

Hearing with Eyes



Poems by
Keith Spence

TO HEAR WITH EYES ...

This is my fourth collection of poems, put together as the Covid pandemic moves into the background, and other world events take over.

I have taken the opportunity to revisit old poems, and to discover the enjoyment of playing with words again as a kind of therapeutic activity.

I have tried to express ideas and feelings arising from the experience of growing older and looking back on my life, at events, people, and places.

I hope you can catch my voice through reading the written word.
Shakespeare, of course, put it much better.

“O, learn to read what silent love hath writ.
To hear with eyes belongs to love’s fine wit”.

(Shakespeare: Sonnet XXIII)

NIGHTFALL ENNERDALE

A silence deeper than
the lake is
spun from stars
and melting sun,
to flow around my
deeper self and
fill all needs with
golden peace.

ROBE OF JOY

Deep moon shadows line the sea-shore road
that lead our footsteps to the womb of night.

Soft the light across the widening indigo sea
like a searchlight for the errant traveller.

Sea-sound breathing of booming breakers,
sighing waves dying upon the glistening sand.

We sit and talk, dangling our feet like kids,
in the mystery of deep, starlit, enchantment.

Can this be true? This flying like sea-spray,
hearts one with night, sea, wind and moon.

It's the ageless fool, love; romantic visitor
weaving our senses into a robe of joy.

SNOW VISION

As I cross the village road, feet crunching on fresh snow,
the air closes on me like a vice, and squeezes my breath.
A new world around me, houses shrouded in deep white
walls with new buttresses, cars topped with icing domes.

The white world blazes, dazzling light, bouncing across
the freezing windows, sunlight amplified by ice crystals,
refracting off welded gates, and posts, and bulbous trees,
as I wade knee high into the narrow, pristine white lane

leading up to an invisible farm, buried overnight with
tons of soft, wet, foam sloping down from the roofs to
cantilever over the hidden farmyard, and its tractors,
each silent under a new blanket of enveloping snow.

Never has the world seemed so new, so untouched and
beautiful, with each bush a miracle of shining down;
tree are statues of unsurpassed flowing snow pillows,
blending into a curved space that lies beneath my feet.

Breath, coiling like smoke, I walk entranced into the
virgin snow-filled lane, my stumbling feet the first to
break the surface of this sleeping sea, and leave deep
yeti prints for later travellers to discover and record.

This is not blindness, but a new way of seeing an old
careworn world, burdened with our heavy use, now
turned overnight into the creation of something new
radiating the transubstantiation of matter into joy.

SNOW VISION (Ben Nevis)

This was the time, this was the day
sweat and pain showed me the way.
To climb up to the highest peak,
the limit of my breathless reach.

A cloudy summer day we climbed
leaving Fort William town behind.
Up Carn Mor Dearg soon in snow,
cutting steps made progress slow.

Winter reigned in silent splendour,
land and sky one dazzling contour.
Without our guide we would be lost
searching for what we wanted most.

The summit cairn on the frozen top,
and happy photos that never stop,
recording our mini-Everest climb
caught on the camera for all time.

Then, sure of the compass bearing
sliding down, like kids, all wearing
broad smiles of hard earned pleasure,
our mountain trip a time to treasure.



SUBURBAN RIDE

Waiting in a cold carriage for the train to leave
surrounded by graffiti and defaced posters,
there was flash of fire on the drab backcloth
of greasy concrete and railway litter.

Red, calf-length coat, black laced-up boots and
long blond hair flowing round an elfin face,
the girl opened my door and sat down at a
distance, face frozen without greeting.

Opposite, an ageing man, glued to a crossword;
wordless, his lips tight shut on a difficult clue,
gazed vacantly through the slimy window as
the train lumbered into creaking life.

Alone, a young Jamaican man, in a shirt
that vibrated with the colours of the rainbow, sat
nodding to the sounds of music in his ears
from the walkman in his hand.

Metal grinding, air escaping, lurching to a stop
our carriage reached a dismal station platform;
waiting people, wrapped in winter coats stood
close to the door opened by the young girl.

She left, a flash of fire down a cavernous staircase
as the new passengers climbed on board and,
with a hiss, we sped off to the next destination,
anonymous travellers in this urban desert.

CHRISTMAS DAY 1914

The giant wheel of death was
still that Christmas day
as carols floated in the wind.

Men rose above the stench of
war to share their songs
and play a game of football.

Instead of flares to guide the
flaming guns to fire, a
single star lit all their hearts.

SEA SHELL MEMORIES
(Remembrance Day 2004)

The tide was up on shingle beach on a
day of cold sun for fishermen and gulls.

Memories flood my mind like the waves
washing myriad pebbles underfoot.

This is a place to still the mind, and clear
its usual measuring of essential chores.

As I look idly out to sea, I seem to catch
a shadowy glimpse of my sailor father.

In 1915 he was in the Royal Navy crew,
of a battle cruiser, just before Jutland.

Invalided out, deaf from guns' blast,
struggling at home, his hearing returned.

He died back in 1962, from a cancer that
took away his fierce Yorkshire pride.

I want to remember him, with all the
thousands like him, stricken by war.

I have is a pair of waterproof trousers,
so I lay them to rest on the shingle beach.

Covered with shells, multicoloured stones,
their poignancy catches me, a human shape.

Slowly, I add my poppies of red and white,
remembering a loved one, now lost to sight.

Let others march with pomp and precision,
I sit here in gratitude for this lowly vision.



SEPTEMBER 9/11

We try to remain silent, for silence is all
you find, when you are numb with
shock.

But words burst out, rise in terrified
flocks, like birds, flying round in
anguish.

Oh, God, what have we done, what have
we done, to deserve this horror in the
sky?

So many dying, for what? To satisfy a
foul revenge? To crush the serpent's
head?

Where has this pitiless power been bred
that crushes human hearts with
ease?

Words, from their gyrating pain, rest
on signs from around the
world.

Beirut, Ramallah, Kabul, Baghdad,
a litany of sorrow, broken lives, and
rage.

Can we not hear the old, lost cries of
those dispossessed by years of suffering
neglect?

Who knows now where they will strike
next, the black words of retribution and
revenge?

O words, re-shape into a hope that is not
illusion. Speak a language of compassion for
pain.

Ask the deeper questions of justice, that
lie beyond the glistening technology of
war.

Let all of us, who cry out in human frailty,
mourn our common loss, and stop the
hate.

We cannot bring back the dead, but we can
build a lasting memorial of love not fear from
ashes.

IN BETHLEHEM

A dim moon above
a broken village,
homes in darkness,
weep in fear
as children,
holders of the future
die today.

One who lives must
carry the burden
of hope into the
black night, for
in his spirit
all their dreams
live on.

WHERE?

"Where have you taken him", Mary said
"My love, my God".

One voice replied: "He is here,
wrapped in a mantle of stone,
in the smell of incense and
polished wood. He is wafted
aloft in a harmony of voices,
singing his praise out loud.
He is happy here".

Another voice spoke:
"Not so fast, brothers! His
powerful voice, sombrely
speaks in our disciplined ears,
he stands in our pulpit of
dim fire, talking, talking.
He is happy here".

A third voice cried:
"Oh, no man. You're wrong.
He is dancing with us, he
is our song of delight,
hugging me tight so I cry.
He is our rhythm, our
ecstasy and joy.
He is truly happy here!"

She left them arguing.

Then stumbled over a
seated figure in the gloom
of a darkened doorway.
There he was. In dirty clothes,
talking, comforting, soothing,
a runny nosed child.

St.NINIAN'S CAVE
(Whithorn)

At the foot of the cliff, just
beneath the martin's nest,
lies a small rock tomb;
decorated with tied twigs
and roughly drawn
crosses on sea pebbles.

So many have come to
remember their saints,
people they love. So
many pebbles on the
beach washed by the
tides of history.

WHITE BIRD

On this day of cloudless blue,
white bird, flying south, have you
seen the tiny flower growing in
the deep green wood?

Sitting high upon a tree,
white bird, resting, can you see
people rushing by so busy
in the city's smoke?

Choking smoke fills the air
where he sat, please don't stare,
he'll not return until the
tiny flower blooms.

TURNING OF THE TIDE

Dawn rises to wash the sky
with light,
a turning of the tide
of night.

Earth clothes herself with green,
to bring
water and blood to birth
in spring.

Birds rise like hopes set free
to fly
above the mourning land
and cry:

"Welcome new life out of death".

BACH STREAM
(English suite)

Notes pouring over rocks,
bouncing down
a ravine,
clear
crystal
mountain
water;
dropping
down
into
a
circling
pool
of
light.



WE ARE TOGETHER

(Film at Agape Orphanage in Kwa Zulu,
South Africa 2003, during the AIDS epidemic.

Director Paul Taylor. Shown at Edinburgh Film Festival)

Lost for words, a smile
lights up her face;
twelve years old and
facing a camera for
the first time.

Then she sings
with her sister;
a sound so pure
so exquisite
fills the air.

Harmony learnt at
her mother's knee,
unites her sister
and her in
loving song.

"We are together,
we are family";
united around
the illness of
her brother.

He is fading slowly
with AIDS,
until his voice
is silenced like
the rest.

Still, they sing
together; children
orphaned and alone;
finding strength
in song.

JOURNEY NOT TAKEN

Pages torn from an unwritten book
minutes plucked from an alien clock,
we spoke and touched
for eternity.

The sun which flecked your hair with gold
burnishes the leaves of the tree outside
and you are present
with me.

I have known you so little yet feel I
know you from a distant time,
and you are behind
my eyes.

Now I see you in misty foliage of
silver birch and ash leaves,
and your eyes swim
with tears.

Do not weep for lost love,
for all lover's hands are frail,
made of sunlight, music,
and sighs.

Time past, time present, time lost
- a shattered glass, crumpled ticket
for a journey we did
not take.

All journeys are incomplete,
yet complete at the still point
of motionless experience
we had.

So, each moment is a lifetime,
we have lived many together,
crossing oceans deep
and lonely.

KEEP YOUR DISTANCE
(Michelangelo's Creation)

The massive painted fingers
never touch,
the yearning bodies locked
forever apart.
Distance defines
existence.

Morning bobbing crowds
inundate the platform,
springing from
wordless, suburban,
commuter
cells.

Figures, stiff, apart, in
Lowry's family portrait,
gaze away,
into space around us
watching, fearing
touch.

Mutual orbits of solitary
life meet in silence,
waiting for
the spark of life,
in the motionless bird's
wing.

FOR DOUG

"She died you know" ...
Life's sun went out leaving
a universe in darkness.
And, caught in the slow
grip of time, he went mad.
(Politely of course).
Facial muscles tense, too
long biting tears, will
twitch a ghostly smile:
"Doing fine, thank you.
Got a job now, yes, I had
almost given up. Almost".

His daughter blooms nubile,
springing from dry wood.
She has to grow. Just a hazy
question clouds her noonday
face, then she smiles.

"He is doing very well, I think".
He sits unnoticed at the party,
a reveller for the day, among
other old people at the centre.
On his own again, like last year,
Christmas, Easter, holidays,
they all pass the same.

HOLIDAY SNAP
(Launceston, home of Charles Causley)

As Earl Robert slept,
lost his last battle,
Launceston farmers fed
their pigs on his castle.

Now all that stands
resisting time's snout,
a hollow stone crown
to keep the wind out.

Sun, perched on a ruin
pours its light down
on stumbling streets
in Charles Causley's town.

Bench-rooted old men
dissecting the town,
hunch by the south gate
until it falls down.

Stone-frozen Mary
lies on her side,
blind and mute at
life's passing tide.

Quarter jacks ring
on a sloping square,
tourist cars squat
hides shining with care.

Haunted Dock Acre
hiding shyly away,
where music is silent
and pain gone away.

TINTAGEL

Crumbling stones, spear
the broken air
while we sleep.

Tiny flowers sprout
in silent cells
while we watch.

Monk, Arthur, both
fade into air
while we dream.

Up long dusty paths
tourists come -
to find what?

Old, worn, legends
on cafe doors,
and cream teas.

OLD TANGO DANCER

My feet, yes, are slower than they were,
flowing movement seems to creak a bit;
but rhythm still runs through my veins
that once inspired my youthful spirit.

I still move my limbs to a deeper music
that always brings me delight and joy;
passionate music of touch and voice,
my dancing soul can still employ.

I dance in myself, longing for the sound
never to end, but take me to a place
where I am whole again, and join
laughter's songs, so full of grace.

JAZZ ECHOES (LOUIS)

Familiar gravel voice
the big wide smile,
ambassador of jazz
he had bags of style.

In New Orleans when
bands hit the street,
he learned hot cornet
at Bunk Johnson's feet.

Playing with the best
he soon left town,
King Oliver took him
to gild his crown.

Louis hit the heights,
close to heaven
with his soaring notes,
and his Hot Seven.

His touring took him
around the world,
at Jazz Philharmonic
his band excelled.

Veteran jazzman he
played to the last,
showman, pioneer,
voice of the past.

HAPPY 80TH!
(Harold Wild)

A Manchester lad, eighty summers he's had,
surviving the fog and the rain.

Independent of mind, good, straight and kind
'to conscience be true', his refrain.

Believing in peace, convinced war should cease
He held prison's loss with disdain.

With countryman's heart, he played his part
for Derbyshire's Peak, moors and plain.

Footpaths he walked, with gamekeepers talked
and John Public's rights did maintain.

His humour's unique, with a pun in his cheek,
his jokes produce groans and mock pain.

This Manchester lad, a long life he has had
that we celebrate with might and main!

WHICH WAY NOW?

A popular phrase round the media,
put forward by people who know,
is 'road map', linked to the pandemic,
describing the way we should go.

It assumes the terrain is familiar, not
wild, shifting wilderness untamed,
where your journey is far from easy
the cartographers mostly to blame.

The current leaders, erratic at best,
prone to setting routes on a whim;
change their minds with the polls,
and assuming Joe Public's too dim

to notice what they are about, are
cavorting about in their garden,
oblivious to rules they have set,
as the hostile opinions harden.

Their primary aim is apparent
to preserve their jobs, at all cost,
creating diversions, a smokescreen,
to hide the cold fact they are lost.

This virus has taken us over, it's
driving the people to drink,
children have lost education,
our economy's still on the brink.

We need a new revolution, to
show us a much better way,
with leaders guided by morals,
who really mean what they say.

That 'road map' we all require,
giving us a route we can trust,
will show respect for the poorest
and not be all boom or bust.

THE PAINTER
(For Anthea)

Sunlight scatters a million diamonds across the lake towards the beeches, standing knee deep in burnished gold along the shoreline, where she stands in silent wondering calm, waiting for the presence, deeply felt by an earlier poet, standing here in the ancient woods of Ullswater.

She marks her canvas, and tries to catch the mood in paint of her glance into infinity, gently blending the colours emerging from the wave of beauty washing over her fragile brush, blessing her aching heart with a vision reaching to her soul, of the one who left her his love.



GEESE LANDING
(Edenside, near Kirkby Stephen)

Peaceful November air
warmed by fading sun,
shatters with honking
of Canada geese, curving
over an expectant lake.

Three times they circle
calling over our heads,
exultantly arriving at a
chosen destination, and
as one flock glide in to

a plunging spray of wings,
and then a muted wild
calling, as they gather
at the end of their flight
to this winter resort.

LEAP OF FAITH

Another 'wild' programme on TV,
taking out a landlubber like me,
onto the craggy Welsh sea coast
and into the waters deep below.

Dreamy shots of cliffs and birds,
seals and porpoise fill the screen,
a gentle voice relates their wild
lives, dangerous from the start.

One story holds my attention;
it is the fate of the guillemot
chicks, crowded on their ledge,
watched by predatory ravens.

Four hundred feet up, the birds
cling on, parents fetching food,
until the day of fledging comes
and all the chicks must leave.

The camera closes on one chick,
left on the ledge by his parent,
dad swimming far below him,
will he make the leap of faith?

The raven hops closer for a kill
as the chick hovers undecided,
dad calls from the bobbing sea,
and at last he launches bravely.

The tiny bundle hits the rocks,
bouncing over and over he goes,
you think he has died, and then
out he pops, and jumps again.

The raven watches as he succeeds
to hit the water on his final jump,
then father and son swim away,
the raven waiting for another day.

WATCHING BIRDS

The dark winter mornings
cold and dank,
lights on for breakfast,
no news to thank
for brightening
our day.

Characters in a play
the jackdaws arrive,
bold, strutting walk,
they all connive
to keep other birds
at bay.

Outside birds are busy
at the table,
eager for more seed,
ready and able
to polish it off
at speed.

Noisy clowns are next,
a blackbird brood,
chasing siblings away
to keep the food
for themselves alone,
their need.

With a piercing whoop
the doves appear,
perching awkwardly,
as if they fear
they might tumble to
the ground.

Their company brightens
up each new day,
as watching the birds
about their play,
lifts our mood
we've found.