness* – the word play strangely appeals.

I am told at the end of the poem that *As is Ness*. I re-read the poem again replacing *as* as necessary with *Ness*. This is a powerful process – try it.

Fran Reader

Afterword: I've recently discovered *Suffolk Suite* by the female composer Doreen Carwithen (1922-2003) – the second movement is dedicated to Orford Ness. Here is the YouTube link: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=E6dXMHRmras>.