

Stephen Robertson

Iken Hall

Later, my mother will describe the house itself
as ugly. No such thought would cross my five-
or eight- or ten-year-old imagination.

It stands within a grove of trees, a very few
of which I can discern, even perhaps
identify across the years. A copper beech
stands out, a clump of pears whose fruit
is hard as stone. (But when stewed overnight
in the oven of the pre-war Aga, they will emerge
a startling deep red, and taste delicious.)

Another tree, perhaps a beech, but green
(I think that I can see the nuts it sheds)
on the grove's outer edge, contains our own
tree-house, a canted deck of ancient planks,
nailed across two angled branches, reached
by clambering the branches by the trunk
or (better) by the real rope-ladder, which
we can then haul up behind us, ready
to defend against the next attack.

Towards the river is a group of firs
—the kind you sometimes see in lines across
the Suffolk countryside, each tall bare trunk
gnarled and twisted by the wind, supports
a wild, tufted crown—quite unlike
the planted forest, serried ranks of Christmas pine
which begins a mile down the road
and into whose dense interior
we sometimes venture.

Beyond the fir-trees lies
a bracken-covered heath. The summer fronds
rise far above our heads. In this bright green
we wander, hacking out our paths, or creeping through,
maybe chancing on a hidden hollow which
will make a temporary home, until
the next adventure.

(One time, though, the hollow holds
a real live snake, standing up and hissing
at our approach. We turn tail and flee
as fast as breath allows us, not to feel safe
until inside the house.)

The bracken spreads across a gentle slope
towards the river. A line of ancient oaks
(one blasted trunk is hollow through, and can be climbed
inside) mark out the sandy/grassy bank that is
the cliff. A narrow sandy beach past which
the falling tide reveals the deep black mud
which oozes softly up between our toes. Across the river
lies the lagoon, a field flooded and then left
to the encroaching mud. On the far bank
of the next bend, another sandy beach
to reach by boat. That place we call Japan:
against the sky, a line of those same firs
looks vaguely oriental.

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Since then, of course, the bracken
has been ploughed, the edges fenced, the house
demolished and rebuilt. The trees remain.