

Coracle

CORACLE

Poems by Kenneth Steven



SPCK

First published in Great Britain in 2014

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.spckpublishing.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-281-07209-5

eBook ISBN 978-0-281-07210-1

Typeset by Caroline Waldron, Wirral, Cheshire
First printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

eBook by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

*For Kristina,
with love*

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Acknowledgements



Poems in this collection have previously appeared in the pages of the following outlets: *Acumen*, *Causeway*, *Coracle*, *The Countryman*, *The Eildon Tree*, *Envoi*, *The Herald* (Glasgow), *Life and Work*, *Northwords Now*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Poetry Scotland*, *Quadrant* (Australia), *Resurgence*, *Scintilla*, *The Scots Magazine* and *Temenos Academy Review*. ‘The Words’ was read on BBC Radio 4.



CORACLE

A round of dryness, one man strong
Woven and stitched to bob
The slow fishponds and the deeper creeks,
The waterways of crannogs:

Out even to the up and down of sea,
The blue bell of water that does not end,
But reaches, by the compass of the stars –
Another island and a new beginning.



IONA

And God said:

Let there be a place made of stone
Out off the west of the world,
Roughed nine months by gale,
Rattled in Atlantic swell.

A place that rouses each Easter
With soft blessings of flowers
And shocks of white shell sand;
A place found only sometimes
By those who have lost their way.



CLOISTER

The garden is walled with quiet
Ten feet tall. I have come inside a silence.

Rose petals jewelled with dew
And in each one a sun.

Swallows, soft felt flittings, trapeze the air;
An endless whisper of criss-crossings.

I hear a woven hum of bees
Holding their notes, hovering, burrowing deep,

As the sun unsmudges from the mist
And morning, warm, in blue and gold, begins.



THE WORDS

All night I wrestled with an angel, sure
He carried words that I must make my own.
Hour after hour I fought and cried because I could not win,
Because I feared those words would die unknown.

And by the time this morning bled the skies
I'd neither won nor lost, but I could fight no more;
As that first fire of light began to rise

I turned, went out, barefoot, into the dawn
Empty of everything and heard the choir of birds,
And all at once I knew what I should write –
They came alive, they grew – these were my words.



A GREEN WOODPECKER

The day is like dead wood –
No colours, only shades of grey.

The gentle breath of my steps
Leaves a ghost story written in the grass.

A stillness like that when snow falls
Except there is no snow, and none all winter –

Only the river in its silvering among the trees
Whispers the same old journey to the sea;

Only the moon, low above the hills,
Frail as a ball of cobwebs.

On moss feet, I go into the wood
And a great door closes behind me:

Little quiverings of things
Quick among twigs;

Two deer, their eyes listening,
Flow into nowhere in a single blink.

I look up, into a pool of light
And hold my breath:

Swans stretching north
Swimming the open sky –

The silence so huge
I hear their wings.

And I think,
As I begin to go back home;

I came here searching one bird
And found all this instead:

How like my life.



AFTER THE STORM

The valley lay in the window
Dazed and damaged.

The river horsed under bridges
Swirling with earth and rain.

The fields were filled with mirrors, glass stretches
Reflecting a breaking sky.

The house was silent, left unhumming –
We were powerless; there was nothing we could do.



GEORGE

It was after a gas attack he found the bird
And brought it back still warm in those big hands.

A lark he said it was. They agreed, later on that night,
Poking fun at him still crouching there, feeding the thing

Bits of cheese and worms grubbed up from mud.
He'd always been the odd one out, not one of them:

Got yourself a bird at last, George! they sniggered,
Told him it was probably a German spy,

Would be off back over to their lines
Soon as it had word of the next offensive.

He didn't care. It held him, gave him something back
Of Dartmoor, those days with his Dad up on the tors

In the early summer winds. How the larks rose
Twirling songs until you lost them in the sunlight;

How they'd watch them rise and rise as if on strings
Till all the sky seemed full of them.

He didn't give a fig for cards, never heeded all the jibes
As night boomed huge and strange about them.

Was a sniper picked him off on sentry duty, though –
Probably when he was far off in his thoughts

Back on the moors of home and walking miles and miles.
A single bullet through the head and he was gone.

They clasped the bird into his hands (who the hell
Was going to go on feeding it when he was dead?)

And that night there was a quiet in the place,
A strangeness, something that wasn't there.

