

Family Elder

Maybe I shouldn't have looked for it on Google Earth. Was I really expecting to still see the elderberry tree over forty years since our family moved from the small, grey, terraced house in Luton? I now know the life expectancy of an elder is sixty and it was probably middle-aged then. It only exists in memory now.

This was the tree whose blossom heralded hay fever season for me, its white spring outfit prompting my eyes to stream and nose to itch. This tree did not offer the great climbing opportunities we read about in our favourite storybooks: we only ever managed to get a few feet off the ground. Nor was it sturdy enough to accommodate a longed-for treehouse. But it was the lone tree at the bottom of our compact garden, and it was loved.

It watched over all our games and sisterly squabbles. It allowed us to hang a bird table from a limb and welcomed a variety of visitors from bullfinches to coal tits, despite the urban surroundings. We would crouch beside it, using knotholes in the back fence to watch as passers-by in the alley paused and gazed upwards, following the melodic trilling of our water-filled bird whistles. Our parents also appreciated the tree – a row of bottles with handwritten labels and containing alluring reddish-purple liquid, stored high on a kitchen shelf, were the results of a fruitful partnership.

In memorium: the elderberry tree.