

## Angi Holden

### Poems from John Clare Workshops with Clare Shaw: Manchester

#### Identity – 29<sup>TH</sup> June 2109

##### Stickleback

I am no longer than your smallest finger,  
my spines, folded back, are blade sharp.  
Hard to spot, I slide across the gravel,  
circling in eddies, carried by currents.  
From below I am silver against the surface sky,  
from above I am mottled against mudstone.  
I will strip the algae from rock and reed,  
I will close your eyes to thought.  
Pick me up and I'll twist in your grip,  
one flicker at your eyes' periphery  
You may think you have me,  
but the slightest splash, and I'm gone.

##### Summer Storm

I am stagelights against a Victorian guildhall,  
a vaudeville of terracotta and ochre and glass.

I am a backdrop of rainclouds,  
the sky unyielding, dense and steel grey.

I am streams cascading across tarmac,  
tumbling through one draincover, flowing from the next.

I am the electric prickle of bare skin,  
suddenly burning, sleet-cold and wet.

I am the excited chattering of magpies,  
streets of plane trees alive with rainsong.

## Altered

The Book of Myself is an altered journal,  
once a celebration of needlecraft.  
I've pulled and shuffled its pages;  
now it's an album of images, over which  
I've stitched and stuck and written.

My grandmother's recipes interleave  
with extracts from Mrs Beeton and Nigel Slater;  
advice from Adam the Gardener is rooted  
between empty seed packets and pages  
torn from an Observer's Book of Wild Flowers.

There are shopping lists and cheque stubs,  
stories and poems, photographs and postcards,  
tickets to concerts and shows,  
and from the trains that took me there;  
from contents to index there are women's voices,  
an endless echoing of wordless song.

My book smells of autumn bonfires,  
of the open hearth of Old School Cottage,  
of Holland House tobacco and Avon Occur!  
of chocolate and ginger and sweet chilli,  
of ancient yew and pine and eucalyptus.

Its cover peels like the bark of silver birch,  
its pages are as soft as June's first rose buds  
crinkled as the silk petals of poppies.  
Words, like rice grains falling through a rain stick,  
tumble from my pen, skitter across its surfaces.

## Work – 13<sup>TH</sup> July 2109

### O Taste and See

Smaller than a fist, this breast is ripe, overripe, the flesh dissolving, dropping like a peach left too long among other fruit, faintly wrinkled, a thin coat of fur, a pelt, the finest, softest, while underneath the flesh is falling, not drying out but becoming moist... this flesh, this flesh beneath your teeth, and the juice dribbling down your chin, the flavour intense now, stronger than when it was tight and firm and fresh-plucked, still waiting for its moment of ripeness and fecundity.

### A Flea Attends the Library Creative Writing Class.

I hear them extolling the virtues of the written word,  
but I find little of sustenance in these dusty tomes.

They talk about the writers' pulse, the toil and sweat,  
and I can feel the animal warmth of these leather spines.

But I divine no capillaries beneath the surface,  
no flesh yielding enough for my prick and suck.

A single spring takes me to the table's shadows,  
where restless ankles shuffle, where socks scroll down.

They read in turn, pulses quickening. A hand reaches down:  
a furtive scratch, exposing skin in bloody sacrament.

**Carers**  
**after Kim Moore**

Gratitude for the hospice carers, paid and unpaid,  
the holders of hands, whose firm grip  
stills the shaking if only for a moment.

Gratitude for the bedside hours,  
the pouring of cool water, the supporting  
of sippy beakers, the spooners of mush.

Gratitude for the listeners, for those who  
bend their heads close to labouring lips,  
who catch the faint words of the sick and dying.

Gratitude for the imaginative, the ones  
who talk about how it was back then,  
even though they'd not been born.

Gratitude for the night workers,  
who allow the sons and daughters respite,  
who hold their places for an hour or two.

And afterwards, gratitude for the ones  
who bend the rules, who share a hug,  
a cup of tea, a plain sweet biscuit.

Gratitude to those who say her passing  
was peaceful, who gloss over the dry lips  
and the rattling breath, the ones who say  
her time had come, that she was ready.

## Landscape & Nature – 27<sup>TH</sup> July 2109

### All the Sources of Heat

This is the one we don't mention, the thousand razor blades, the burn that doctors say is simply your age, here have some cream. And then the kettle blows and I'm boiling water for tea and sitting in a room with closed curtains watching sleet the size of golfballs bring sweating cyclists to a halt on a French mountain. Outside, the bin wagon collects our debris, carries it away stench and all, and still the sun burns against the brickwork of our house, still the temperature rises, still I peel and flake. A mayfly shedding its final skin: egg, naiad, imago.

### Summer Moods

after John Clare

I love to walk from Tyn y Gongl,  
from horses' fields to Lon Gwion,  
from rugby club to Banks the Ironmongers,  
the florists, craft shop, general stores.

Where the trail tumbles alongside gladed streams  
behind Breeze Hill, tread carefully.  
The rough path's worn  
to stumble stone and raised tree-root,  
as if the land were saying: slow down, take time,  
watch each and every step.

And so you should, for if you pause  
you'll catch a glimpse of small brown birds:  
a sharp-beaked dunnock, a wren,  
perhaps a black-necked stonechat,  
each foraging for grub and bug and beetle,  
in constant nurturing of nestlings.

Listen too. The occupants of summer gardens,  
heat-fuelled and bickering, are distant now,  
the squeal and shout of children filtered-out  
by fence and hedge and wild gold gorse.  
There's quiet here, a not-quiet silence  
as the water courses over rounded pebbles,  
through wind-snapped twigs, around the fallen logs.

The roar of midday sun, the traffic's rumble,  
the stamp of salt-sweat mares – all are far off,  
forgotten in the woodland's shadow.

## Take nothing but pictures

Click: This sky of peach and turquoise,  
wide with sheep-fields, hedged by gorse.

Click: This slow unfurling of translucent horn:  
a snail, muscling along a blade of grass.

Click: This peripheral flit through beech leaves,  
a camouflage of feathers, splitting the shadows.

Click: This clatter-spit of water over pebbles,  
the light rainbow'd through stream spume.

Click: This drone of bees, this dance of mayflies,  
and in the shadows, these footprints of ants.

## Rest

for John Clare

Here. Sit. This seat, whittled by your grandfather,  
has felt the hands of generations,  
fathers, brothers, sons.  
It's smooth and firm for all its age.  
I'll move it closer to the stove, that you might feel  
the woodlands welcome: warmth.  
Rub your hands. That's it: rub.  
And here's a blanket for your knees,  
your mother's pattern, not written down  
but copied from her mother,  
in turn learned from her own.  
Here's bread and cheese, soup your daughter made:  
wild nettle, carrot, turnip. Thick and filling.  
Rest awhile – limb and heart and soul.  
There will be time again for lanes and blackbird nests,  
for kites and old man's beard, for oak and elm,  
for blacksmiths' anvils, horses, ploughs,  
for gates and benches. Time for them another day.  
Rest now. Here, take this seat. Come close and rest.