

HONEST JOHN

(John Clare, 1793-1864)

In confinement, imagined he was filling his pen
from an inkwell of his own urine,

saw the pale script fading as it dried
to the invisible ink of his obscurity.

Starving on the run, falls to his hands and knees
Like Nebuchadnezzar to eat grass. Keeps

walking back to what does not exist:
long-dead first love, landscape of youth, back

to days before the Sunday best of his brief celebrity.
Thick-fingered daisy-chainer, he knew once

how to become very small, could enter
the tiny world of ladybird in a high wind,

would read aloud the small names of God
he saw written through the songstruck woods.

Fugitive again, he knows the constellations and takes
their giant word in laying himself head-north, feet-south

to know his way before first light. But first light sees him
far down a wrong road, foul-mouthing the new land

and sky as they spin him in their cock-eyed compass,
misleading him from his way home.

Sam Willetts

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