

“First Love”

by John Clare¹

I ne'er was struck before that hour
With love so sudden and so sweet,
Her face it bloomed like a sweet flower
And stole my heart away complete.
My face turned pale as deadly pale.
My legs refused to walk away,
And when she looked, what could I ail?
My life and all seemed turned to clay.

And then my blood rushed to my face
And took my eyesight quite away,
The trees and bushes round the place
Seemed midnight at noonday.
I could not see a single thing,
Words from my eyes did start –
They spoke as chords do from the string,
And blood burnt round my heart.

Are flowers the winter's choice?
Is love's bed always snow?
She seemed to hear my silent voice,
Not love's appeals to know. (var. And love's appeals to know)²
I never saw so sweet a face
As that I stood before.
My heart has left its dwelling-place
And can return no more.

¹ *The Poems of John Clare*, ed. J. W. Tibble (2 volumes, Dent, 1935), vol. 2, p. 504.

² *Selected Poems of John Clare*, ed. and intro. James Reeves (London: Heinemann, 1954; repr. 1968), p. 128.

“First Love”³

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No single hour can pass for naught,
No moment-hand can move,
But calendars an aching thought
Of my first lonely love.

Where silence doth the loudest call
My secret to betray,
As moonlight holds the night in thrall,
As suns reveal the day,

I hide it in the silence shades,
Till silence finds a tongue;
I make its grave where time invades,
Till time becomes a song.

I bid my foolish heart be still,
But hopes will not be chid:
My heart will beat, and burn, and chill,
First love will not be hid.

When summer ceases to be green,
And winter bare and blea,
Death may forget what I have been
When I shall cease to be.

When words refuse before the crowd
My Mary's name to give,
The muse in silence sings aloud:
And there my love will live.

3 *Selected Poems of John Clare*, ed. and intro. James Reeves, p. 97.