

New Light for the Old Dark **by Sam Willetts**



Although Sam Willetts has worked in many spheres, no biographical description of him can resist the detail that he is also a recovering heroin addict. Poems in [*New Light for the Old Dark*](#) do explore the 'use, cluck, raise, score, use' cycle of addiction, but the poet also takes a singular approach to episodes of twentieth century history a step beyond his personal experience. The book was shortlisted for all three prizes for first collections of poetry, and also for the T S Eliot Prize which is a rare achievement for a debut.

June 3rd

You don't stir when I unstick my damp chest
from your back – at that tiny sound,
an orange pulled open, or a kiss
reversed. You've slept through
the window's changes, through its dawning
on me that if I could stay just this far
from sleep, I might escape our years,
somehow make it over those rooftops,
blue in this hour's one blueness – over the drop
to Andy Andersen's backyard, with its litter
of rolled chickenwire, gas-bottles, toys left out;
over it all I'd go looping like a monkey,
from guttering to chimney and up around
that ventilator-stack. If my heels kicked
off a slate, you wouldn't hear it shatter
for your dreams. Sweetheart, you wouldn't
hear me for these birds.
And after that I'd be away,
clear of roofs and city, and moving now
at shaking speed into a day
that's opening like an orchard
and an avenue of that orchard
opening to me like another lover's arms.

Fur-Sorting

In the lit corner of this vast shed I work
like the rats by touch and smell as well as sight:

even the best synthetics crunch between
your fingertips, but real fur parts

down to the aromatic hide, spreads
as it would have when the living animal stood

exploring the wind. A low sheen runs across
silk-cursive legends – *Silvermann*

New Bond Street Guaranteed. Revenant
scents from collars and linings trail long-forgotten

assinations. The nearest thing to warmth here
is the radio's lost bonhomie, swallowed into

the dark. Sometimes the bad light yields
little shocks, like the dainty snarls on those four

foxes stitched into Siamese-quads; then my
own hide pimples, horripilates in sympathy.

The furs love lapsing from their pallets, to flood
the concrete in a lavish slump; some pieces,

somehow, keep coming back – that whole bear's skin,
macabre, scurfed with grit and sawdust, clacks

its claws like sad maracas every time.
Darkness of year's end and a mound of rags

remade daily. The radio yatters to the freezing air. Deep
inside the fur mounds, pink litters squirm for life.

Honest John

(John Clare, 1793-1864)

In confinement, imagined he was filling his pen
from an inkwell of his own urine,

saw the pale script fading as it dried
to the invisible ink of his obscurity.

Starving on the run, falls to his hands and knees
like Nebuchadnezzar to eat grass. Keeps

walking back to what does not exist:
long-dead first love, landscape of youth, back

to days before the Sunday best of his brief celebrity.

Thick-fingered daisy-chainer, he knew once

how to become very small, could enter
the tiny world of a ladybird in a high wind,

would read aloud the small names of God
he saw written through the songstruck woods.

Fugitive again, he knows the constellations and takes
their giant word in laying himself head-north, feet-south

to know his way before first light. But first light sees him
far down a wrong road, foul-mouthing the new land

and sky as they spin him in their cock-eyed compass,
misleading him from his way home.

Discussion Ideas

- If you were making a film of 'Fur-Sorting' would it be a PG fairy tale or a rated 18 horror story? What would the lighting be like, what would be playing on the yattering radio? Who would you cast as the fur-sorter?
- On the basis of this poem, would you apply for a fur-sorter's job? If someone were to write an equivalent poem about your job, what are the details they would focus on?
- What do you know about John Clare? How much do you need to know about him to appreciate the poem? Do you think there are particular connections between Clare and Willetts?
- What can a poem tell us about a named person's life that a biography can't – and vice versa? How far do you trust a biographer? What biographical poems / straight biographies / biopics have you enjoyed, and why?
- Why do you think the title is so specific in 'June 3rd'? What might June 2nd or June 4th poems contain?

Sam Willetts read English at Wadham College, and worked as a teacher, journalist and travel writer but became addicted to heroin at the age of 37. His debut collection, *New Light for the Old Dark* (2010), was shortlisted for the Forward Prize, the Costa Prize and the T S Eliot Prize, and contains poems about the years he spent homeless and addicted to heroin. Now free of drugs, his work covers everything from his mother's plight in the Holocaust to his childhood in Oxfordshire.

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