

I Am  
(John Clare)

I am: yet what I am none cares or knows,  
My friends forsake me like a memory lost;  
I am the self-consumer of my woes,  
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,  
Like shades in love and death's oblivion lost;  
And yet I am! and live with shadows tost

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,  
Into the living sea of waking dreams,  
Where there is neither sense of life nor joys,  
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;  
And e'en the dearest--that I loved the best--  
Are strange--nay, rather stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man has never trod;  
A place where woman never smil'd or wept;  
There to abide with my creator, God,  
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept:  
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie;  
The grass below--above the vaulted sky.

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When he was sane, John Clare was a country man so most of his poems were about animals, birds and other rural topics. Self-educated, poor beyond imagining, John Clare experienced a brief, condescending vogue as England's "Peasant Poet," at a time when illiteracy was a norm for England's rural workers, and poets were expected to come from higher social ranks. (Keats, for example, was ridiculed for writing "Cockney poetry"). When he was in fashion, people would visit his cottage and sometimes give him a few coins.

When the novelty had worn off, this immensely gifted writer experienced isolation and hardship, and finally became insane, spending most of his life in an institution. The tough, memorable language of "I Am" demonstrates that Clare was an extremely impressive artist. Lines such as "I am the self-consumer of my woes" have a distinction and force that need no propping up by the pathos of the life behind the writing.

It was at Northampton General Asylum, most likely within his first two years as an inmate, that Clare composed what has become his best-known poem, a definitive lament simply and achingly called "I Am". It is slightly disturbing, and terribly well written.