

Life set free



Poems by
Keith Spence

LIFE SET FREE

(Poem collection number five)

I never dreamt that I would write so many poems when I set off during lock-down in 2020. I had written private ones back in the 1970s and 80s, and many of those I have revised for these collections, but I also got a new impetus from somewhere, and have really enjoyed writing more poems reflecting life around me.

This latest offering takes in the changing seasons, and the changing personal and political scene. The death of close friends, and the crushing weight of the Ukraine war give a sombre backcloth, with some passing comment on contemporary life, as seen by an over eighty year old!

I hope you will enjoy some if not all in this celebration of 'Life set free'.

Keith Spence

CLOUDS

("Imagination is life" - William Blake)

It takes me back to being a child at home,
gazing, wordless, out of the bedroom
window at the passing clouds.

Living on a hill in the north of England
you could not miss their presence,
stacked in a massive sky.

Dominating my view, overpowering the
dark hills, and undulating limestone
fields, flecked with sheep.

No wonder the perennial pastime is
talking about the weather, over
all other serious pursuits.

And in my childhood education
clouds loomed large, source of
my inevitable day-dreaming.

Huge castles in the air; galloping
horses streaming down aerial
meadows lit by the sun.

In winter the thunder heads, black
with menace, squeezed the light
out of the frightened air.

In summer, fragile gauze skeins
of white foam floated freely in
the infinite blue sky.

Now, I see the heatwave herring
bone pattern decorating the
vast canvas of space.

A lifetime of watching clouds is
not misspent time, just the
heart of constant wonder.

LA HAUGUE MAUGER

(iron age site, St.Mary's Jersey, CI)

Wind bends the trees,
and sifts the leaves
along the winding lane
leading to this old,
and sacred space,
and hill.

Looking across the sea,
beyond the praying
rocks, to Sark, with
Herm rising from
the drifting
clouds.

Fine etched her sunlit
cliffs and windy
fields, that beckon
a wandering spirit
to travel on
in hope.

This ancient hill has
seen it all,
iron men farming,
Germans at war,
concrete left
to corrode.

Now, in peace, the
hill sleeps deep,
holding it's own
still memories,
a new family
listening.

FAIR ROSES

Visitors from another land, they stand
proud in the vase, catching the light
streaming in on a winter's day.

Full of sun's fire not winter's hand,
grown by farmers in Africa's fight
to make their daily work pay.

These burning flowers remind me
of the constant struggle we have,
to right economic injustice.

Wealthy countries say what can
be imported, what money we save,
thinking that nobody notices.

Buying cheaply, ignoring the cost
to poor growers and makers,
our companies grow rich.

These red roses say all is not lost,
we can be givers not takers,
if to Fairtrade we switch.

LOVE SET FREE

(Greystoke Parish church, Cumbria)

A cold clear light streams
through the high window
of misty glass, onto the
flagstones below.

Flecks of dust float round
the silent air in a church
caught by time, as we
begin our search.

Years ago she came here,
Josefina de Vasconcellos
sculptor of stone, to fix
a wall-bound Christos.

And suddenly there he is
naked on the wall above
our wondering eyes, on
a cross carved of love.

Crucifix with arms spread,
displaying not an agony
of bloodied hands, but a
triumphant serenity.

Face turned towards the
cold light of the window,
he is looking out, seeing
a resurrected glow.

Miracle of suspended grace,
this Christ is not trapped
within the church, but
alive in all he taught.

Paradox in stone, she set
his sacrificial love ablaze
outside the church, where
his eyes so firmly gaze.



A LITTLE GIRL SINGS
(for Ukraine)

People trapped under the open
horror of a bomb blasted town,
people clutching a few precious
possessions they took down,
to the safety of a cellar below
where beds and blankets wait,
food and warmth are shared,
friends facing a common fate.

Ruthless destruction of life
at the behest of a dictator,
his fantasy of empire grown
to a monstrous terminator.

He is trapped too, unable to
control the forces unleashed,
confronted by people unbowed
even where missiles reached.

For here, in this bleak cellar
a little girl, with hardly a care
stands, breaking into song,
her pure sound filling the air.

Above the blast of the bombs
and breaking glass, resounds
this human voice singing of
courage and defiance found.

CHANGI QUILT
(made in a POW camp)

Hope blossoms red
out of dark painful
soil, as threads
of life are
woven.

Human hands defied
death in a time
now forgotten,
but the quilt
lives.

Resurrection comes
in many forms
breaking the
indifferent
rock.

PRAYER FLAGS

(Suffolk. Handmade Tibetan prayer flags,
hung between old posts)

Take care where you hang your prayers,
they may come crashing down, like
waterlogged words in the wind.
Great thoughts lie bleeding in the
rain, snapped of support.

A post, we thought so old and wise
gave way under the strain of wisdom,
split, and laid its knotted length
upon the sodden grass, the flags
spread leaves in the rain.

Take care where you hang your faith,
it too may come crashing down,
under the weight of expectation.
Limp faith, twisted out of shape
at gravity's touch.

Take care where you hang your songs
of freedom, love, and protest; the
ancient frame may be rotten at
heart, not able to carry chords
when discord reigns.

Hang your prayers, and your songs
upon the ancient spreading oak,
rooted deep within the earth;
a living well, gravity fed, that
reaches to the stars.

DARKNESS IS LIGHT

(Ps. 139, v. 12 - on Ukraine)

The news has taken a terrible turn
to catalogue suffering in village and
town, beyond our imagining when
we watch and learn

just what a modern dictator will do
to realise his ambitions, and follow
through, a campaign of violence
unchecked by who

will lose their homes or lives as well
through his unbridled use of missile
and shell, destroying cities and
creating hell

for women and children fleeing death
pursuing them down their streets
with stealth, running to find a
place that's safe.

Darkness has flooded all our lives
through orchestrated warfare
and lies, destroying the innocent
before our eyes.

Be sure the darkness is light to One
who judges the hidden crimes that
are done, with an implacable
lifting of each stone.

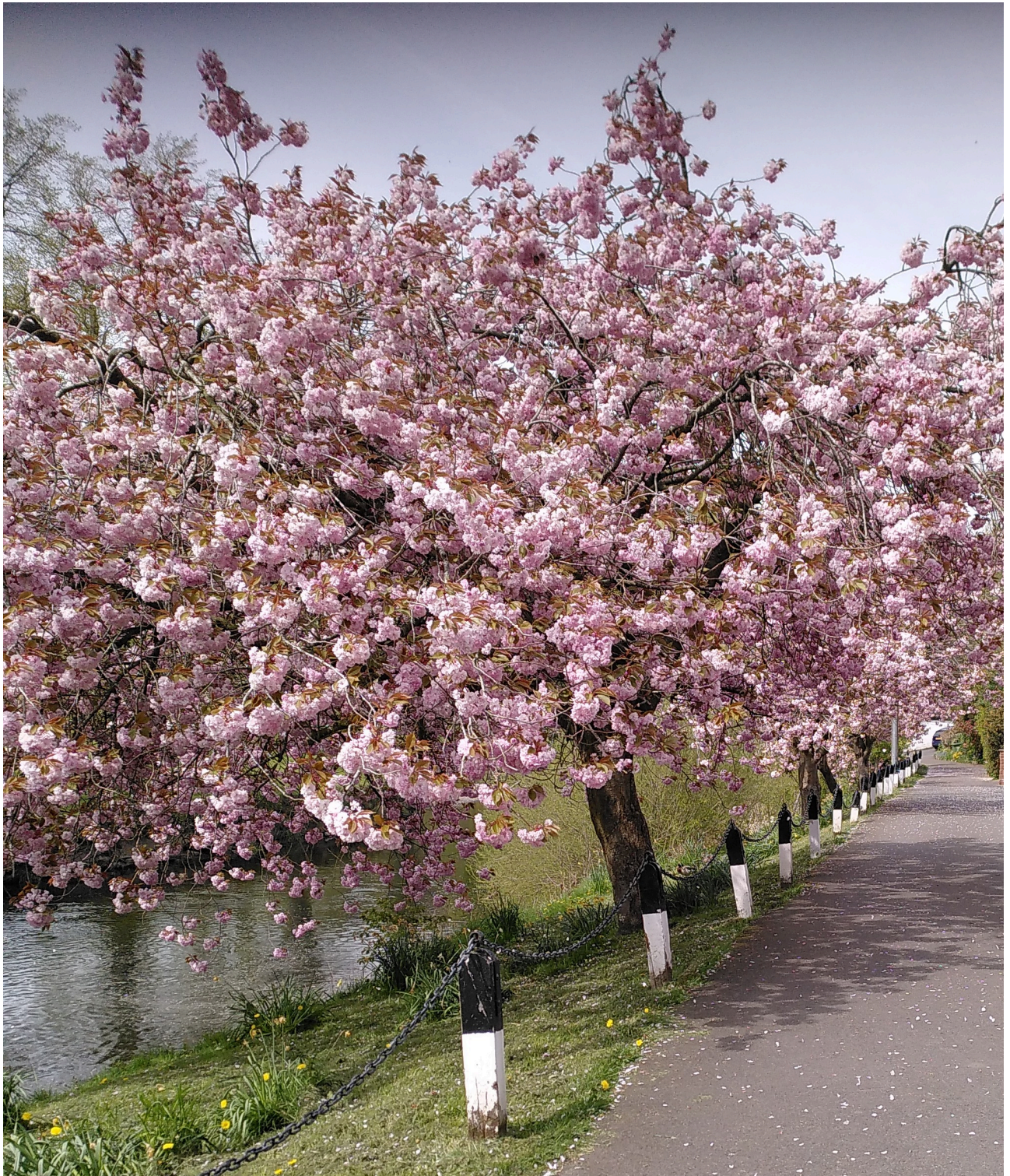
For darkness is light to him,
darkness is light.

SAKURA

They know how to celebrate spring in Japan,
with crowds walking beneath canopies
by light-filled clouds
of flowering
cherries.

A cascade of delicate petals billows around
the worshipping throng below who,
lost for words, use
photos to
recall.

But, nature lies beyond our technical grasp,
and entranced by resurrection,
we lose ourselves
in humble
faith.



ECHOES

(The bathhouse, Kenwood House,
Highgate, London)

Along the path of memory
to this shrine of sound;
still testing the acoustic
with new skills we'd found.

It's perfect dome will amplify
the quietest human voice,
put our three together, and
in harmony we rejoice.

Timeless, elemental toning,
sound rising so sublime,
past and present woven to
take us beyond time.

Echoes linger in our minds
a song that never ends,
a fourth voice joins us now,
sweetly with us blends.

O, let all the peoples join us,
our song rise to the skies,
in a universal paeon of love
as the whole earth replies.

FROM A TRAIN

A smoky Sunday afternoon
in the train;
as across broad fields the
sun sets.

Through a hair-wood screen
of silent trees,
the sky burns gold into
a gentle haze.

The slow, cold, February
days with furrows
in wet soil pointing West
as farmers rest.

In a railway yard, passing
the crushed metal
of a hundred cars, now rust
and knackered pomp.

Look, along a road are more
cars, railway lorries,
queueing for their turn to
become scrap.

Flying by now, house lights
that twinkle in sequence
along the heavy land.

Rain has flooded everywhere,
bushes, trees, gates,
all floating in soft mirrors
of dancing water.

WET DAYS

I like wet days, when
the wind booms like
sea in a cave, and
seaweed trees dance
a dignified jig.

The black silk road
slides, oily, underfoot
and a gurgling drain
sucks its teeth
noisily...

A bow-taut woman
leans on the wind
till it moves, and
laughing, upends
her brolly.

NIGHT WALK

Hold me in your palm
night God of the
scented wood.

Light me a path of
pale flame into the
whispering grass
of enchantment.

Take me over the
fire etched tree,
black traceried
against the deep
fathomless sky.

Lift me through
drifting clouds
to see star-bright
space; float me
over glistening
sea-silk waves
to night's cave.

Here, I am myself
alone, at peace.
Then, night God,
as day's light
opens on the
new world
I walk back
past

unwanted rubbish
in the wet grass of
rusting dreams.

CROSSFELL

(North Pennines)

Colossal cumulous clouds roll
across the wide sky,
dwarfing the old land beneath
our off-comer feet.

They wrap this sleeping giant
with a cloak of cold
invisibility, until the Helm
wind rips them apart,

bowls the sheep down the hill
and flings barn roofs
into the startled farmyards
down the valley.

Welcome to the northern fells
along the Pennine Way,
topped by a huge white cherry
on Great Dun Fell;

the radar station over Silver
Band's old mines,
guiding high flying planes
to distant lands.

These cradling hills have seen
the passing human
tides of Norsemen, Romans,
and the raiding Scots.

Time goes slowly, grinding small
the ancient rocks, and
bathed in evening sun,
Crossfell glows with a dim fire.



PEACE OF MIND

What a lovely phrase to spread
instant calm,
from insurance firms keeping
us from harm.

Plan your protection, you know
it makes sense,
to pay upfront for problems
many years hence.

But, as years go by, you are
certain to find,
it's company directors with
peace of mind.

As a sleight of hand it is
really well done,
telling us in life's stakes -
you almost won!

TOWN CRIER

On the old droving lane
hedges are waking up
out of winter pain.

Branches old and barren
begin to swell with
new buds again.

On a thin flowering twig
sits a wren, with a town
crier voice so big.

No-one misses his song,
piercing sweet notes
all the day long.

Amazing how loud
this tiny bird sings,
pert and proud.

If life seems so futile
with human folly, he
makes me smile.

Saying to us listen out
dull folk, wake up,
I want to shout:

‘Spring is here, spring
is sprung’, so
all of us sing.

JESS

Give me your hand, I'm your friend forever,
you can count on me whatever the weather.
I will stay by your side and never complain,
I'm at home in the water, and love the rain.

Just give me a lake, or a river, to splash in
I am one happy dog with a big wide grin.
Throw me a stick just as long as you wish,
and I'll follow it in, and swim like a fish.

You can count on me, whatever your mood,
I will always be here, as long as there's food.
At the end of the day, when playing is over
I fall asleep in my bed, like a dog in clover.



"SO KIND..."

The slow twisted lady
takes my arm.
"It's very kind of you",
Murmurs a soft voice.
We walk in step
to the car.

Painfully, arthritic
limbs mould to
the awkward seat.
A pale sigh: "So kind" ...
Locked in air her
words echo.

Kindness melts,
postures, and
pirouettes, to
sink beneath
the weight
of age.

JAZZ LEGEND

(Bunk Johnson)

Freedom for South's black people,
with slavery's pain gone to ground.
The soldiers gone, marches ended,
and jazz, a new music, is found

New Orleans is a dancing crowd,
for parades and funerals as well,
cornets, drums, and trombones
play blues, and ragtime, so swell .

Bunk Johnson, born into slavery,
a boy learning hot cornet's art,
got to play with other bandsmen
music that came from the heart.

Buddy Bolden gave him a chance,
with a trumpet he went to town,
playing with famous old bands,
learning to lead on his own.

He stayed at home, didn't travel
as jazz went north to new fame,
Bunk went to the cotton fields
people almost forgot his name.

Jazz fans searching, found him
driving a truck for a wage,
and persuaded him to return
live to the 40's revival stage.

With New Orleans musicians
Lewis, Pavageau, and Dodds,
Bunk's cornet blew off the years,
their hot jazz defying the odds.

Bunk was the voice of Orleans
cornet tone earthy and strong,
he was my introduction to jazz,
but why did it take me so long?

NO PROBLEM

A constant cry these days;
shop assistants out to tease,
cafe owners who think it pays
all say, 'no problem'.

The words echo down the street
where busy shoppers gravitate
or browsing tourists meet,
you hear, 'no problem'.

What's wrong is not made clear,
some difficulty we're not aware
forcing people far and near
to cry, 'no problem!'

Unsure of any trouble I see,
what crisis there might be -
the penny drops, it's me,
I'm the problem!

If you're old and fairly deaf
you're a trial for any staff;
making sure not to laugh
they say, 'No problem'.

FIRESIDE CHAT

(For Stan)

The mind's burning questions
I brought to your hearth.
Patiently you listened to
my passionate search.

Flames in the fire grew low
as I opened my heart
you heard me, weighed my
words from the start.

You gave me the acceptance
of argument, of respect
for stumbling ideas, more
than I could expect.

We talked until the fire went
low, and guttered out,
but the flame you lit within
still burns in my heart.

THE DIPPER

(Stenkrith , Kirkby Stephen)

This amazing gorge on the river Eden,
where torrents sculpt the living rock,
by the roaring river, flitting between
stone slabs, a little bird takes stock.

Head cocked to one side, listening hard
the dipper bounces on his perch,
watching the waves, with little regard
for personal safety; he's in search

of the tastiest fly the river can give.
He fearlessly plunges straight in
the boiling stream. How can he live
or hope his breakfast to win?

A flash of white like a trick of the light
and he surfaces again, to a stone,
this tiny mercurial magician of flight,
is a favourite of mine, I must own.



ICONOGRAPHY

A title rolls, music starts
trendy TV right on cue,
of rolling countryside,
from a bird's eye view.

Camera swooping down
to ground, stops its flow
on a rocky prominence,
with a ruin down below.

Above the music's drone
a voice in awe proclaims,
'Here in an ancient land,
an iconic castle remains'.

Not again, I cry, and
turn off the TV sound;
surely any word than
iconic could be found?

It turns up everywhere
in advertising speak,
cheap superlative when
thought is getting weak.

Iconic scenes, or cheese,
no limit to its use, an
ancient word routinely
is subjected to abuse.

An icon is a work of art
to be held in reverence,
by those seeking God,
lying beyond our sense.

Window into holiness,
a glimpse into infinity,
the ikon holds its gaze
touching our divinity.

THE LAST POEM
(for Trish)

Her laughter floating in the air,
mane of tumbling wind-blown hair.
Music spilling from her art filled room,
the smell of food made kitchen home.

A walk shaped by yoga and Qigong,
brilliant clothing, woven by the sun.
Forever mindful to seek love's truth,
she sought justice under every roof.

Passionate for peace, non violent acts,
her daily diary with campaigns packed.
She still held family in strong embrace,
and extended friendship to every race.

Birmingham knew her, Stroud as well,
Stratford and Suffolk both could tell
true stories of her committed living,
to every relationship empathy bringing.

Her brightly burning light has gone
from all our meetings, walks and fun.
But her loving spirit encounters me
in nature's songs, and by the sea.

