

Voyages in Time



Poems by
Keith Spence

VOYAGES IN TIME

Love's not Time's fool... (Sonnet CXVI line 9)

As we grow older time becomes a tangible presence. In childhood a day was endless, full of infinite promise. In age it becomes a challenge to overcome for many people. Time can move exceedingly slowly!

I am very fond of Shakespeare's sonnets, and his emphasis on time in human affairs. Advancing myself into my middle eighties, I have more of the stuff in which to reflect on life, love, politics and nature. Though I can never match his eloquence and wit, I enjoy putting words together to see what happens!

So, this collection, with photos, looks at some of the events and experiences I have had this past year. I am not centre stage but have a walk-on part, in a period of tremendous changes and challenges.

Keith Spence

VOYAGES

In our mind's eye we see the future
beckoning across an ocean of time,
what will it be like, and how will we
navigate the turbulent waters?

Imagination grows to fill the space
empty through lack of knowledge,
young minds cannot comprehend
the changes that will come.

Dreaming is all, forgetting what is
unsaid about the impossibility
lying all around like hidden rocks,
waiting for our unwary feet.

Still upon this comforting rock
we gaze into the unknown, like
Drake the boy sailor excited by
the heroic visions of his friend.

Time will tell where our voyage
will take us, and to what shores;
the waiting is all, wrapped in our
own miraculous dreams.

LOVE'S NOT TIME'S FOOL...

Shakespeare put Time in his sonnets,
an enemy growing stronger as we fade;
day follows day with gathering stride,
tide blown spray on a seaside parade.

In youth, thinking to buck the trend,
we organise to live here forever;
not seeing Time has us in its sights,
soon plans appear as not so clever.

Age has its inevitable denouement,
when weakness robs us of our pride,
struggling to meet daily demands,
physically look for a place to hide.

Yet, the Bard took pains to point out,
in verses sent to an intimate friend;
that love in a quite paradoxical way,
survives life's hard blows to the end.

His words did survive his own death,
collected by his friends in our books;
his love, expressed in poetry or plays,
a living voice for anyone who looks.

SHUNTED

You see them in the railway yards
as you pass in a shining express,
rows of empty carriages, unwanted
in a daily mainline's urgent press.

All shunted into sidings dreary
forlorn reminders of yesterday,
now waiting for a final whistle to
send them on their rusting way.

Often it feels that way for us,
retired from the workday's heat,
we're surplus to requirements,
moved over to the nearest seat.

Before the rust of ageing grips
and ossifies our remaining skill,
we volunteer in the community
alive to show them our goodwill.

Youth has lost the power to listen,
except to technology's siren voice,
we, lost relics of a forgotten past,
could offer them a lasting choice.

Life is not all a timetable of rush,
it's full of quieter moments clear,
when we see the value of human
love, so ageless and forever near.

LIGHT ON THE HILL

How swiftly the scene changes in the hills,
clouds roll across the sky above our heads,
armies of giant puff balls flitting by, each
chasing the rest to disappear in space.

Each hour the mood shifts with the clouds,
now bright and sunny, airy and optimistic,
then blankets of gloom descend, shutting
sunlight from the darkened land.

But now, just for a fleeting moment's joy,
the clouds ascend beyond the skyline to
permit shafts of sunlight to strike the fell,
heaven touching trembling earth.

The sheep are unimpressed by this show,
they have seen it all before many times,
and safe behind their drystone walls
they browse the rough grass.



PAST THE SELL-BY DATE

Everything has shelf-life, for being up to date
and when that has gone it has sealed its fate;
no longer active, fresh, but on the downslope
to oblivion, entropy's solution, lost all hope.

If it applies to food and clothes, fashion tics,
then it goes for us, humans in the same fix;
in a time of youthful ebullience, all speed,
we, oldies at large, stand in greatest need.

Bemused by technology, caught on the hop
pressing wrong buttons, hoping to stop
the headlong rush to computerised hell,
we sit like Luddites, and grumble as well.

What was wrong with letters, telephones too,
real conversations, with people we knew?
Endless digital chatter, emails, and twitter,
locked to a screen, a smartphone sitter.

Suppose it has always been the same game,
old left behind, the young ones to blame.
Succeeding generations handed the keys,
think how did they survive, the oldies?

AROUND MIDNIGHT
(Miles Davis, jazz trumpeter)

The notes soaring upward
tobacco smoke in still air,
husky tones lingering long
make us feel we are there
in a cellar bar. Miles.

Classically trained he knew
how to bend the rules,
experiment with sounds
to produce a new cool
jazz and blues. Miles.

With Parker, Mulligan,
Evans and Coltrane,
the effortless creation
was destined to remain,
forever Miles.

‘Kind of Blue’ in modal
form before unknown,
revealed his mastery,
musician on his own
that’s Miles.

POTTERING ABOUT

It started as a hobby, a way of slowing down
the pace of daily living was what I found.
Digging the earth for its soft treasure, clay,
moulding it in my hands, I learnt to play
with the pottery shapes.

From history discovering the ancient record
of this earthly harvest turned into a hoard
of broken shards, in generational bands,
created by ancestors's human hands
from the earliest caves.

Down through centuries potters displayed
inherited skills, with pots locally made,
their shapes forged from clay and fire,
and very soon kindled the desire
for high fired porcelain.

From China and Japan came their wares,
displayed in Europe to admiring stares
from the wealthy merchants' friends,
adorning tables, each piece sends
art's enduring message.

Time cannot age these fragile vessels
standing proud in halls and castles,
from mud and fire they have risen,
to open and captivate our vision
with beauteous forms.



LONG LIFE

Greeting a newborn child
held in loving arms aloft,
“May you be always happy,
and of hope never bereft,
may your life here be long
filled with love and song”

Into the fragility of life
each generation strides,
facing perennial fears,
which optimism hides,
“all shall be well”, we say
“all shall be well today”.

And if we survive intact
until with age we fade,
praise sits on our heads,
because we have made
the ideal of living long
into a faltering song.

FAREWELL TO THE QUEEN

At her age it was expected
some day, that time would
claim its due, but still she
rode the present time with
all her accustomed style,
until, in Scotland's loved
countryside, she gave up
the travelling and ritual,
to finally rest.

She was the distant figure
on my horizon for seventy
years, a familiar presence
at Christmas parties, when
she delivered her carefully
phrased talks, to folk she
never met, across the world
in her lonely occupation
as head of state.

The wealth was inherited,
along with the servants
programmed to keep in
the background, speaking
only when spoken to by
Her Majesty, as they did
in all the royal palaces,
full of treasures and old
family heirlooms.

Defender of the faith, she
kept her watch on the
church calendar, through
the sceptical seasons that
afflicted our age, with the
rise of youth culture, and
other religions settling in
our cities from around
the former Empire.

The Elizabethan era is over.

AS TIME GOES BY ...
(*theme tune from Casablanca*)

Each day unfolding slow
like a passing show,
memories I can touch;
your absence still a pain
my love,
as time goes by.

I thought it was all past
that it could never last,
just a distant dream;
but here we are again
my love,
as time goes by.

Your voice is in my ear
just now you reappear,
sitting next to me;
I hear the old refrain
my love,
as time goes by.

A song is just a song
this one lingers on,
an echo of our love;
that will never wane
my love,
as time goes by.

Of course it didn't last
living with the past,
I knew it was the end
when you took a plane
my love,
as time went by.

KICKING THE CAN

I don't know whether to laugh or cry
watching our government's feeble try,
facing the greatest challenge to date
of migrants escaping their cruel fate,
in countries torn by warfare or crime,
to avoid taking action every time.

The latest ruse to stop desperate folk,
deport them to Rwanda, no not a joke,
but a serious policy aimed at stopping
those attempting a channel crossing,
costing the earth, to fly them there,
with no guarantee anyone will care.

Immigration is the perpetual tin can
successive governments use to plan,
as they kick it down an endless street,
by refusing human suffering to meet,
they want to ensure being truly kind,
all refugees are out of sight and mind.

SUNFLOWERS

They came in a packet from our local school,
sunflower seeds, time capsules of joy
exploding into life with the sun,
tiny messengers from the
children's paintbox.

A preposterous plant for wet Cumbria,
better suited to Van Gogh's France,
flooding fields with yellow paint,
and nodding giant heads at the
suffering artist.

Still, they grew in our little garden,
propped up with shaking canes to
fend off the withering wind, and
cheerful summer sentinels,
greeted us each day.

Our neighbour grew his school seeds
in a patch of loam beside his wall
where they grew to nine feet tall,
until disaster struck with
October's gales.

Those nodding heads of brilliant yellow
crashed to the pavement below, black
eyes gazing forlornly up the road,
towards the school from
which they came.



BIRTHDAY PRAISE
(for Pat on her 90th)

It is such a delightful surprise,
to know you have reached to
the skies; laughing out loud
you have made us all proud,
as you reach your ninetieth
year.

It's you we all want to praise,
knowing you've reached this
day of days; always a friend,
kindness knowing no end,
may joy on your birthday be
near.

Life's book has a new page,
to reach your own mother's
great age; a century seen,
of old age she was Queen,
achieving it knowing no
fear.

GREETING CARDS

Flowing like a river through the years,
carrying the laughter and the tears,
reminders of people and private places,
points of pleasure, and precious faces,
all caught up in a paper card,
disposing of it impossibly hard.

Nestling there on the bookcase shelves,
by books into which one seldom delves,
hiding the spines of important tomes,
pictures and words from distant homes,
paper tributes to the past,
feeding memories so they last.

Christmas, the trickle becomes a stream,
links with family and friends a dream,
hundreds now are Blutacked to doors,
go up the stairs, pile up on the floors,
robins and angels are found
flying high or on the ground.

When we finally decide to remove them,
it is almost like emotional mayhem;
which shall we keep, which throw out,
who remember, plagued with doubt,
we hide cards away up in the loft,
keep them all, 'cos we're too soft.

THE SETTING SUN

One star among so many billions
spread over unimaginable space,
locked in orbit, our puny earth
life dependent on a cosmic race.

The clocks tick out the daily wax
and wane of one gigantic furnace,
our planet's power and light,
with all dependent on its burning face.

Our ancestors worshipped here,
turning the star into a holy God,
source of protection and health,
to modern scientists rather odd.

The TV astronomer, Brian Cox,
sees several billion years ahead;
the sun will fail, fuel burnt out,
the earth will, with us, be dead.

Until then, a bit after my time,
I rejoice to welcome sunrise,
and amazed at sunset displays,
still consider myself as wise.



MIRROR, MIRROR ...

Is it really true, what I see of myself
when I look in the mirror?
Can it really be me, gazing back,
surely there is some error?

Those furrows, and sagging cheeks,
like a Francis Bacon bleak,
skin showing like a withered map,
all lines faded and weak.

I try a smile, just to please myself,
a carefree thumb of the nose,
only to see I look even worse,
a grinning gargoyle pose.

There is only one way to reply,
the deed it must be done.
Take the mirror off the wall for
a photo of me, still young!

TWITCHER'S LAMENT
(to the tune of D'ye ken John Peel)

Did you see this bird
when you last walked by,
did you see this bird
flying in the sky?
A lesser-spotted woodpecker
drilling high,
when you walked in the
woods in the morning.

No he was not there
when I last walked free,
no, he was not there
on his usual tree.
He is the rarest bird
you will never see,
when you walk in the
woods in the morning.

The pied flycatcher
has almost gone,
the turtle dove has lost his song.
Oh, the harrier's not
hunting all day long,
when you walk in the
woods in the morning.

Children do not know,
never get to hear,
the nightingale song
beautiful and clear.
Oh, we must protect birds
both far and near,
so we hear them in the
woods in the evening.

ENDING

(After COP27 in Egypt)

Coming to the end of the year
when the calendar runs out.
Its days are numbered.

Coming to the end of a political
regime, when ideas run out.
Their days are numbered.

Coming to the end of life on earth,
when hope runs out.
Is our number up?

BEGINNING OR ENDING?

In the beginning was ... well what was in the beginning,
how did it all start? Are the scientists correct there was
no time before the Big Bang? God knows.

Are we moving towards another non-time, when matter
will disappear, no space-time to measure? Is it all just a
huge dream called existence? God knows.

But, here we are in space-time, limited by our human
presence to occupy a particular space at a particular
time, unable to see beyond. We know this.

Our fascination with time has taken us to the limits of
human knowledge and technology, to map the stars
and travel huge distances. We know that.

Perhaps Blake was right after all, the world is there in
a grain of sand, and we do hold infinity in the palm
of our hands, eternity in an hour. Who knows?

RAINBOW'S END

A sign of universal grace,
overarching every place,
skyborn miracle of light,
catching droplets bright,
a childhood exclamation
demanding explanation,
the rainbow.

Symbol of universal love,
like an ever present dove,
woven of sun and water,
source of joy and laughter,
Newton's fine experiment
revealed his God's intent,
the rainbow.

Where does it start or end,
who can match its bend?
Is there a fortune or fate
will we be in time or late?
This dazzling benefactor
has landed on - a tractor,
the rainbow!



WATCHING BRIEF

(St. Lawrence Parish church, Appleby.)

'Time like an ever rolling stream ...'

from a hymn by Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Peaceful in evening sun,
the lichened sentinels
etch their shadows onto
the trimmed grass.

Our ancestors in faith
await the resurrection,
promised in the book
inspired by Christ.

Here, by the riverside,
coiling its serpent arm
round the churchyard,
they keep watch.

Town councillors rest,
with opponents near,
arguments silenced
for an eternity.

Rich and poor alike,
in earth's accepting
arms enfolded, until
the trumpet call.

The ancient church
holds special guest
Lady Anne Clifford,
in titled tomb.

Cromwell's scourge,
royalist to the core,
rebuilding her castle
above the town.

The soft evening sun
rests on her work,
crumbling slowly
to history's dust.



ANOTHER VOICE

When I listen to
the world's sad
woes,
drifting into my
ears from the radio,
I listen hard for
another softer
voice,
offering hope and
a meaningful choice.
In the darkest of
places someone
strives,
to bring a fresh
spark to tired
lives.
Courage comes to
the battered
heart,
friends join hands
to play their
part,
in healing torn
humanity's
pain.
Love and deep
compassion
reign.