

Along The Way



Poems by
Keith Spence

ALONG THE WAY...

Here is my third collection of poems put together during the covid epidemic. It is now 2022, two years into the new era and the experience of the virus has brought turmoil and anxiety. The old order has been well and truly shaken.

Added to this, highlighted by the Glasgow COP 26 conference in November 2021, is the climate crisis. It is no wonder there is a lot of anxiety around, not least associated with our ruling political party and their antics.

Here is my antidote. Some nature poems, gentle reminders of our wonderful world and our remarkable neighbours, mixed with earlier work on memorable places and, well, chance meetings along the way of life.

Oh, and a bit of comment on the political malaise. Hard to resist that...

Keith Spence

MOORLAND ROAD
(Mastiles Lane, Yorkshire)

This ancient sleeping sea of wind blown sand
is possessed of a silence that is absolute.

A stony track climbs up each rolling wave of
fossilised green foam to eternity.

Heavy booted mariners, we navigate the road
by curlew calling stars in solitude.

Eyes shaded to long horizons we are blown
beyond self's shore to equanimity.

Sheep pot politely down portholes in the aching
limestone walls, like rats escaping.

Pee-wits and dunlin fret the scudding air and
settle to their nuptials gratefully.

A lone mechanical man, heroically motor-cycling
the plunging land, is silenced.

At journey's end we rest our aching limbs with
joy to know our spirits are still travelling.

CROSSING THE ROAD

They were there, pale in my car lights,
trotting over the road, no sign of fright.
Two roe deer, ghosts appearing at will
out of the farmer's fields dark and still.

We are so close to nature all around
our paths meet upon the same ground.
Their future and ours are intertwined.
If animals die out, so will humankind.

Whole species gone, just in my lifetime
birds, insects, animals, it's a real crime.
All pushed to extinction by our neglect
to temper our actions, stop their effect.

Late in the day, we are learning to care
about all the losses, and be more aware;
changing our habits, protect the earth
learning from nature, seeing her worth.

Come back little deer, crossing the road,
as we work out a new countryside code,
provide new places for you to flourish,
making certain no more species perish.

HORSES RIDING BY (Appleby)

At first, just the sound of hooves,
rhythmic drumming on the road,
hidden from sight around a bend,
were they pulling a heavy load?

Pressed against a roadside wall,
we were enchanted by the sight,
of a four in hand, black beauties,
trotting by proudly on our right,

down the hill towards the river,
the muffled driver in his seat,
they plunged into the crossing,
spray flung from flying feet.

A privilege to see four cross
the ford with power and grace,
a reminder of the ancient past
when horses made this place.

Gypsies claim to hold the reins
with their annual horse fair,
buying and selling, parading
and racing, horses take the air.

Crowds come to the spectacle
of a lifestyle from the past,
adapting to the modern world,
wondering if it will last.

As long as horses are the main
and truly respected focus,
this little town will be the site
for the annual horse's circus.



DUCKS DILEMMA (Appleby)

No matter what weather or day
traffic bustling past their home,
sitting on grass by the riverside
this ducks' colony is here to stay.

Chosen with care for good food
by a bus stop and friendly shelter,
lots of people passing through,
this must be their favourite road.

Bonanza time is a coach stopping
just opposite lies the town chippy;
the ducks know beyond any doubt
that people soon will be dropping

tasty morsels of succulent scraps,
that will lead to a pecking melee
of ducks going quackers together,
for their bit and for the other chap's.

Competition hots up too as school
pupils hit town for their lunch,
when a rival, black-headed gull
starts making ducks look a fool.

With his pals he quarters the river,
collecting flies as he speeds along,
but beating the ducks to the food
is far better when we are the giver.

So, nature and ourselves we reveal
to be partners in life's dilemmas,
each seeking to feed our own kind,
but wary of what others may steal.

SIGHTING

Along the river Eden's winding arc
the path follows a tree-lined bank,
past the farm, and munching goats,
into a leafy tunnel, wet and dank.

Autumn's fiery display is now turned
to piles of sodden, grey-brown mud
squelching under the constant feet
taking dogs out, because we should.

What pleasure remains is not clear
in dark December's shortening days,
but, if you are fortunate or quick
your dismal trudge a dividend pays.

For suddenly, as with magic's touch
a slight, bright, figure darts along
in squashed leaves about your feet;
a red squirrel, like a winter song.

Full of life, and grace, and energy
he bounds above you up a tree,
leaps in the air, tail a flying cloud,
a vision of nature, wild and free.

Into our winter dead with dread,
he comes, the athlete on the slope,
lifting our hearts to feel new joy,
awakening us to see fresh hope.

December 2021

ROBIN'S REWARD (near Keswick)

It is a modest hill by Lake District elevation,
a mere thousand feet in the old calculation;
from the top can be seen all the lake's spread
that's why so many people climb Castle Head.

From the Borrowdale road, crossing with care,
we climb with slowness the lower slopes bare;
a pause for breath every few yards takes time,
but eventually we make it, to the view sublime.

Remarkably, for once there is not a soul there
no families with children, no dogs, all is clear;
out come the cameras, recording the view
Derwent below us, Lake Bassenthwaite too.

When, hopping around on stones by our feet,
appears a cheeky red robin, dodging the sleet;
where he has come from, how he got there,
is a complete mystery, but he doesn't care.

He's not afraid, nor put out, by our presence
'cos humans have food, if they have any sense,
to eat on the seats that sit proudly on top,
he's worked it out, this is where we all stop.

He doesn't give us his clear piercing song
no need to sing, he knows he won't be long;
hunting around in our rucksack pocket,
we give him some food, and he's off like a rocket!

January 2nd 2022

BOX HALL DAWN
(Suffolk)

Upon the sweet dawn silver'd grass
the ancient house lies sleeping;
the chorussing birds ascend their
morning song, as a squirrel does
swiftly up his favourite tree.

Is this just another day the blackbird
heralds from the ash, or have we
swung the time-old gates to open
on a fresh young world, soil turned
by moles smother'd in May blossom?

It is so still so perfect, filled with
nature's thousand voices; the sun
entrancing, flooding over fields and
catching rabbits unawares, as they
sit in the shadow of the giant oak.

A cuckoo calls across the heath, and
pigeons in the wood reply, while
chaffinches echo the rising song of
the blackbirds. Where did they learn
this swelling music on the morning air?

THE POND
(Wallington Town Hall)

The heavy trickle of
thick time
rounds the stones
and fills the pond
with weed.
Slow straining buds
fill out
upon their saucer beds
of green.
The small stone boy,
lichen old,
grips his slithery fish
with fossil arms
and smiles.



LICHEN SPEED

Here they freckle the stones,
nudging their brother mosses;
changing colour once a century.
Does the lichen measure time?

Slow but sure, their family motto.
No need for speed. For a snail
silver trail is a like a high speed
motorway to nowhere.

They do not mind the birds
dropping dung on their heads,
because when birds and humans
are no more, lichens will rule.

TURNIP KING

It used to be a grassy meadow
dotted with browsing ewes,
now its become a mudfield
dotted with turnip chews.
Winter time, so expensive
to feed your flock on hay,
a field of nutritious turnips
will help the season pay.

It's breeding time of year,
looking to next year's crop,
the tups are busily engaged
working through the flock.
One stands out with pride,
astride the higher ground,
splendid in the setting sun,
a dramatic pose he's found.

With no soft grass to lie on,
no shelter from the rain,
you cannot help feel sorry
for limping sheep in pain.
But, bathed in evening sun,
one tup has shown the way,
to overcome the boredom
and brighten his cold day.

THE ROCKING CHAIR

(An old chair in a National Trust house)

Standing silent in the dusty sun
in the corner of an empty room,
it is a mysterious spell you cast
of all who used you in the past.

Were you part of a lover's tryst,
lost in time's enveloping mist?
Did you carry a mother's weight,
feeding an infant at her breast?

Did your rocking sooth in part
a returning soldier's broken heart?
Or was your rhythm all in vain
to assuage his lasting pain?

Forward, back, forward and back
did grandma sit there all in black?
Needles clicking, needles clicking,
wrapping family ghosts in knitting.

Now, you are silent, gathering dust
sitting here idle, your life all past.
Locked away in this stately home,
waiting for the visitors to come.

DOWRY

I give you sunlight on the sea
I give you laughter, bubbling free;
I give you lark song in a meadow
I give you autumn colours mellow;
I give you moonlight in the lane
I give you hedgerows wet with rain;
I give you a gentle caressing breeze
I give you the sound of wind in trees;
I give you the touch of skin on skin
I give you a kiss from love within;
I give you the the feel of polished wood
I give you a tree that shed its blood;
all beauty and pain that lie in the earth
are my gifts, with all their worth;
in accepting them, you welcome me
I am always near where I long to be.

SOMETHING HAS GONE WRONG

There, it's done it again,
Just to give me a fright,
Booking swimming online
On the fancy website,

My password rejected
I'm persona non grata,
It makes me dejected
And really past laughter.

"Something has gone wrong"
Is the message I get,
So hold on, stay strong
I'll master it yet.

Remarkably patient
I type in my name,
But giving my ident
I get just the same!

I know what's wrong,
It's perfectly plain,
I've spent far too long
With computer pain.

Tomorrow I'll ditch it,
Pick up the phone,
Buy a swimming ticket -
Hope I'm not alone!

PAPER TRAIL

Across the floor and up the stairs
they fall from steps and lie on chairs,
letters, cards, and leaflets on pensions,
each one precious, needing attention.
Notes to tell us about coming events,
some are in time, but mostly, they're spent.

Memos pinned to our notice board
gathering dust as they're often ignored;
timetables for buses running last year,
tourist attractions, now over I fear.
Why do we keep all this paper clutter?
In case we need it, we vainly mutter.

Notebooks abound by the telephones
recording the news, not just the bones
of every message that pours in daily
from family, friends, reporting gaily
on every activity cut off by lockdown,
no one it seems is painting the town!

Electronic recording is not our thing.
We much prefer paper, just like string
a gentle throwback to an age of writing
letters not emails, far more exciting!
Now it's digital madness, more or less,
quite impersonal, and lots more stress.

So, our lives exist, written on notes
a paper trail of memories that floats
into consciousness, then disappears
into the fog of advancing years.
Old age, is the apex of life, let me state;
but I have a job to remember the date.

COUNTING THE COST

(In March 2021 the ten year Census took place. It was also the anniversary of the start of lockdown. Ceremonies took place around the country, remembering all the 149,000 deaths, at that date, related to Covid.)

March brings a decade
count across the map
of Britain;
where people live
and people
die.

A shadow falls across
the spring this year;
daffodils mute
their trumpets, as
the wind
cries.

The birds flute from
trees and fields their
annual song,
but softer now
a lament
grows.

Silent gardens hold the
hidden voices of all
Covid's victims;
so many lost
beyond our
tears.

Beauty reaches out to
heal families torn apart
so violently;
but colours fail
to remove
despair.

We cannot be whole
this silent spring as
people weep.
All nature's joys
stay mute
today.

WESTMINSTER ABBEY

Buttressed to stand the siege of time,
these ancient stones have seen all
the passing pageantry of
temporary power.

Eroded daily by a tide of people
who lose themselves inside, then
flow outwards again to
city clamour.

Are you a church or mausoleum
of pomp, with brigades of stone
statues awaiting the clarion call
of doom?

Generals and nobles alike in dust;
an unknown warrior wreathed
in death, but not alone, the
common man.

Each carved flower and flagstone
underfoot, a silent witness to
builders, craftsmen who
worked here.

There is no monument but to
them, their daily food and sweat
turned gloriously into arch
and pillar.

The lofty Chapter House is mute
kings, monks, soldiers are all
gone, leaving old worn tiles
to tourists.

Now, a minute's thoughtful prayer
floats across the space, stopping
advancing waves of cameras for
Christ's words.

CARPET OF LIGHT

You cannot touch heaven, yet we always try
spinning dream fingers, to lose ourselves
in the colours of peace.

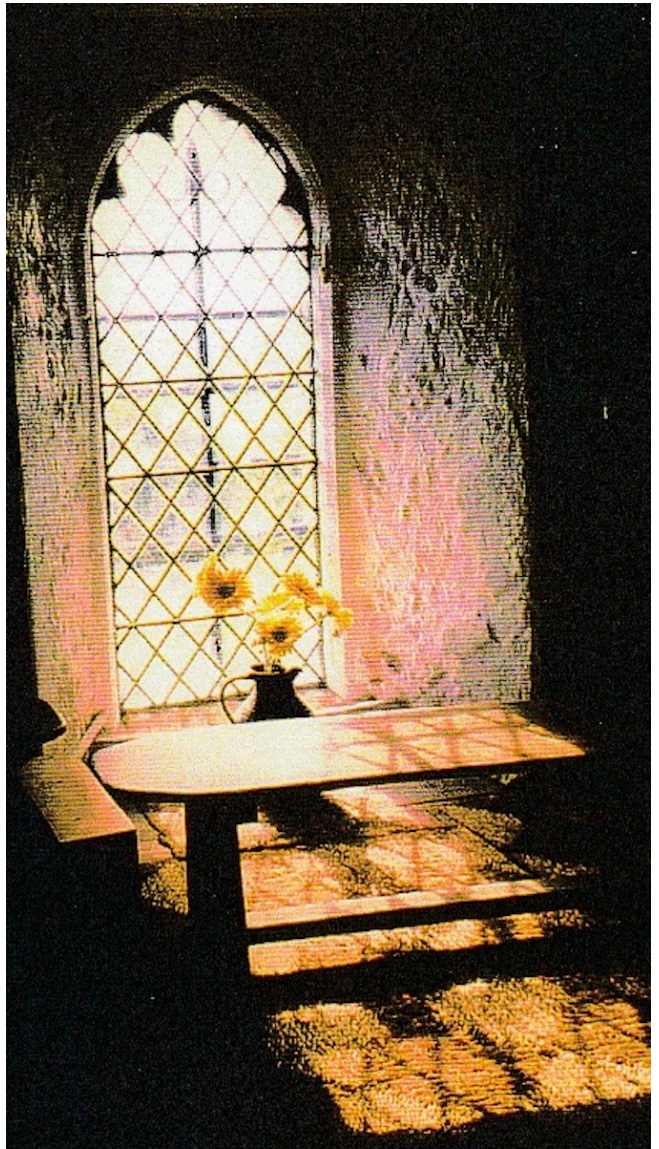
Time has no meaning here, nor pressure of pain,
for longing has gone, in the evening calm of
silent stones.

Who knows - waiting in the shadow of love,
that pours eternally to halo our fragile faith,
what we shall feel?

What music rises in the still air, caught in
dusty sunlight webs of gold, to fill all
emptiness, and loss.

Climb the bright stair, the narrow way to kneel
by flowers of prayer, on the frayed mat
of childhood dream.

(November 2001)



LINDISFARNE TRINITY

BOATS

Calm sea, sun sparkling, boats rocking in the breeze,
some, upturned lie beached, away from stormy seas.

We, tied ourselves to the land, are rooted too, at rest
until the tide changes and we can cross life's strait.

Our journeys brought us to this shore, blown by the wind,
to search with saints and pilgrims for peace in mind.

CUTHBERT'S CROSS

(St. Cuthbert's small island is marked by a wooden cross)

Cuthbert, rugged saint, sat on this isle,
gulls for company, seeking all the while
to anchor his faith with stronger ties
to the God he served, who ruled the skies.
His simple wooden cross stands clear
between the land and his isle so near;
like a bridge between life and death
it stands so strong upon the earth.
All is here, no need to seek more;
prayer blown by love onto the shore.

SHELLS

In small pools, cupped by old black rocks
are treasures, reflecting jewels in the sun.
Broken shells of myriad creatures. Blue,
pearl, pink, and grey, they run in tributaries
along the rocks, bright necklaces and
pendants for the mermaids. A saint's
treasury of free gifts for all to share.

RED AND WHITE

(Each Remembrance day I wear a red poppy and a white one, twined together)

I wear two colours on this day,
remembering all the
lives blown away.

Soldiers, sailors, airmen brave,
and civilians in millions
they couldn't save.

Sadness covers the whole sky,
the earth is weeping
with their cry.

Why this constant human waste
to warfare's pitiless
violent haste?

Red poppy crying on my coat,
the white witnessing
a different note.

Men and women, of every race
join their hands to
work for peace.

Listening to each other's pain,
learning about love
that heals again.

Red and white together grow
to tell the story we
need to know.

RISING TIDE

(A COP out at Glasgow?)

On the streets and in the squares
Gathering with banners unfurled
A multicultural crowd prepares.
Messages from round the world,
Shouting hope and not despair.

Inside a security fortress wall
The delegates nervously await;
Leaders reacting hear the call
Of people facing a deadly fate,
From a planet threatening all.

In vain speakers hold the fort
On promises they do not keep,
Ignoring the damning report
Scientists mutter in their sleep,
Telling us all that time is short.

Past crumbling beneath their feet
Propped on coal and fossil fuel,
Nature shouting as they meet,
Beware the looming future cruel,
Crushing people in every street.

Hurry, hurry, say heavy skies,
Flooding the tiny island states,
Listen to the mounting cries,
As people try to close the gates,
Before all around them dies.

The tide is turning, on us all,
If we don't act to stop it now,
Wealthy all must heed the call
Get carbon down, and keep it low,
Working together to make it fall.

November 2021

LOST AT SEA

Still they come ignoring the tide,
desperate people, trying to hide
from the violence and poverty
that plagues us world-wide.

Seeking safety on England's shore,
across the continent, facing more
hostile border guards on the way,
their daily living an open sore.

In December's rain and cold,
one small inflatable, too bold
to make the Channel's passage,
broke and sank we are told.

In the evening news report
27 people lost they thought,
an overcrowded rubber boat,
lives all cruelly cut short.

Our horror at this human
loss is fuelled by political dross,
failed immigration planning
making the situation worse.

Official promises to create
a safer system; now too late
to prevent the needless deaths;
people abandoned to their fate.

Our Governments are all at sea,
making threats they think will be,
a way to stop the human tide,
of suffering people like you and me.

November 2021

OLD STORIES ARE BEST

So December slowly turns in
its annual closing down,
and our minds are shuttered
as faith is gone to ground.
Familiar Christmas stories
each belonging to the past,
tell of a cosmic drama that
we did not think will last.

Angels, shepherds, dreams
from a mythology arise,
that now we just ignore,
as childhood in the skies.
Divine beings fade away
like mist on frosty days;
we need physical evidence
to show religion pays.

We put our trust in science
to show us how to live,
for a confident technology
would our salvation give.
But now, with nature's pain,
climate changing course,
we learn the awful truth,
things are getting worse.

Faith in economics shows
just how wrong we are,
wealthy grow unhealthy
with each changing car.
Poverty grows like cancer
eats up our common life;
the market cannot solve it
so it will to lead to strife.

What Christmas stories show
is a world just like our own,
but focus on a new-born child,
humanity on the throne.
The wealthy and the powerful
pay homage at his birth,
along with poorer people who
really know his worth.

The measure of divinity
a humble peasant child,
a life full of compassion
with nature reconciled;
this is the old solution for
our desperate search,
to find a hopeful future
that lies just out of reach.

December 2021

NEW YEAR

Big Ben strikes the midnight hour
and laughing friends rush in the door;
hugs and kisses all around and
fill our glasses to toast the time,
a New Year!

Measuring time we are measured
ourselves, the new becomes old,
history, time, last year. The past
living on to remind us of where
we have been.

Hopes, dreams, tears, deeds,
'do you remember when?'
Our hearts relive the scenes
words, moments, left behind
but part of us.

VACCINATION

First jabs were headline news,
a triumph of hard endeavour,
produced in months not years
by scientists working together.

Next the health professionals
harnessed the volunteers,
staffing centres countrywide
to reach those full of years.

First the one jab, then again,
finally a booster injected,
millions of folk vaccinated
except those who rejected,

all vaccines as dangerous,
swayed by online hysteria
fearing some fatal outcome,
refusing to meet the criteria.

So we see a deeper malaise
that vaccines will not reach,
our suspicion of each other,
or hatred some will preach.

We need mental vaccination
against internet mutations,
of the violence infection,
destroying world relations.

Our default of aggression,
from years of propaganda,
is no answer for us now,
when unity's on the agenda.

Covid has clearly shown us
when we are facing danger,
we have all to work together,
including every stranger.

January 2022

TREE OF LIFE

(For Trish, turned 80)

A year is a small measure of a life
And eighty do not tell the full tale.
Compare us to a tree like the giant oak,
And human years are just one leaf.
But still we have known wind blown
Change like it, as we have grown.
Those early steps and wondering
Childhood walk, all mystery and joy.
Then, unquiet runs, and passionate
Jumps over many youthful gates.
Into fields of golden years that
Flowered with family and friends,
Still searching for an inner melody
That runs too deep for words.
Through doors into mirrored fantasy
Longing for some enabling truth.
Past the wider clamouring world
Demanding all our energy and time.
And then, an inner wisdom rises silently
From sourceless wells beneath.
Until, at last, with the oak we rest on
Deeper roots, binding us to the silent
Fruitful earth beneath our feet.

THE GHYLL

(Applethwaite, near Keswick)

This 'lovely dell' of Wordsworth's pen,
gift of a wealthy friend, with its tumbling
beck falling from Skiddaw's height;
he never lived here, too expensive, but
it gave him what he desired, the voting
rights of a statesman, political clout.

Shut away in modest Applethwaite,
the two small cottages came down
to Dora, then to William's son, and
later into the capable hands of
two gardening women, cast in the
mould of Dorothy Wordsworth.

They channelled the beck, built terraces
planted ferns, laid paths that wound
up the hill; and tending the orchard,
improved on nature's bounty, with
viewing seats to show the beauties
of Derwentwater spread below.

Then, with an ironic twist of fate
the Ghyll came to Bishop Treacy,
a keen photographer of trains,
iron monsters Wordsworth hated,
destructive of his beloved Lakes.
The Bishop retired here, and from
it's peace made his last journey.

Now, the Bishop's family rent out
the cottages, made into one large
and friendly house, nestling in its
dreamlike valley lost in time. The
trains passing Keswick, like the
Wordsworths, are long departed.



PENSIONER PRAISE

I have a freshly minted song
to lift me every day,
to transform the experience
of slowly fading away.

Now with time to appreciate
the changing season's face,
I have found a melody,
and words I can embrace.

A song to really celebrate
all the people in my life,
friends, and family as well,
my children and my wife.
With a tune from listening
to birds in woods and fields,
picking up life's melody
which daily routine yields.

The divine is all around me,
unseen presence at my side,
revealed in loving actions
by neighbours far and wide.
I don't need flowery words
to capture what life gives,
each day brings me miracles,
I sing with all that lives.

STONES OF GOLD

Lost in the world of
a blade of grass,
time's silent wheels
scurrying past, I am
child and man.

A leaf like a star
pressed into a wall
of lichen limestone
attracts my gaze,
and I wonder.

Snail shell slow
and earthworm blind
we await revelation,
opening our eyes
to now.

Stones of gold on
every beach, cast
off treasures in
country lanes by
our feet.

Bare trees against
a velvet sky, and
a robin's song at
dusk in a dark
murky wood.

Stars into stones
stones into song,
turning the everyday
inside out with
divinity.

TURNER SUNSET

Was it a trick of the light
or did the mountains
become transparent?

Skiddaw, Blencathra,
Catbells, Maiden Moor
all transformed.

Matter became light
in hues so subtle,
beyond words.

Send for Turner, it's
his kind of evening, to
paint eternity.



BONFIRE ON THE BEACH (Auchenlarie, Scotland)

Small hands clutch sticky marshmallows
barbecued in smoky flames
and eaten with solemn
delight.

Sand encrusted feet scrape on ancient
rocks, in risky Himalayan climbs
a few feet above the wet
sand.

Twigs and logs gathered along
the shore, burn slowly, sparking
parents' memories of campfire
songs.

The sun dips below the ink black
sea, and soon torches glow-worm
along the darkening
beach.

A ghostly dance begins, with luminous
strips round arms and hands
glowing red, yellow, blue and
green.

A laughing conga winds along the
crunching sea-shell beach with
fairy voices ringing
loud.

Too soon night beckons tired eyes
and dragging feet, to climb the
rising cliffside path to
dreams.

BEDTIME STORY

It's been a warm companion for over twenty years,
a simple handmade coverlet of patchwork squares.
It was one person's gift to us when we moved on,
from a loving friend who made its lasting song.

One side green, with pink edged flowing flowers
each stitched carefully into intertwined bowers;
the reverse a dance of cornflower blue, and red
it brightens the appearance of our autumn bed.

Like an old friend when no words are needed
it's ready to warm our rest; as if it still heeded
the call of our ancient bones to hug us tight,
and keep the cold at bay throughout the night.

January 2022