

*Evensong*



# EVENSONG

*Poems by Kenneth Steven*



SPCK

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*This collection of poems is  
for Jack Hutcheson*



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## A BASKET OF WATER

The boy came back from school in tatters –  
A March day; snow thin in all the hills,  
A blue wind breezing the sun  
Wild across hillsides, and sweeping it away.  
The boy saw nothing; he had told a lie –  
The teacher had belted his hands until they bled.  
*I want to be good, he told his grandfather,  
But it never lasts. I always have to start again.*  
The old man ruffled his hair. *Take the coal basket,  
Go down to the river and fill it –  
But hurry, run for all you're worth.*  
The boy went, the basket bumping the backs of his legs,  
Fled down the hill, wind grazing his face –  
Plunged the basket deep, swirled sky water upwards,  
Rushed with it splaying, up and up the hill,  
So it gushed and splashed, hopeless.  
He came back with an emptiness that shone –  
The words in his eyes spoke dark.  
The old man knelt beside him:  
*It wasn't useless. Look at the inside of the basket;  
The coal dust's gone, it's washed away.  
Just the same with you. Put good things  
Deep in the heart. They'll bleed away,  
But the light they give is always left behind.*



## THE LINN

On August days when thunder  
Prowled about the hills like bears  
And skies were low and heavy  
We went to swim in the river. By then  
It was thin and slippery, resting in rocks,  
Half-hidden under green overhangs.  
But the pool was a whole stillness of smoky quartz,  
Deep as a dungeon.  
We skinned ourselves, crashed into the water –  
Its delicious gasp of cool – plunged under  
To lie on our backs breathless, listening  
To the whizz of swifts above us,  
The river's silvering below.  
By nightfall we trailed back home, barefoot,  
Smelling the blue smoke of barbecues,  
Hearing in the trees muffled smudges of talk  
As rain pattered dark around us  
And lightning flickered the sky.



## EASTER

When the year is beginning again,  
The sleet coming in wet cotton on the wind  
To build against the dykes;  
And sometimes the sun like a single eye  
Blind behind the clouds;  
And daffodils, the frail green of them,  
Hidden away and hurting in the wind –  
I am no longer full of my own emptiness  
But just light and sky, listening,  
And able to hear at last.



## ONCE UPON A TIME

The house asleep like a blue ship under deep water;  
The moon fiercing the skylight window,  
I padded down, bare feet trying not to creak the stairs,  
Out under the jewellery of the stars.

The hushed bark of a dog,  
The last pears fallen from the tree in red-gold slush,  
The moon cast over the garden, such a bright shadow  
I could have wandered miles and miles.

And that was what I longed for –  
To lose myself in the story of the forest,  
Come out in some magical tale  
Written by wolves and snow.



## MORNING

A soundless day in December;  
Six below and the trees furred with frost,  
The ground a snow that was not snow,  
A crystallizing of cold.

I went up into the Narnia of the woods,  
Making my steps soft, yearning deer and geese.  
I heard nothing but my own heart;  
Just a shimmering of birds from one tree –  
Thirty or forty in a flight that was made of waves.

There among the trees the loch;  
A breath of ice had ghosted it,  
An ice swivelled with patterns,  
As though in the night strange dancers  
Had come to skate its stillness.

I stood, scarves of breath woolling the air  
As a cloth bell somewhere  
Remembered Sunday.



## ALL I KNOW

The late sun leaving in the trees an orange-red,  
A soft honey fire. There has been no breath of wind  
In fifteen days; leaves hang gold and gorgeous  
In the woods, and through them the deer tread  
Patched with light, wary. The year begins to die;  
The rowans hang in blood-red clutches, every day  
The ripe sun is lower in the sky. Is this what it must be?  
Or did everything begin to live for ever  
Before the bite of the apple and the long fall  
Into our own demise? Is the worm at the earth's heart  
Our fault, the birth of our badness,  
Or is the last blizzard of all things,  
The withering of all that is, no more  
Than it should be, like a child's blown bubble –  
Beautiful to begin with, spinning reds and blues –  
Until it fades in a ball of cobwebs, bursts  
In a thistledown of drops?  
All I know is the seed sleeps December long –  
Forgotten, gone, buried in the dark –  
And then is born again.



## MAKE - BELIEVE

There is no God nowadays,  
We have grown up and gone away from home.  
There is no last prayer before the light goes out –  
We lie awake and wonder, and the dark is sore.

Sometimes, in the flicker of the dawn,  
When the garden blooms with a thatch of birdsong –  
We feel the place that joys and hurts  
Empty and wanting.

Sometimes, in the suburban sadness of the last train  
going home –  
Acres and acres of living rooms,  
Flickering thin November rain –  
We wish and know it's all too late.

We must understand the murders of children alone now;  
We must put back on an old shelf the donkey and stable  
We made out of wood a long time ago –  
We have to believe we were wrong.

We need to keep on going  
And everything will be just fine.  
Of course it will – it's only a question of time,  
Nothing more than a question of time.



## NOVEMBER

In winter we go whole days without seeing light –  
The trees condemned, heads bowed and bare.

Except for the odd pale yellow window,  
Sky and hills and woods are one, grey and dead.

Hard to believe there will be daffodils,  
That green things will happen again.

At night houses shine out in cries across fields of floodwater,  
The cold of wet and wind like the cut of a spade  
in a bare hand.

We pull our hopes and dreams behind us on sledges  
Into the sheer hope of light,  
The one clenched promise of the spring.



## SOLACE

I look back through my mind and see  
The days when forest wolved the land in mystery  
And light was cradled out of coracles  
In wild and wintered island storm.

All night and every night the rip and snarl of wind,  
And this their task alone, to guard the light they  
    had been given –  
The flutter of that single flame  
Keeping out the whole world of the dark.

