

Stephen Swann meets a local poet whose work, he believes, deserves wider recognition

One morning, a few years back, I went into the editorial office here at Dorset and on my desk amid all the bumf that had arrived in the post that morning was a little book of poetry. We receive poems from readers quite often; they are usually accompanied by notes that read something like this: 'I was inspired to write this poem whilst walking on the cliff tops near Swanage. I do hope you can find room to publish it in your magazine.'

Now, it has to be said that many such poems leave no trace on the memory at all and I return them with a polite 'thanks, but no thanks'. That morning it was different. I read the first poem in the book and immediately knew that I was in the presence of someone with real talent. The book, desktop published but done well, was called *Selected Poems – Where Beeches Surf the Hill*, and it was by a guy called John Kemp. I went on to review the book in the magazine, got a thank-you letter from the author, and that, for the moment, was that. Over the following years I was lucky enough to be sent two more books by John – *More Selected Poems Now More Quietly* and *By Looking Up*. Both of them contained much good poetry.

Fast forward to January 2006. I'm sitting in a room in a flat in the backstreets of Beaminster. It is far from tidy, there are books everywhere, a table is strewn with bits of paper with handwritten scraps of poetry on them, classical music is playing, its source seems to be a radio half buried in yet more books so that the sound is strangely muffled. Opposite me sits John Kemp. He is, perhaps, 70. He talks in the well-modulated tones of someone who comes from an upper-middle-class background - in fact, it turns out that his father was something in the city. It is good talk, by turns witty, ironical, playful, serious. He smokes roll-ups, the room is pungent with the smell of them, and every so often he pauses in his talk to apologise about the smoke.

John tells me that he was born in Essex, near Bishop's Stortford. After prep school he went to St John's, Leatherhead. He did National Service, 1953-55, with the British Army of the Rhine and afterwards went from one job to another. Over the years he worked as a coal heaver, an estate agent,

Sand

*Look at those grand
pontificating waves
that break their wise old beards
on the long sea strand:
full of the weight
of the ocean they are,
born of weather and years.*

*They know everything
and rise to the ignorant sand,
tower briefly over
importantly, imparting.*

*Look at the sand,
the millions of it, struck dumb,
for a moment appalled
and seething with sudden news,
the next
ignorant as ever
as though no wise old wave
had ever called.*

John Kemp:

he did admin with British Waterways and repaired boats. He has been a lorry driver, worked in admin for a company that made parts for aircraft simulators and worked in admin at CBS records. He has renovated Morris Minors, painted the exteriors of houses and worked for a time as a farm manager. Somewhere along the line he married and went to live in a remote part of Scotland where his marriage foundered and he fell into the first of a number of very serious bouts of depression – depression so bad that he spent several spells in hospital. Eventually he pitched up in Dorset when his parents moved here, looking after them in their final years until, in his words, he 'ended up in this felicitous flat in dear, friendly Beaminster.'

Now, that list of jobs could make John sound somewhat feckless but this would be to read his life all wrong. Looking at his life from the outside and with the benefit of hindsight, it seems more like an existential experiment, a writer's life in fact, and, indeed, that is just what it is, for throughout it all John was writing poems – hundreds of them. His subjects are the landscape, nature, the

weather, the seasons, animals, people. His themes are the age-old themes of poetry: love, loss, grief, hope, the search for meaning. The poetry is loose, it has to be read as if it were talk, without being forced. It is not precious, flashy or given to grand gestures, yet it has a quiet intensity. Thus, a poem might describe a walk during which a simple-seeming chance discovery is made. It might be a puddle in a rut that reflects the sky, or a lane that leads on into the far distance and fades from view, for example, and in pondering these things a moment of profound connectedness with the infinite is vouchsafed. Such moments are hinted at, they are felt rather than understood, and it is John's ability to communicate that felt moment that makes his poetry so good.

'The landscape is straightforward but when I look into the depths, the underneathness, there is, for me, an inter-relatedness of things, a continuity,' says John. 'I can, by the manipulation of words, make some sort of sense of things around me. On another level, it is a form of therapy. I have found myself able to voice what other people would like to voice but cannot. People tell me that they have been moved and awakened by a poem. When you get writing, the poetry somehow reveals itself and hints at meanings beneath the surface of things. It also reveals you. You can't flannel it. I make a start on a poem and I know where I want to end up – the bit in between is a mystery bus tour. They come to me most often when I am driving, often in the dark. I write mostly early in the mornings, mostly in the winter. In the spring and summer I go off in my tiny camper van for two or three nights, locally these days, sometimes to Exmoor. It used to be all over the place.

'I'm not a good judge of my work. I suppose I may have written a half a dozen what I would consider good poems, no more. I was a thistledown seed; when the wind dropped I found poetry was where I was rooted. All my life I have been an observer standing on the edge of things. Poetry is important to me but so is much else, ordinary everyday things.' □

poems from *the edge*

More than Shape

*If this lane were nothing
more than tar and gravel
laid for easy travel from
anywhere to anywhere through
here; and if these hedges
set beside were nothing more
than leaf and branch and stem;
and if the sky in any weather
were nothing more than seasoning,
and you, if you were solely*

*nothing more than shape and form
and face, defined by them, then,
my love, all would be nothing
more than absent-minded motes
that chanced upon a vacant
lodging place and lied, and there
would be an end to them. But,
see how now the lane leads
away the loving eye to where
our way dwindles to the infinite,
further, further even than the sky.*

