

Tree of Life



Poems by
Keith Spence

Tree of Life

The symbol of the tree appears in ancient scripture and myths. In the Christian Bible there is a promise of a Tree of Life in heaven (Revelation 2:7)

Trees root us to the earth our home, and to our ancestors. The branches reach out to the sky symbolising growth, renewal, the future.

This latest collection of poems and photos has several on trees I have seen and loved. They give me a sense of permanence with their slow tempo of life. A sense too of protection and generosity as they provide us with shade, oxygen, and materials for our living.

As a Christian I cannot help reflecting on the deep irony of Christ the carpenter being put to death on a tree, the Cross. Meant as a symbol of contempt and shame by the Romans it became the symbol of hope and renewal for millions with its message of death overcome.

Besides trees there are poems on nature, politics, music, art and exceptional people. A slice of life. Hope you find something you like!

There is no charge for this booklet, but I invite you to contribute to the work of our local Hospice at Home if you wish. The details are below.

Keith Spence
(keithspence335@gmail.com)

*Hospice at Home (Carlisle and North Lakeland),
Barras Lane, Dalston, Carlisle, Cumbria, CA5 7NY (01228 475025)*

Tree of Life

(Magnolia , Botanical Gardens Edinburgh)

Rare tree from Asia taken,
rooted in Scottish soil,
a once a year sensation
bursts into bloom.

Exotic and mysterious
the magnolia rests
so quietly imperious
in a corner site.

Most Botanical visitors
just pass by the tree,
intent on other suitors
among the plants.

Then, in spring sunshine
the buds spring open,
to reveal blooms as fine
as pink serviettes.

This wonder is so fleeting
people miss the show,
a two week long greeting
from nature's soul.

A BIGGER Life

(David Hockney 1937-2026)

Well, lad, you've had a good innings
kicked t' bucket in your own way,
proved Yorkshire bloodymindedness
will allus win a t'end o't day.

A blaze of colour you went out in,
brush in hand an' fag in mouth,
sharpened iPad and loaded brushes
ready t' paint north or south.

We come from the same roots in
Bradford's mucky soot town,
you 't Grammar Schoolboy, ay
an' me much lower down.

I salute y'r daft independence
ignoring t' elders advice,
forgin' a new career in America
ready to set yer own price.

From California to Bridlington
allus breaking new ground,
y'r eye catching all t' colours
in nature's gift to be found.

I'm proud t' know y'r Yorkshire
w' talent few people possessed,
let 'em fight o'er price o' paintings,
stub y'r fag out lad an' rest.

Supermoth

(photo by Andrea Clarkson)

A blustery spring day in June
a garden sleeping,
trees bouncing and flowers
everywhere keeping
colourful watch.

The low buzz of a solo bee
on his round passing,
when on the red verbena
a tiny form flashing
like a windmill.

First thought was a hornet
deadly bee predator,
but this was something
more spectacular,
a daylight moth.

Bright orange wings blur
striped body still,
probing the blossoms
with exquisite skill,
a humming moth.

A needle like proboscis
delves the flowers,
sucking sweet nectar
in daylight hours
and it flies on.

We feel as if we are in
a tropical forest,
a tiny visitor takes us
into the deepest
natural realm.



Face at the Window

Break of day and morning light
lifts the window blind,
starting another day.

Through blinking eyes I guess
the day and rough time,
but what is this?

Outside on the window sill
a cocky blackbird stands,
head on one side.

Bright eyes unflinching
fix mine in challenge,
yellow beak opens.

Well, are you coming out
to give me some food?
I have been up ages.

The wild impudence of him
- bravo little bird we say,
you deserve feeding.

Next day he is back again
same routine - it works,
again some food.

His brood is growing so
next day the female
sits on our sill.

Our blackbird cafe grows,
to show satisfaction,
they sing at night.



Password

Long ago you
used the phone
and job done.

Now it's an app
you've to open -
AI has spoken.

Make no mistake
technology rules
us older fools.

Everything is fixed
by need to see
your ****ID!

Can I remember
do I really care
oh, no where

is the number
I wrote down -
it's flown.

Let's use Google
it's just easy
peasy.

Then I discover
it's just absurd
NO PASSWORD!

Making Waves

We want to be someone
who affects others,
to be noticed and praised
starting with mothers.

Now it is an industry
called 'influencers'
mostly young and brash
whose ego flowers.

Get your name known
make a video,
make a lot of money
with your show.

I like the unknown
folk, quiet types,
who care for others
without the hype.

Bit like Jesus saw
at the Temple,
a widow giving all
lovingly simple.

The Watermill (Acorn Bank Cumbria)

Crowdundle Beck, magic name!
Tiny stream bubbling along
past wood, fields, stately home
that to National Trust belong.
And here a nostalgic wonder,
the beck feeding a water mill,
restored by voluntary labour,
that grinds wheat flour still.

In medieval days the farmers
used the water powered mill,
a second wheel was added
when mining delved the hill.
Over years the towering oaks
that gave the house its name,
were felled and cut for timber
the place was not the same.

But orchard and walled garden,
and walks through the wood,
all remain with the watermill
to remind us that we should
treasure our past inheritance,
remember shared history,
both ancestors rich and poor
sharing a common destiny.



Jess Gillam
(saxophonist from Ulverston)

Sprite in a sequin suit
Ariel come down,
a life force set free
through music.

Cumbrian bred with
northern soul,
she plays classics
like Radio one.

BBC Young Musician
she shone bright,
her saxophone hit
the final show.

On to orchestras or
small ensembles,
BBC 3 or small hall,
Jess is at home.

If music be the food
of joy she has it,
solo or with friends
her music flies.

Protest Song

(‘Farewell to Stromness’, Peter Maxwell Davies)

A lullaby spun from the air
fresh over the Orkney town,
challenging folk to prepare
or lose all they have known.

Doesn’t sound like a protest
so soft the sad melody flows,
a new uranium mine the test
is what the composer knows.

Master of the Queen’s Music
more than a match it seems,
for polluting industrial politic
threatening Scottish dreams.

Like the eternal wind or tide
washing over the shores,
the threat was tossed aside
a mine was seen no more.

Now, music like lilting bells
with an aching tenderness,
lifts funerals last farewells
for all who leave Stromness.

Wreay Church (Cumbria)

A small village tucked into the fellside,
farming country steeped in tradition,
not a place you would expect to provide
exciting church architecture, but look
here it is, a Victorian masterpiece.

The wealthy have always been known
for shaping life to suit themselves,
at best philanthropists handing down
to dependent villagers their help,
the class system's rigidity ruling.

Here, in this small hamlet of Wreay
a family rich in land and industrial
capital, sent their daughters away
abroad for education and travel,
the Loshes of Woodside House.

Sarah and Katharine had the integrity
to absorb glories of Greece and Rome,
following their passion for antiquity,
architecture, palaeontology, images
etched into their imaginations.

Offering a new church for her village
Sarah's inspired memorial creation
paid sister Katherine rich homage
ancient symbols carved in stone
focussing on the pinecone.

Far wider than Gothic inspiration
in Victorian church buildings,
this jewel of artistic devotion
delighted Pevsner on his tour
and still enriches us today.



Conscientious Objector (for Harold Wild 1896-1979)

War is organised madness
when human pity dies,
despite years of sadness
our common wisdom flies.

Injustice feeds the hate
and men rise up in rage,
indoctrinated by the state
in the folly of each age.

But a few resist the fire
quench it as it spreads,
urgent in their desire
to cool fevered heads.

Defiance fits their style
willing to be different,
challenging all the while
the violence of intent.

In the first World War,
with jingoism rampant,
many rose to declare
the moral code extant,

born from Christian ideals
of loving your enemy,
the pacifist message seals
the bond of harmony.

The COs took the hostility
of military aggression,
imprisoned, shown no pity,
each a personal passion.

The Cost of Living

You can't escape it, headline news
every day reciting the gloom,
politicians fighting to announce
the latest forecasts of doom.

Prices rise, prices fall, like the sea
but the press revel in disaster,
saying it has never been so bad
we are declining so much faster

than all the previous forecasts
predicted with their data,
with foreign wars, energy prices,
meaning that we will later

tumble into a deep recession -
and perish the thought,
share prices will all tumble
values come to nought!

But cost of living is not money
alone, but our future,
we wealthy nations are blinded
by the capitalist culture.

In countries around the world
people are just surviving,
deep in debt, riven by wars
certainly not thriving.

We need to build co-operation
learn to invest in living,
turn guns into ploughshares
and bear the cost of giving.

Window of Opportunity

A small room, a dormer window
my hideaway and workroom,
place to dream and write.

An invasive sun on daily patrol
wants to get in somehow,
caressing the worn carpet.

Such fleeting incidents are daily
occurrences not noticed
unless I am quite still.

Then like a sudden revelation
I am able to see the light
shaped into a window.

A poem now insinuates itself
as I sit and contemplate
my heavenly visitation.

Making the most of a moment
I write this down for the
sunlight soon fades.

My window of opportunity
vanished like a dream
but caught in words.



The Old Oak

You hardly see me driving past in a car;
just another tree by the side of the road,
behind a wall sitting in someone's yard.
I spent ages planting my roots beneath
pasture before the road cut through land
over which for a century I stood guard.

Horses, cows, sheep, pigs, and people
passed me by in a rich cavalcade while
I cradled the squirrels, fed them acorns.
Gave wood for houses, fences, barns,
saw the generations flourish and depart
lives measured in flowers or thorns.

I dream of my ancestors born in forests
that stretched beyond the far horizon,
populated by bears, wolves, and deer.
Now it's tractors, cars, and huge lorries
filling the clear air with their smoke,
I grow but into a hot future I fear.

Visitors (social care)

Old age has a changing pace,
a marking time we know,
hours drag, days grow long,
and life can seem so slow.

If we are uprooted from
our home and place,
to live in care with others
it might be outer space.

Where the familiar things
we have accumulated?
Where the familiar faces
to whom I am related?

I long to feel an embrace
to know that I am real,
a voice to call my name
to get me out of gaol!

A scent of a world outside
comes with visitors,
laughter, smiles, and faces
like brothers or sisters.

Life's more than routine
it is meant for living,
care is not just washing
but joining in singing.

Celebrate all faithful folk
family and neighbours,
who come to see us daily
sharing our life with us.

The Outing

The first step is the hardest
when you are very small
even harder for a duckling
missing mother's call.

Off she went without us
sailing over the pond
us racing to catch her up
until we came to land.

Before we knew it we
were deep in grass
couldn't see her clearly
until she sidled past.

Where is she taking us
we wanted to know
pushing through a jungle
we are all so slow.

Suddenly she rounds us up
sets off for the water
our foreign adventure it
is prematurely over.



Pat

(in memoriam)

A mischievous smile
glint in her eye,
she cared for others
no passing by.

Politics shaped by
family loyalty,
South Wales miners
were Royalty.

Youth a tomboy
ready for fun,
adult a trained nurse
work never done.

Travel a passion
Africa to China,
her husband John
always beside her.

Labour supporter
thick or thin,
urgent to deal with
crises we're in.

A battle with cancer
in her last days,
smiling as always
she passed away.

Nos da, cariad

Tree of Peace
(for Trish)

Beneath your branches we meet
sisters and brothers together,
celebrating the life we shared
in calm and stormy weather.

We come here to find our peace
within your arching shade,
now linking past and present
we need not feel afraid.

Your silent solitary vigil kept
protecting creatures small,
reminds us of nature's bounty
with sufficient for us all.

In times of human folly bring
us together here to know
our dependence on each other,
compassion let us show.

Thanks for all absent friends
meeting us in spirit,
enfolded in the web of life,
in love that has no limit.

Copper Giant

Gravel paths and ordered stone
make up the stately home,
now open for the public to own
when for visits we come.

Among treasures of old wealth
is a water mill restored,
organic flour for our health
is the volunteers reward.

The estate is famous for its trees
as oaks and ash abound,
but rustling proudly in the breeze
a copper beech is found.

Towering over the stable gate
watching horses pass,
the beech has witnessed the fate
of grooms and stable lass.

Generations are like the wind
stirring its huge branches,
each flourishing in their kind
with the years' advances.

I celebrate this giant of the past
bridging history's changes
a witness to us of what may last
beyond our written pages.



England Expects

The national mood changes with the season,
from spring expectation to winter gloom,
each year hope triumphs over logical reason
as we chant again, 'football's coming home'.

Buses change drivers, so managers depart,
each new one lifting the country's pride,
this year the team rising to a great height,
until again we embark on a bumpy ride.

Now is the moment of the World Cup
for a new golden generation of '26,
will they emulate Bobby Moore's luck,
lifting the Jules Rimet trophy in 66?

England expects...and hopes.

Epitaph

Here lies the poet
lost for words,
singing in peace
with the birds.

