



A Story a Week ...

... from woodblock printmaker David Bull

Wooden School

This is one story from the 'Summer Suite' - a collection of stories written during the summer of 1994, when our family spent a month staying at the home of my late father-in-law, in a small village in Mie Prefecture.

One building dominates the village, and it's the first thing that comes into view as the bus rounds the final turn, coming up the road from the city down on the coast. The road hugs one side of the valley, tight against the steep mountainside, and twists and turns, left and right, as it follows the contours, making its way past the wide rice fields waving under the summer sun.

The name of this village, where grandad grew up, is Ozato, 'big village', but this only makes sense in comparison to the tiny clusters of houses scattered here and there in corners of the long valley. There are only a few dozen houses even here, but as it sits roughly halfway between the river mouth at the bottom, and the final tiny hamlet up at the other end, it is a focal point of valley activity.

It was thus natural that the education authority should choose Ozato as the site for the valley middle school over 100 years ago, and it is the roof of this long low wooden building, standing on the mountainside at a slightly higher level than the village houses, that one sees from the bus.

Late the other day, out on a stroll with my two daughters in the early evening cool, we come up the hill towards this place. The wooden walls are a deep brown, mottled and stained over the decades, but still a rich colour, not bleached to a dull grey as are most of the old houses nearby. We cross the stony playground, climb the front steps, and find that not only do no locks keep us out, but there are not even any doors to block our access to the wooden hallway that runs the length of the building, off to our left and right.

Kicking off our shoes, we step up onto the dark, shiny wooden floor, and enter another world. I can think of no words more apt than that tired old phrase 'polished smooth by generations of feet', to describe this building. Not only the floors, but everywhere within reach has been rubbed until it actually glows in the late sunlight that streams horizontally through the front windows. The doorknobs, handrails, posts ... everything has a deep sheen like an old-master violin. How many hands have swung around this corner post here? How many feet have slid across this entranceway?

The three of us sit down in a row of students' desks. We disturb nothing, we just want to soak up a tiny bit of the ambience of this amazing place, but the light is fading rapidly now, so we quickly walk round the rest of the building. Everything brown. Golden brown everywhere, and burnished clean until it glows! As we leave and make our way homeward through the now darkened lanes of the village, that long row of windows behind us catches the last light, and reflects the glow of the evening sky. We are each silent with our own thoughts.

But now I have to confess that I have not been quite fair with you while writing this little story. I have used words like 'is', 'stands', and 'are', and oh how I wish that they were true! For these words are now lies, and had I been honest with you, I would have said 'was', 'stood', and 'were'. For this story was last year's story, and during the past winter, this magical building was replaced with a modern concrete structure.

I suppose the students are happy in their clean, bright, not to say warm classrooms. I suppose the insurance company is happy, secure in the knowledge that this building will not catch fire one cold night. I suppose the village parents are happy, knowing that their children have a facility the equal of those in the big cities. But if everybody is so happy, then why are my eyes full of water?

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