

Stephen Robertson

Wet and dry

In the summer of fifty-six
after my tenth birthday and three years
after the great flood, my grandmother Margie
moves from the house at Iken
where I was born, the eight miles
to the coast and the small seaside town
of Aldeburgh, to a house
originally built by my great-great-grandfather.
Our school holidays move with her.
The Landrover that Margie drives
like a canal barge, in the middle of the road
is already well-known
in the countryside around.

But it's by bicycle that we explore:
the town itself and the beach,
north to Thorpeness (for the Mere
boating lake) or south to what was once
the village of Slaughden
to the marsh, the river,
the quay, the sailing club slipway
from which our explorations take us
sailing down river towards Orford
or inland towards Iken and Snape.

Beyond the sailing club
the derelict Martello Tower
stands stranded on the shingle bank
that separates river and sea.
There is a large cake-slice
cut out of its surrounding wall
for the new sea defence they built
after the flood of nineteen fifty three.

Slaughden was once a ship-building port
on the marsh south of Aldeburgh, but
(like Dunwich to the north) had been
falling into the North Sea for centuries.
The last house in Slaughden was drowned
in shingle in the nineteen-twenties,
and the last boat-building shed
was washed away in fifty-three.

The town too had suffered from the sea
with every storm, every winter season
re-arranging the shingle beach,
moving it bodily south
towards Orfordness and beyond
to Shingle Street. But it had been caught
(for a while at least) by a phalanx of groynes
marching down the beach. Later,
after storms have undermined the new
sea defence, and fifty yards
collapse into a hole, they groyne a further stretch
for a mile south, past the Martello Tower.

Half way along the town beach, between
the drawn-up fishing boats, stand
two lifeboats
on tarred wooden platforms, with ramps
running into the sea. If we are very lucky
we hear the maroons that summon
the crew, grab our cycles and rush
down to the beach, just in time to see
a lifeboat released, to gather speed
down the ramp and plough out
through the waves.

The smaller lifeboat, the Lucy Lavers,
commissioned in 1940, had
a baptism of fire at Dunkirk.
But a few years after our move
to Aldeburgh, and after
twenty years' service, she is sent
elsewhere—the station no longer needs
two boats.

I go to university, get married.
We spend our honeymoon a long way
from the sea, in Yorkshire, J's home county
exploring the Dales—we have borrowed
Margie's Landrover for the trip. No boats
but plenty of water in the rivers
and becks and tarns.

Margie has left Aldeburgh by now
but my mother has found at Slaughden
another base for holidays: a boat
with a small cabin and a leaky roof
about the size of a caravan, washed up
onto the marsh in fifty three,
never to move again. The *Deerfoot*
serves us well for several years. Later
until my mother dies in eighty-four
there is a flat overlooking
the beach and the remaining lifeboat.

Much later still, in a new century
and after J's death,
I find a new home with G, eighty miles
northwest of Aldeburgh, on the coast of
north Norfolk. From our window, we can see
a section of the quay, the creek
the marsh, the tide rising and falling
the moored boats, and when the tide is up
boats passing. We sail and kayak
the creeks around.

In the next village east, a small company
is rescuing wooden boats.
Their first project: a seventy-year old
former lifeboat, long since
decommissioned, renamed
and used for other tasks. She now lives
up our creek, a hundred yards
from our front door—
restored, repainted
in full livery, and proudly displaying
her proper name and rank:
Lucy Lavers, Aldeburgh No2 Lifeboat.