Worshipper of Earth: *A Centenary Tribute in Verse to Richard Jefferies* by W.J. Keith (Hub Editions, 1987), drawings by his wife, Hiroko, to whom he dedicates the book.

Keith's *Worshipper of Earth*, 16 poems, including two published in *A Spirit Illumined* (Richard Jefferies Society, 1987), 'Bitter to Know This' (p.15), and 'Loss and Gain' (p.48).

Keith explains in his Foreword that the 'I' in his poems (apart from 'Epilogue') refers to Jefferies himself.

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Coate Water [p.1]
First memory: Coate Water extending
to the edge of time, its banks magnified
into cliffs, reedbeds augmented to jungle,
where fabulous birds, exotic animals
forage upon imagined islands.

This is my world, to make of it
what I will. Sun shines for ever;
this now is always. Later,
as the dream fades, I grow and know
that I want it only as it is.

My first memory: perhaps (transmuted)
it will be my last.

For Company [p.2]
They despise me in the valleys, blind
to beauty under their boot-soles; they never go
up to the hills in storm with only
lapwings for company; Roman coins
dug up at brookside are useless, won't buy beer;
to them the barrow in Gipsy Lane is no more than
earth in the way.

Nature is implacable but never
lonely. The cowering leveret fears
his enemies, fears me needlessly, but
is at home with his own kind. I slouch awkwardly
in Swindon streets, seek out untrodden footpaths
where no one comes. In desperation
I have lain down in the leveret's form
for company.
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Sunday Morning, 1866 [p.3]
Hymn slightly out of tune; scent overpowering;
a boy in the next pew frantically clawing
at his collar ("Keep still," his mother whispers).

A ray of light streams through a transept window
picking up dust-motes; rooks caw outside;
there is coughing, wheezing, and sermon-drone.

Suddenly I know that the God I worship
has abandoned the consecrated wafer,
made a bolt for the Downs. I rise and follow;

larks sing anthems above me, while breezes blow
psalms over the lynchets; on the way up
I drink from a stream in natural communion.

Kneeling on the soft turf, I pray to the pulsing
life that beats within me and about me;
in paeans of praise I tell my heart's story.

Day House Stone-Circle [p.4]
Almost invisible, buried deep
in impetuous grass, a rutted track
passing between them: only old stones—who
cares? Well, I care. I bend down, revel
in roughness under my fingers, touch
history's grain, the coarse texture of time.

These are the old folks' stones. I have seen
others on the Downs at Fyfield; close
to the Ridgeway at the chambered smithy
of Wayland; I have laughed at age-old, live,
grey wethers that bleat and stumble away
from my boyish prehistoric dreams.

Giggle! I look up, blushing: the window
of Day House Farm, a slip of a girl
grinning, blushing too—old Baden's daughter.
Chestnut petals fall like snow or blood,
like her flesh and lips. I turn, ecstatic,
trip on a forgotten stone, uncaring.

Downland Vision [p.5]
Shattered fragments of sky
fallen from heaven? No,
a blue butterfly's wing
poised upon thyme-flowers.

Look upward beyond time;
behold, cerulean,
a great blue butterfly
enveloping earth.

March 3 1878* [p.6]
Dream more vivid than dreams:

A child, not my young self nor my grown
son, staring into my eyes as if
determined to look through them, stepping
into my footsteps, appropriating
my shadow, observed as a pale spectre
along my habitual pathways.

Sentences come to me in a voice like mine
but not mine. I glimpse a study resembling
my study; upon the shelf are strangely-titled
books with my own name upon their spines.
I see him writing, as I have written,
loving, cursing the words. I see him lonely.

Dream turns to nightmare: I shudder as he plunges
into a world alien to us both: earth shakes;
birdsong no longer audible; the scream of horses;
mud-spattered trees; mud-spattered rats; a network
of sandbagged corridors; the stench of sweat. At last
a staccato crack, he fades—and I wake weeping.

* birthdate of Edward Thomas

Wiltshire Lane [p.7]
There is no official name, though the locals
have doubtless christened it. It winds from nowhere
to nowhere, innocent of any
unfamiliar bird or flower.
Yellow-hammers
pick about in the loose gravel, wrens twitter
in the thick hedges, magpies and crows
caw in the fields adjoining, swallows veer
in the air overhead.
On grass verges
speedwell, plantain, and milfoil, nettles
threatening from undergrowth where herb-robert,
nipplewort, and cinquefoil create
their own design.
There is no reason
to come here—the charged currents of life
throb and pulse elsewhere—yet the lane beckons
to all who love obsolete, forgotten things.

Turning West [p.8]
Now the footpath
veers right, follows this trim hedgerow,
skirts that small coppice.

I can expect
wood-avens, speedwell, willow wren
singing in season,

but who knows what
I shall see as I turn west
to the setting sun?

As day darkens,
year passes, I am approaching
my own life's corner.

Perspectives [p.9]
I look down like a god
on ants at their scurrying
labours,

then up at the heavens in vain
to find someone watching
me.

Beechwood Silence [p.10]
Beechwood silence is a unique silence;
I listen for the lack of sound, for the birds
that are not singing, for the snapped twig
that is not there, and the tall beeches guard
a dignified, unchallenged peace.

In the familiar stillness I recognise
beechwood silence as the hushed complement
of a loneliness within myself—the songless boughs
are my own dumbness, the unsnapped twigs inhabit
the untrodden pathways of my mind.

Yet I return, pressing the mossed turf
gently, affectionately beneath my feet,
acknowledging in the beechwood silence
loneliness comprehended but not shared,
engaging, calm, unfathomed solitude.

Loss and Gain [p.11]
I have discarded
so much: the company of believers,
immortality, design, God.

Cacophonous bells resound
in tower and steeple, ring
my enforced apartness. Yet

harmony in a blackbird's trill,
music in mowing-grass:
these I have heard and am blessed.

Sun beats on Liddington; my heart
beats here; the link between them
fosters my faith.

Words [p.12]
My words remain only
words. Dandelions are neither
yellow nor gold but beyond
yellow and gold. A thin weasel
hunting a rabbit in snow leaves no
tracks upon this white page.
Hawthorn sprays upon pathways
near the Shepherd's Steeps leave
not the faintest trace
of the scent of may.
Chaffinches spink among orchard branches
unheard. The spring of the turf
on downland at Liddington
no one will feel
in these words.

I lament, as others do: even
Hokusai's horses could not escape
from their scroll-stables.

Bitter to know this . . . * [p.13]
Dying. A few short weeks, and then
nothing. My daughter is too young
to remember, my son old enough
to forget. My wife? She faces
half a lifetime in which to do
one or the other. My failed dreams
are gathering dust upon the shelves
of libraries. Bitter to know this
before you are dead.

A book closed, but not finished;
my mouth stopped, my words forgotten.
Flower, bud, leaf and tendril speak
through chaffinches, not through me.
Each blade of grass was (once) mine; now,
earth crumbles beneath my fingers which
in turn will crumble: earth I have loved
that loves not me. Bitter to know this
before you are dead.

* from 'Hours of Spring' in *Field and Hedgerow*

My Old Village [p.14]
My village, not theirs.
I saw what I wanted to see (no dirt,
no squalor), created a memory village
where rustics moved as congenial ghosts,
knew their place, touched their forelocks, and
(when I forgot them) died.

Their village, not mine.
Ashamed, I took pity upon them, built
a village of words with cottages made
to last, where I (sly poacher among poachers)
will haunt their hearths and stories, remembered only
because they live for ever.

Sea Lane, Goring [p.15]
The life that was given unasked is now
ebbing, like the sea by which
I shall never walk again.

There the tide turns; here I riffle
the pages of old notebooks,
relive an evanescent past.

That early orchid, greeted with joy
but recorded casually—I did not know
it would be my last orchid;

that first cuckoo, those migratory swallows—
images of a continuity
fast slipping from me.

I see through my window clouds
that pass where I can no longer pass,
melt into nothingness as I shall melt.

Nature betrayed me, as (I ought to have known)
she always does. Only I
regret my imminent going.

Life blossoms and dies unasked,
unquestioned. I waste in pain to become
one with the solid earth I have always loved.

Epilogue

Jefferies Country [p.16]
This land belongs to him; he is always here
concealed, inconspicuous, on the edge
of any photograph we can imagine:
a boy's bobbing head at the shallow end
of Coate Reservoir; or, gun in hand,
leaning over a gate in Burderop Park;
or prone on the sward in a fosse at Liddington.

We tread these footpaths because he trod them;
the meadow crane's-bill is cherished because
it was a favourite flower; we follow him
up the chalk downs to feel for a moment
the wonder that he knew always; and we discern
in a child's racing the wind up the home field
a hint of him, a true memorial.

W.J. Keith (1934–2018)