

First Alphabet

for John Clare

Little oddling, always late,
a solitary wide-eyed boy
dawdling by the fields edge
on his slow saunter to school.

Still bewildered by learning,
a timid figure, gawping high
beyond the trees and hedgerows,
trying to read the fenland sky.

That sudden shock of geese
flying low over Glinton spire
a noisy flock of letterforms,
silhouettes folding and flapping.

A garbled alphabet of wings
above his tousled head,
a formation of words in full flight,
his first sight of poetry.

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In his autobiographical sketches John Clare recalled
that as a child he watched wild geese scudding
through the sky and saw in their formations
'all the letters of the Alphabet'.