

Path Through the Wood



Poems by
Keith Spence

PATH THROUGH THE WOOD

Woodlands have always fascinated me. From childhood they were places of mystery and enchantment. Danger was never far away. Hansel & Gretel, or Amazon jungle exploration, both part of my early reading.

The wood is also a metaphor for human life. Finding our way a perennial concern, from the days of our ancestors to the current political jungle.

Lastly, climate change has sharpened our minds to the importance of trees. From mere commodities to be turned into tables and chairs, they now have a global survival value.

The following poems have come out of my experience , and reflection around these themes.

Keith Spence

BLAZE OF LIGHT

Sun peeping through the trees,
dappling the path as we walk;
the bright birdsong of spring
flooding our crowded minds,
and calming the inner noise.

Woodland magic at our feet,
aconites littering the grass,
shadowed by bursting trees,
alive with fresh green leaves,
along each singing branch.

Then we saw this miracle by
the path, a glowing candle of
blossom, white and radiant,
a young hawthorn blazing
into glorious spring light.

Our world has not grown too
stale and tired, to marvel at
nature's annual display of
profligate excess, a blaze of
generous abundance.

POOLS OF LIGHT

Midday sun soaks through sweating trees
along the river, dancing with light
blown by the breeze.

Birds soar silent in the deep blue air
and the heron stands on one leg,
watching by the weir.

Too hot to hurry, lulled by the heat
I walk along a woodland path,
light pools at my feet.

Sheep snore in the hedge's shade,
the business of grass mowing
stopped till siesta's made.

It's summer, and as nature dreams,
we find the ebb and flow of life
much simpler seems.

THE CROW FLIES

Noisy, combative common or garden,
bossing a feeder with no hint of pardon.
The crow.

Black and beautiful, impossible to ignore,
cleaning up road-kill, hunting for more.
The crow.

Oak trees vibrate with incessant calls,
as they fly to roost when evening falls.
The crow.

Security patrol flying high in the sky,
mobbing a buzzard as he passes by.
The crow.

Part of our heritage in story and song,
regular companion all the year long.
The crow.

Will he be there when we are history?
The crow caws: now, that's a mystery,
and flies on.

A WILLOW CAVE

Early morning on the riverbank,
walking in dew soaked leaves to
a special place, a willow cave.

Sunlight filtering myriad leaves
wraps us in a cloak of light so
fragile, and bright, it feels alive.

The silent spot lies near a church,
an ancient holy site, guarded by
gravestones, and old trees.

Here, in morning glory, nature's
window opens an eternal world,
waiting in the gentle breeze.



PUT A GOOD WORD IN FOR ME...

Out walking her dog, we met in the lane,
friendly neighbours, in sunshine or rain,
chat about weather , “Isn’t it a hot day”,
then part again, going our separate way.

Our talk, as normal, comparing lives,
or our families, who goes , who arrives;
but just as we part, she added for free,
“Don’t forget. Put a good word in for me”

It’s a throwback, I think to older days
when people said that he who prays,
really captures the ear of the Almighty,
making favours come far more easily.

Vicar and squire, doctor and lawyer,
all had the ability to exercise power,
now, wanting to get something done,
we ignore the clergy, as figures of fun.

Odd, her thinking I had some ability
to change things now in our vicinity;
weather, events, or just a bad mood,
sthink of a clergyman being that good!

FAMILY PORTRAIT

Looking at old albums on the shelf
laughing at the costumes and faces,
of ourselves as we once were, in a
time long since past.

Are we the first generation to have
so many events and occasions on
files for posterity, saying what
we thought would last?

The early photos are often our most
poignant, stiffly posed clothes and
with sombre faces, trying to look
good for the camera.

Each new photo put in the library,
a reminder of who we are, where
we have come from, like the
plot of a folk opera.

Will anyone look at these archives
when we are no more, or even care
who the assorted faces were, in
an obsolete digital file?

It's democratisation of history that
allows us to believe we all matter,
with portraits not in oils, but pixels
that photoshop us a treat.

DIVERSION

They are commonplace around the lanes
where tractors turn, and Mercedes strain
to overtake our little old Ford.

Big yellow signs plonked without warning,
absent last night, there in the morning,
telling us to watch our route.

As good jokes go, they're up with the best,
you follow the sign, then come to rest
at the same point you started.

It must be boring doing potholes repairs,
so having some fun when nobody cares
is sure to relieve the monotony!

HOLDING HANDS

Little fingers uncurl like buds
to hang on tight to another,
or clutching hair, clothes ,
keeping close to mother.

Taking our first wobbly steps
holding tight dad's hands,
sitting down then standing,
we start on life's wide sands.

The first day of our schooling
dressed in our new outfit,
gripping our parent's hand,
so reluctant to let go of it.

Then romantic love comes
tugging at our heart,
wanting to be together with
hands that never part.

Holding close the firstborn,
humbled by our miracle,
frightened to loosen hands,
as love is at its pinnacle.

Children grown to maturity
climbing their own way,
our hands holding old coats,
as we watch and pray.

At the wedding, rings and
hands we now exchange,
and discover once again
love's power and range.

Upon a pure white coverlet
of the bed in a side ward ,
a gentle squeezing of hands
speaks of love's reward.

LOST AND FOUND (On loss of memory)

One of the hazards of growing older
is a frequency of things getting lost;
keys a speciality, spectacles, a folder,
all disappear in thin air, like the post.

It's not just things that go missing,
but names, and dates, and more,
a black hole that leaves you trying
to stop them flying out the door.

Am I still the person I was before
this forgetfulness took place?
Or have I become a stranger who
no longer knows his own face?

The brain is a wonderful creation
allowing us to control our life,
but when it starts to malfunction
it plunges us into hard strife .

The familiar can be a lost cause
as we navigate each daily task,
every journey a new discovery
of what we are needing to ask.

For family and friends give thanks,
because they, seeing our plight,
with time and patience enable us
to struggle on and find the light.

THE SYSTEM doesn't allow it...

Computers Rule. OK?
No, it is not OK.

An algorithmic nightmare
is what we have to face,
as digital enforcers hit
the human race.

From shopping to banking,
we cannot move a hand,
until the system says
'I have it planned'.

Try changing your email
with an old account,
and the system curtly
says: 'you can't'.

Now for nerds and geeks
living daily on IT,
there isn't any problem,
it's obviously me.

But I wonder frequently
if we've made a mess,
as machines do more
we are doing less.

HIDDEN UNIVERSE

We see the night-sky overhead
spread its wings and fly, a vast
tapestry of light to infinity.
Where do we fit in this ancient
movement of spheres, slowly
rotating into oblivion?

Are we the conscious beings
destined to record time, and
taste death in our season?
We are not alone, as others
occupy our spinning home, to
fulfil their destinies.

Animals, insects, birds and fish,
plant life in profusion, far
beyond human counting.
And beneath our feet, another
universe of mycorrhizae, feeding
giant trees above.

This web of minute life, so dense,
reveals its marvels to our gaze,
each season when fungi fruit.
From tiny milky bulbs in grass
to branching plates on bark,
a rising from the dark.



BEING HUMAN

*("It's hard to be a singer.
It's even harder to be a human being".
Dame Janet Baker)*

I have listened closely, tears in my eyes,
as she sang Dido's lament from Purcell.
How does a voice contain so much sorrow,
transmuting her pain into beauty as well?

The sound swells with an inner despair,
from the ashes of long contained grief,
the loss of her brother, too young to die,
searing notes bringing welcome relief.

No wonder great music touches hurt spirits,
embracing us in all that is human and frail,
words, so inadequate to express inner pain,
will yield to music whose power does not fail.

All great artists have this power within them
to face life's tragedy with unflinching gaze,
always wanting to tell the truth, not hide,
moving humanity forward, seeking new ways.

THE HAWK (Coleman Hawkins)

Swooping sax tone clean and clear,
imperious style, makes you hear
every note crisp and bold, bends
a tune to new harmonies that ends
with a signature flourish. The Hawk.

His Body and Soul set a new pace,
making his tenor sing with grace,
escaping the big bands dominance,
his sextet and quintet led the dance
into bebop's rarified air. The Hawk.

A stylish guy, who liked sharp suits
his playing matched Getz or Zoot's,
new generation players like Rollins
admired the old guy, still calling
himself the King. The Hawk.

TREE TALK

We are in a hot spell of weather today
when tarmac melts, and grass browns,
dry wind stirs crackling leaves on trees
like a crowd whispering.

Several have dropped their branches,
huge limbs discarded like old coats,
thudding onto grass below in slow
shuddering thunder.

Emergency surgery on a big scale,
the trees survival plan made plain,
conserving the heart from harm,
rationing precious water.

They touch canopy leaves above,
veins pass unspoken messages,
chemical notes sent to each other,
on the wood-wide web.

Some giants have seen it all before,
aged survivors of icebound ages,
their memories longer than ours,
they dream and watch.

August 2022

WRITING LETTERS

I hear the sound of postal feet
making their way to our door,
hoping what drops in is a treat,
not catalogues I've seen before.

In the daily round he brings
sometimes a pleasure rare,
familiar writing given wings,
from a destination where,

knowing writing by its style,
we conjure a friend's face,
opening a letter with a smile,
linking us in time and space.

In a world of mobile phones,
instant communication,
it seems we oldies are alone
in liking a written creation.

But nothing can beat words
written in a familiar hand,
recognised, and also heard,
a living contact we demand.

TREE CANDLES

By the river flowing through the town,
a horse chestnut cracking the ground.
Hundreds of children scooped its fruit,
for conker fights along the school route.

A massive old-timer has new progeny,
young sapling growing tall and free.
In the spring air it bears its first crop,
white candles sprouting up to the top.

Fragile flowers, a reminder each year
of passing seasons, a message clear,
we humans and trees are all related,
reminding us never to get too elated.

A new gang of boys, wielding sticks,
gather conkers, and fresh battles fix.
Each new generation, kids and trees,
grow up together, and nature please.



ELECTION (for a new Prime Minister)

It's happening again, this media frenzy,
the clown prince at last stepped down;
unable to quell the rebels around him,
he grudgingly conceded his crown.

Now, standing before us on the TV,
a bunch of aspiring new leaders,
squabbling like kids, over a prize
none of them really deserves.

For all that matters is sound bites,
our approval for grandiose plans,
their egos colliding before us, we
watch this political romance.

Our country may be facing disaster,
from inflation rising like mad,
a climate racing towards oblivion,
but, really, it's not all that bad!

Here's a new clown to entertain us,
to assure us all will be well,
once the Conservative party decides,
everything will be just swell!

July 2022

THE MYTH OF GROWTH

They're all over the papers again,
Tory hopefuls battering our ears,
with promises, promises of growth
lying ahead for untold years.

Hearing them you would think
it was settled, almost inevitable,
our standard of living would rise
to heights even more incredible.

But, take note, Mr S, and Ms T,
our old world is a finite place,
with enough to feed every person,
if we stop this mythical race.

World companies growing larger
shareholders bloated with greed,
add to the long list of billionaires,
leaving more poor people to feed.

Learn from nature, and co-operate,
put renewables top of your list,
give food production your attention,
or else the opportunity is missed.

The world is not ours to consume,
we are dependent on the earth,
tackling climate change together,
gives us a chance for new birth.

August 2022

STAN & OLLIE

(Ulverston, birthplace of Stan Laurel)

De dum te dum, de dum te dum
diddly dum, diddly dum...

Unmistakeable, irrepressible, comedy genius
etched into our collective memory, two
minds without a single thought.
Stan & Ollie.

My childhood heroes, from the Saturday
matinee, source of joy and laughter,
another fine mess they made.
Stan & Ollie.

What a delight when they started to dance,
one a delicate elephant, the other a
clown with twinkling feet.
Ollie & Stan.

Here they stand, immortalised in bronze,
poised to lead us to another world
of fun and slapstick mayhem.
Ollie & Stan
(and the dog!)



DREAM MEETING

So strange, meeting here
on a golf course, a sport
she used to laugh at.
A tennis court, this
I could understand, she
excelled at that.
Here I am watching
her drive from the tee
to a misty green.
I remember, her father,
an immigrant here, liked his golf.
And, deprived by racial
prejudice, opened his
very own course!
Is she reminding me
of his courage? She
had his quality.
A sudden peal of her
laughter, so sweet,
hits my throat.
Her loss is still raw
after many weeks,
catching me.
Then, I begin to see
what this dream
is all about.
Her courage was to
imagine the future
and live it now.
She fought for peace,
non-violently, in
so many places.
Her drive was strong,
clearing all bunkers,
finding home.

Rest in peace.

SUMMER FESTIVAL

The heatwave continues, scorching the grass,
sprinklers are banned, ice cream sales soar.
On the open fields of our local big house, giant
mushroom tents sprout from the ground,
it's Festival time!

Desperate for music, company, crowds, fun,
people drive in from the country around.
Traffic queues form several miles long, cars
trapped in the sweltering heat, disgorge
disgruntled revellers.

All is forgotten with the very first song,
voices are raised with familiar words.
United in singing, dancing in tune, this
is the celebration of summer, forgotten
black covid despair.

Deep into the night, the singing goes on,
new bands adding their ritual praise.
Friends, families, wrapped in warm joy
share food, laughter, and sleeping bags
in communal bliss.

August 2022

MORE THAN MARBLE (Iona reflections)

The importance of this tomb cannot be missed,
in a side chapel adorned with wrought iron, lie
side by side, the Duke and Duchess of Argyll.

Abbey patrons locked for ever in its embrace,
testimony to the power once held over people,
set in stone with the higher power of faith.

Church and state entwined in a mausoleum
of Scottish history, surrounded by the bones of
clan warriors and silent saints now dust.

You cannot fail to be impressed by the stories
locked here in perpetual memory, to people
who forged their way through history.

What remains are here, speak to our alien
culture, of a time when Christ's message was
a power capable of changing the world.

We come, refugees from indifferent times to
look for something tangible to lift our souls,
and see, surprised, the Abbey's hidden life.

Here, with marble statues, are also living books
of prayer and song, modern people battling our
political and social ills with Christ's power.

He inspired Columba, and his monks to make
a new world out of their cold and hostile time,
preaching over wild waters to foreign lands.

His voice is heard in our modern world, as
Iona's vibrant community bears witness,
to the power of love and compassion.



TIME'S STAGE

(*'One man in his time plays many parts...'*
As You Like it, Act 2: sc. 7)

Children, we learn to walk and talk,
trying sounds that make us laugh;
older, deeper notes make a mark,
as we change along a learning path.

Like actors we, Shakespeare saw,
fulfil many roles along life's way,
from young to old, growing more
complex each unfolding day.

Are we the sum of all our parts?
Do roles define the way we live?
Or is there some way our hearts
a fresh direction try to give?

To be a real character on stage
is to lose oneself in a stranger,
who coming from another age
could be placing us in danger.

For plays so easily hide the truth
of who we are, and what we want,
place of mirrors, reflecting proof
that deception no favour grants.

I have trod the boards in plays
learnt lines and scripted moves;
comedy, tragedy, finding ways,
giving an audience what it loves.

But, roles carrying greatest weight
are created from life's hot press,
not acting, but bearing our fate
to draw from others a real "yes".