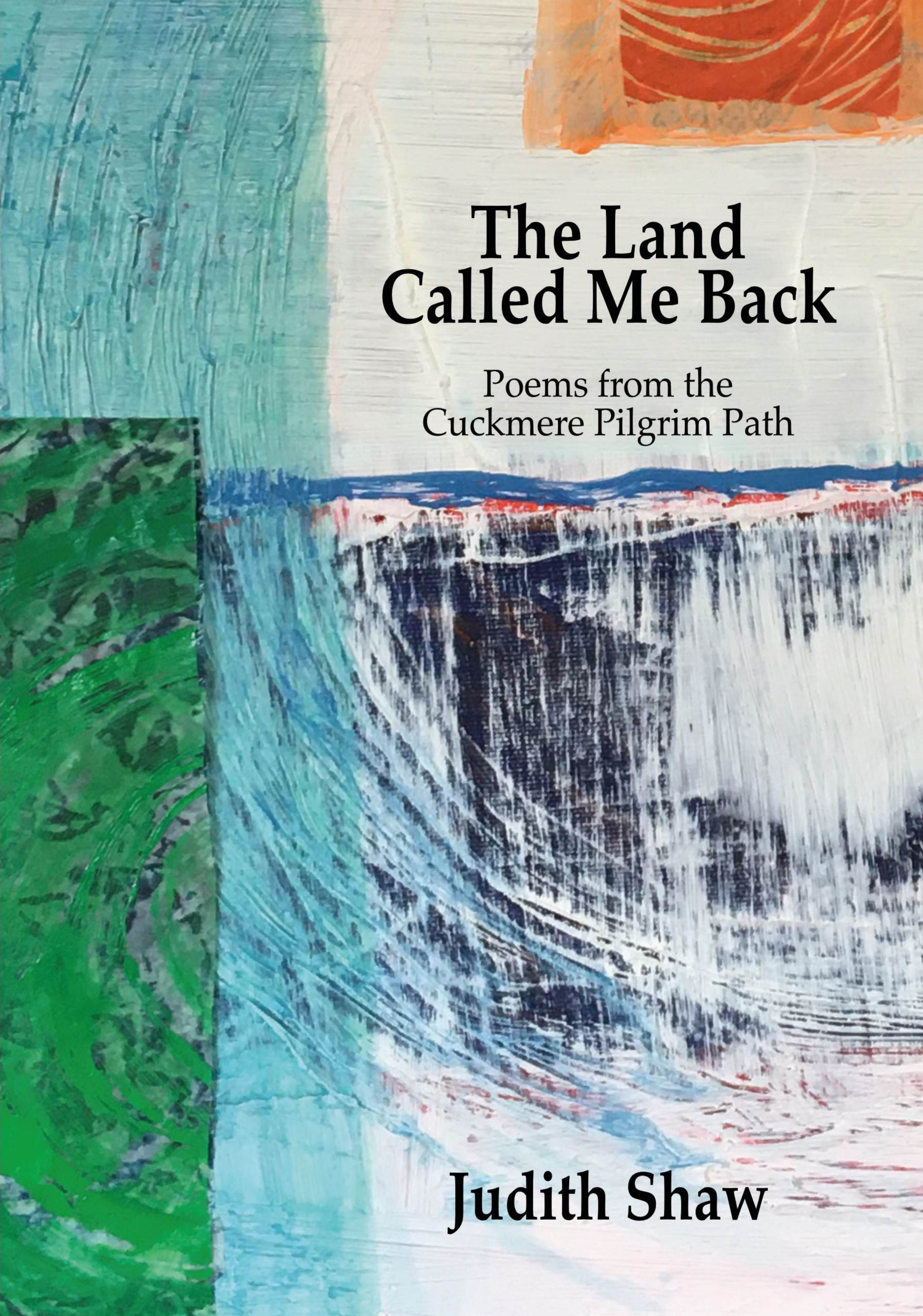
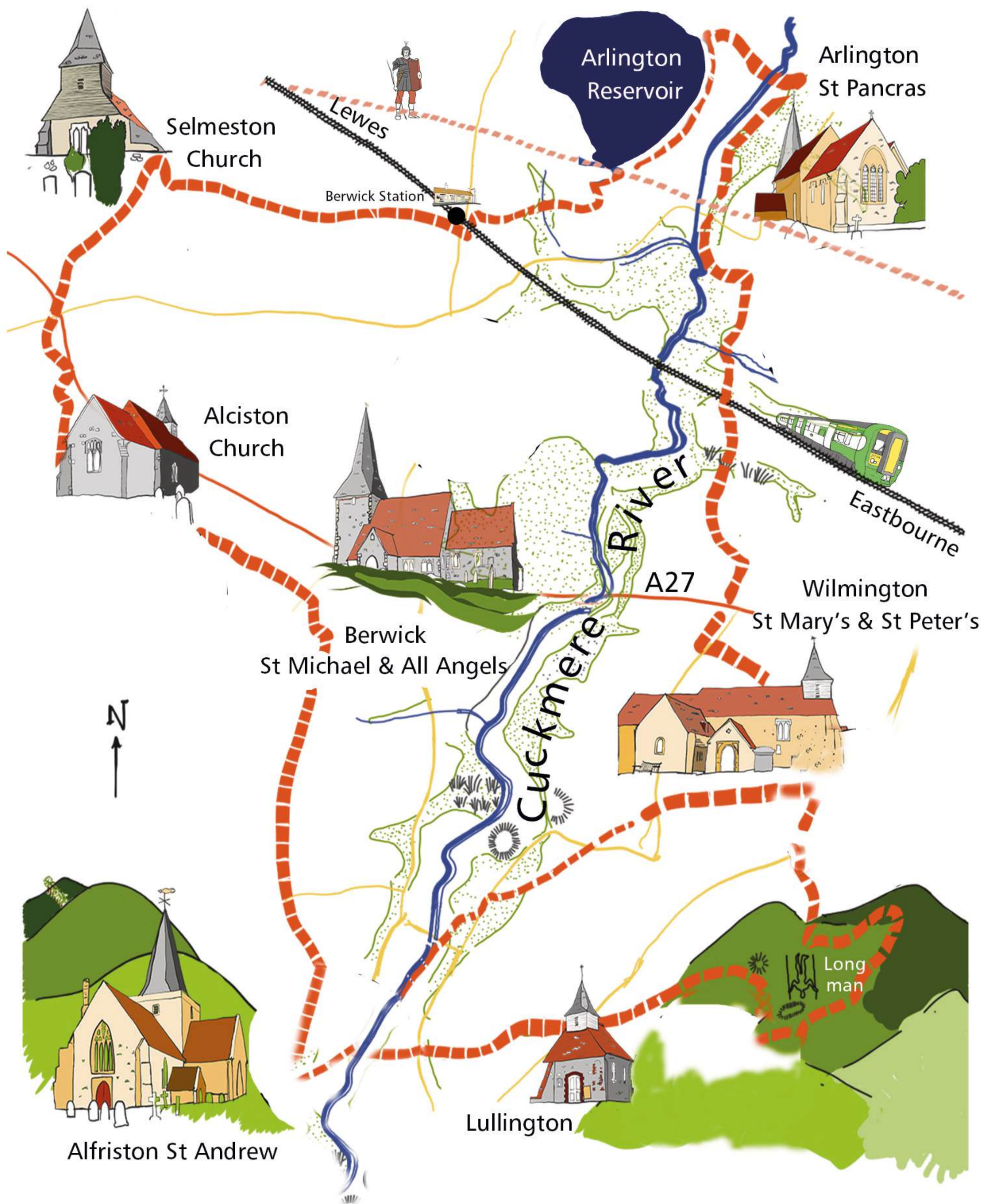


An abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. The background is a mix of light and dark tones, with a prominent vertical band of green on the left side. The top right corner features a bright orange and red circular shape, possibly representing a sun or moon. The overall style is expressive and painterly.

The Land Called Me Back

Poems from the
Cuckmere Pilgrim Path

Judith Shaw



The Land Called Me Back

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Foreword

The year exploring this beautiful area as Poet-in-Residence for the Cuckmere Pilgrim Path has been a gift. I have learnt so much through getting to know the landscape, the churches and the people who live here. The poems are intensely personal responses and vary greatly in style, focus and intent in an attempt to be true to my experiences.

As well as working on my own writing, I have been running monthly writing workshops. The participants have been open to the new, sometimes strange, poetry I have brought to share, and have written from their hearts as well as their minds. I have learnt as much if not more than I have shared.

As part of the residency, I interviewed people who live and work in the area. My thanks for giving their time so generously go to Catherine and Paul Lewis, Diana and James White, Michelle Boyes, Margaret Wilmot, Jane Hooten, Graham Wratten and Joanna Lumsden. Although not all their stories and knowledge of the area appear directly in the poems, all the interviews contributed to an understanding which enriched my work and I hope will continue to do so.

Thanks are also due to the many people in the poetry community who have supported me in this work, in particular the Hastings Stanza group; my workshopping group, Joanna Lowry, Antony Mair and Mary Allen, who have been consistently interested and supportive; my mentor Caroline Bird who has challenged and supported me to grow through this experience; and my first reader and editor, Catherine Sweeney who has been a stalwart and perceptive friend throughout.

It has been wonderful to have the support of Diana White in her role as Benefice Administrator; she has been really generous with her time.

And of course, I must thank Peter Blee who has had the vision to create this Pilgrim Path and Poetry Residency and has given me the freedom to find my own way and been there to support me when needed.

Scan this code to listen
online to the poems read
by the author.



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Echo

On the stiff slope
out of Alfriston I stop
beside the roadside crucifix resting
hand on hip to catch my breath.
Geese honk overhead
flying into the distance.
When I look back down
my mother is beside me
mirroring the posture I learnt from her
pausing on a hill
steadying herself on her stick
or leaning on her rollator by the lake
in the arboretum
where in the end,
only six of us allowed,
we gathered to scatter her ashes.
I read the notice.
The crucifix was erected
on a prehistoric burial ground
the year my mother was born.
She runs her hand through her hair
offering that self-deprecating smile
before she sets off down the hill
and I turn back to the climb.

Alciston Church

Flight Groom

For M.B.

I used to calm the horses when the planes took off,
stood with the restless ones. I always knew
those who would find the journey hard. They trusted me.
And then the tired arrival, out of time and place.

I stood with the restless ones. I always knew
they'd scent the land before we did.
And then the tired arrival, out of time and place.
Birds draw ragged lines against the Downs,

they owned the land before we did.
I keep the church and care for those who come,
watch birds draw ragged lines against the Downs,
the churchyard fills with springtime roses.

I keep the church and care for those who come –
I always know who'll find the journey hard.
The churchyard fills with springtime roses.
I used to calm the horses when the planes took off.

Custodian

Time unspools
like the sea's horizon opening
in your forehead, or in yoga
when the teacher says *let your eyes*
drop and there's a click
as your brain releases its cage.

When he says *the land called me back*
I wonder which voices called -
the billions of soil microorganisms?
Fungi, protozoa, nematodes?
The ghost of his father's father?
The children who were taken out of school
to herd cattle from hill tops? Or is the call
from the old farmhouse, part-built
from the keel timbers of broken boats?

He gives me a sea-urchin turned to flint.
I can see the shell, the mouth.
A hundred million years old.
He planted oak saplings thirty-two years ago;
they've only grown ten feet.

Berwick Church

Altarpiece

This is not the sort of painting I like
an ideal and sentimental landscape

but its symmetry folds the world
into an order I need now when my friend

returning from Calais describes how people
are living. The wildflowers painted

with every detail of petal and leaf,
give an illusion of peace. She says volunteers

provide hot drinks, a charging bank for phones.
In the painting the track starts centre,

winds right and out of sight in distant hills.
In Calais they live in shelters under trees. Here

are tiled floors, mediaeval windows,
a bronze of the Christ Child. Every two days

the police break up their corners of safety,
she tells me, bring in different forces

so they can't make friends with the refugees.
The rainbow in the dark sky lightens to the right,

grass grows down the middle of the rutted track
untouched by wheels. She says there is rubbish everywhere.

Family walk

a rabble of rabbis, a coven of carpenters,
prayer shawls flapping, yarmulkes clutched,
crowd along chatting, argue in Yiddish,
even my stone-faced dressmaker granny
her carpenter husband so weak and so handsome
who mustn't – not ever – quite be himself.
His cousin is trapped in her all-in-one girdle
like my mother's relations all locked in catastrophe,
the disappeared father in photos with marks
on his face and her mother, unhappy
even before she was taken away
and before them, the peasants
who lived off the land, not tidy like here
with its hedges and paths
but the shtetl, with all its roughness and pain.
They trail on the path that I'm following now
wondering where we are heading and why.
My mother in straight up and down polyester
my father beside her with bow-legged walk,
all generations, both sides of the family,
by the grinding of time, I've become what I am.

Selmeston Church

Visiting the past

In the 21st century
at a service station
I buy Earl Grey tea
and pain au chocolat
with my phone
then sit on a bench
in Selmeston churchyard, try
to slow to the pace of
someone who was born
here and lived their life
never going further than the next
village, moving no faster
than walking or a horse
could carry them, hearing
news by word of mouth. My brakes
screech and lock. I must
release them. The air I breathed
when I was young fixed
who I am, all my life
from one place to another,
not knowing how to listen
to the grass grow.

Rooted

The bones of the earth are in him,
changes of the seasons from snow
to the tumult of growing grass
in the Austrian Alps.
I try to figure how many places I've lived.

One summer we take the ski lift
to a sky top café, eat Sachertorte,
drink coffee. He relaxes
but the restless passing clouds
remind me of the 73 bus
trundling by my London flat

where my brother who always loved the sun.
would read in the garden backing
his chair further and further
as the shadow of the house
grew towards him till he tipped
precariously on the edge of the rockery.

Now he lives in Australia
where the sun always shines
but the small dark rooms
of our childhood insist.
The membrane stretches thinner
and thinner but never breaks.

Here on the Cuckmere Pilgrim Path
I meet people who have lived
in the same home for sixty years.
The Wilmington Church yew tree
is sixteen hundred years old
and, in the way of trees,
has never moved.

What poetry can do

strings of railway lines hollow places
 all lighting up at once walk toe to toe
 with your own reflection a tangle between you
and the rest of the world sliding down the helter skelter
 shooting off the end into a demented sky
clearing the gutter washing out
 old leaves dead mice
looming out of fog pressing its dripping face
 against the windscreen
a sparrowhawk jinking to chase a fulmar
 cutting through the sky
 against a sandstone cliff pitted with nests
strings of seagulls calling calling
 superhighways following new compass settings
 a horse gallops through the classroom door
fills the room with dead geraniums
 from a rubbish tip brought back to life

Selmeston Church

Fine rats

Fine rats was a series of art installations held under Spaghetti Junction in Birmingham 1993. The names are men who died in the First World War commemorated in Selmeston Church.

we trail through tunnels stinking of piss and petrol

Sidney Frank Coleman Charles Hylands Charles Walter Short

in a clearing where six subways meet
the blank stares of tango dancers to the sound of a violin

on the side of a building fabric printed with a white horse
comes alive with the wind

George Clarke William Mackay Ralph Squibb

a row of barbers' chairs face empty mirrors

we stand on the edge of the canal
shadowed by the motorway
oil drums at intervals as far as I can see

a man with crash helmet and leathers runs
down the canal kicking each oil drum
setting off explosions

Charley Clarke Arthur Henry Chilvers William Robert

Wilmington Church

Yew tree

The leaning sections are supported by various poles, some of which are too small in diameter to be of any use if the tree decided to move.

The church is closed. I worship the tree.
It has been here since the Romans left Britain
two-trunked, thirty foot round, supported
by sturdy sticks, imprisoned by a strong rusty chain.
Although, as the guidebook says, if it decided to move,
the props and chain would not hold it.
It would heave its roots out of the earth
spraying slow worms and woodlice over the church,
lunge off to visit the Long Man and plant itself
by the hilltop barrows looking down on the Cuckmere
and live another thousand years.

Selmeston Church

The book

He parts the book, snipping its strings,
precious pages spread on a long table

like the flounces of a shirt to be ironed.
He has lain in bed musing on how to do this,

what he'll write. The man he reveres
was dead before he himself was born.

Will he copy White's phrasing
or create something entirely new?

He handles the sheets firmly
keeping them in place, interleaving

virgin paper like a conversation,
binding and stitching their lives together.

He steps back, admires the double creation.
He is making his mark, gently.

Note: Gilbert White (1720-1793) wrote about Selbourne; W.D.Parish (1833-1904) rebound the book with extra pages for his observations of Selmeston.

Paths

It started with the birth canal
or even before that
sperm swimming to the egg.
Paths made by creatures
their trails eroded,
their desire lines
becoming ours.
Now we have names
for every route,
alley, twitten, rodding
partways, bostal, rake
driftway, pad, holloway, ride.

I track my life in pathways:
across the road to school,
the gully between boarded fences,
through school corridors
lugging my load of books
through unfriendly faces.
Stumbling routes
round the back lanes of Newcastle,
from West End to Jesmond.
Then to the print workshop
in the Elephant and Castle mews.

When I was ill I was attached lightly
to my body, ready to fly.
I shortened my distance
walked the roads around the Home,
but kept close, staying in a circle of safety.

Once my feet froze to a halt
under the oak in the grounds.
The nurse rescued me back
to my room and rubbed my feet
till I was in my body again.

And now the Pilgrim Path
learning new routes while knowing
my time is running, no, walking out.

Arlington Church

Leper's window

I imagine a woman in thin clothes
shaking with fever peering
for grace through the dirty window
but the guidebook lies.

*From the leper's window
you can see the altar.*

But from here I see only
the choristers' bench, a cloth,
mop and bucket.

*Anyone too sick to join
can participate.*

She scratches at the glass
but they ignore her
like a stray cat.

*A good view of the altar
and the ministry of the sacrament.*

I lean on the cobbled clay wall
to write this poem
graceless and shaking
with my lying guidebook.
Mayday, I whisper, Mayday
though the signal
has not been invented yet.

Note: Although I quote the guidebook describing the window as a 'leper's window', there are other interpretations of its purpose.

As I walk

by the wheatfield,
the Downs above me,
hot day, no birdsong,
a horde tramps
through my brain:
war elephants trumpet,
hornets drone, big cats
lurk, the wind is a man
beating a dog
tied to a stake, the clouds
are rats, eviscerated
and lined with gold leaf,
this tree has the tail
of a fox nailed
to a plaque. I want to enjoy
a peaceful walk
along the pilgrim path
but the cries
of the ensnared
keep spoiling
this lovely view.

Berwick Church

Church visit

Graham grabs my
arm I scream he
lets me go pats
the air between us
as if I'm a
dangerous dog I sit
on a tombstone
it's cold but there's
no noise no
people no smells
on the bus I had
a seat to myself
but I still had to
breathe everyone's
air I want to go
home but I'll have
to get on the bus
again I feel sick
Susan leads the
others out sits on
a tombstone doesn't
touch me
come in
just you and me
no smell of
food or perfume
I'll switch the
bright lights off
I'm cold
I say yes

benches
paintings on the
walls *I want to*
show you this
she holds
a bronze cross
seven hundred
years old found
in the field over
there fifty times
my age all
those people
like cut out
dolls holding
paper hands
want to hold it
it's heavy
doesn't want
anything
look after
it while I go
with the others
I sit with this
cold piece of
bronze and I
breathe

Selmeston Church

my shadow soul watches my survival self

so ill I nearly died twice
glimpsing the end
when I was young trying to find my way
who would think I was the ghost
haunted by the broken gravestones nameless people
whirling in a trance of familiar mistakes
still in the same place
when I think I am going forward
everything rolling back
I spin in wheels of time and space
a pagan stone circle from before Christ
turning on the spot in Selmeston churchyard
a pagan stone circle from before Christ
I spin in wheels of time and space
everything rolling back
when I think I am going forward
still in the same place
whirling in a trance of familiar mistakes
haunted by the broken gravestones nameless people
who would think I was the ghost
when I was young trying to find my way
glimpsing the end
so ill I nearly died twice

Berwick Church

Dayenu

The group are rustling
their papers, fiddling with pens,
they've got nothing – and then
a tawny owl hoots around the church
and round back again and we all look up
even the man who doesn't hear well.

My mother, the hard-boiled atheist,
when something moved her used to say
Dayenu, from the Passover Seder –
if God had only brought us out of Egypt,
it would have been enough.
Dayenu

If God had only given us the hoot
of the tawny owl,
it would have been enough,
if God had only given us snowdrops,
if He had only given us rain.
Dayenu.

My lover's father was deaf too.
I always knew when he was visiting
because I'd hear her shouting.
When he was dying, he said
Blackbird and we all heard it.
Dayenu.

Alfriston Church

Harmonic Resonance

six bell-ringers are ringing down
this is the best bit the big
woman says *harmonic resonance*
created by all
the bells and none



Judith Shaw is a poet and artist who has lived in St Leonards on Sea since 2004 when she returned from a year living and working in Iceland. The landscape and people of Iceland had a profound effect on her visual work and poetry. She currently works as a therapist and as a specialist in education, supporting people who are neurodivergent.

In 2023 she was awarded a distinction in the Masters in Writing Poetry from the Poetry School/ Newcastle University. Her poetry has been published in numerous magazines including *Magma*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Consilience*, *Black Iris* and *The Frogmore Papers*. Her poem 'Fragile Bodies' appears in *Ten Poems about Getting Older* by Candlestick Press.

A selection of her work and contact details are available at: <https://www.judithshawcreative.uk>

Searching, hard-won poems where worlds co-exist, where the line between the past and the present is as faint as a breeze, and sometimes we must follow the path backwards in order to find ourselves.

- Caroline Bird

The subtle poems in Judith Shaw's latest gathering whisper secrets embedded in chalk landscapes and rural churchyards. Their honed silences spark into sudden vivid life - a yew tree threatening to 'lunge off to visit the Long Man ... live another thousand years'. Histories natural, cultural and personal intertwine in the lines of the Cuckmere Pilgrim Path, evoked in language alert to how we're shaped by the layered richness around us: 'By the grinding of time, I've become what I am'.

- John McCullough

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