

Scraps

(on viewing the John Clare archive)

You called them scraps
these flawed fragments, unfinished efforts
captured on anything you had to hand,
a tatter of torn labels or printed bills,
splices of birch bark scrawled in spidery lines,
old envelopes pieced and stitched
as a crude notebook, creased wrapping
hoarded for the hard days, the weeks
when you couldn't afford fine paper.

Thin skinned testaments, bleeding through,
a flurry of words written this way and that,
corner to corner, covered back and front
and slewing sideways down the margins.
Penned in poor man's homemade ink
ground oak galls and green coppurs,
a tannic concoction stewed in rainwater,
its bitter cantankerous brew
a recipe for disaster in years to come.

Today I gently turn the pages
of your humble archive,
coded folders of acid free paper,
expensive conservation tapes and tissue
protecting these remnants of poems
delicate as pressed harebells
or wisps of dried sweet woodruff.
This catalogue of waifs and strays,
frayed oddments mottled and holed
by hurtful ink, leaf bitten lines
nibbled to the vein by pooties and caterpillars
feeding on your wounded words.

(pooties .. Clare's name for snails)