

COURSE: JOHN CLARE, MANCHESTER CENTRAL LIBRARY, JUNE/JULY 2019.

LEN EVANS

TUTOR: CLARE SHAW.

NOTES AND POEMS

Notes: I didn't know what to expect from this course. I'd heard Clare Shaw read once, maybe twice before. I liked the atmosphere in the group, as it soon became clear that course members were enthusiastic and serious about their writing. This was just what I needed as I had started to write more often, with a growing awareness of the craft of poetry.

Clare was a demanding tutor and challenged our poetic decisions and perceptions. Again, this was good for me, making me question things. For example, Clare would often say, (when a poem particularly affected an individual) 'where in your body does that resonate?' Having a background in drama I was used to experimentation and exploration, but she is much more experimental in her teaching than I'd met in the poetry world before.

Below are some first draft and fragments of poems. The idea of 21<sup>st</sup> century people writing to John Clare interests me, but these, at the moment, are fragments.

WEEK 1.

NO TITLE

I hear the echoes of past voices now.  
I hear the echoes of unheard voices now.  
I hear the scratching of heads and pens  
on an Elizabethan page and the tapping  
of Turing's keyboard.  
I hear the two mile roar of coaches, lorries  
and other vehicles, carrying the next  
generation of everything that parents hoped for.  
I hear the planes that eventually choke the world.  
I hear the chatter of soap opera, leading  
to suds and drowning.

On the horizon I hear the memory  
of the Zulu film when Michael Caine and army  
feared the sophistication of warriors.

I hear a new species planning the biggest revolution.  
I hear an army of vengeful computers clicking into life.

ALL CHANGE

I come from the streets  
full of legs and keks,  
where each front door step  
was stoned out of its rocker,  
and nine out of ten families  
were 'nesh' in winter.

But when we moved,

keks became pants,  
front steps were cleaned  
by somebody else  
and 'nesh' offended the villagers.

And then we moved again.  
Pants became pressed,  
front steps became gateways  
and offence seemed to be taken  
by everyone in every street, house  
and institution.

## WEEK 2

### CAUGHT IN THE DEEP

I was silver and gold and large  
in the hands of Victor.

His halfway house friend,  
with a Banksy beard,  
took a photo of us, then threw  
me back into the dirty canal.

I swam along  
and swallowed something green,  
then something red.

I can't tire of swimming,  
the alternative is worse.  
So I've acclimatised to the rust  
and the stink and the cold.

The towpath is full of photographers  
shouting at me to smile.

## WEEK 4

### NO TITLE

I love to walk along  
this path I don't know.  
It is golden brown and quiet.  
To my right and left, grass  
and flowers grow wild.  
Up ahead the path is long, maybe infinite.  
I walk slowly and stop  
at intervals to consider  
this August mid-morning.  
I hear a trickle of water.  
I hear no animals or birds  
and come to the thought  
that this is what it was like  
before too much creation.

### NO TITLE

On this summer coloured path,  
I feel a pebble, then pick it up;  
sky blue and smooth, hot in my hand.

Five miles further on,  
I feel a pebble, then pick it up;  
red and awkward and cold in my hand.

A stone bigger than me blocks my path  
and confronts me in Arabic.

## POSTCARDS

Dear John,

I'm sorry we haven't met before now.  
But I arrive at your open page in the perfect moment,  
two hundred years later, when your messages  
strike a progressively clearer alarm for us.

If I'd experienced your starvation,  
my growth would have lay in a thick shadow.  
If I'd suffered your losses, I'd have been hospitalised.  
If I'd lived with the full fist of class and power,  
I'd be in a strait jacket. My four walls would  
be telling me to refer myself to Self-Help-Services.

I'll write again.

Yours sincerely  
Dr Alan Knott (Extinction Rebellion.)

Dear John,

Would you consider speaking to our group  
about your experience of living in asylums?

We are all survivors of the NHS  
and feel sure you have something  
pertinent to say on the matter.

We can only pay expenses,  
but will provide tea, biscuits  
and appreciation.

Yours sincerely,  
Margaret Leighton  
(Founder of New Asylum Survivors)

Dear John,

I'm sorry you can't get permission  
to leave your asylum

and therefore cannot speak to our group.

It seems narrow minded of the doctors.

Perhaps we could come to you.

Is this possible?

Would you ask your doctors permission?

We are happy to travel,  
especially since we have been able  
to buy a mini bus with the help  
of the National lottery.

Please let us know,  
so that we can make arrangements,  
ASAP.

Best wishes,  
Margaret.