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H U G H B E H M - S T E I N B E R G



EXCERPTS FROM "GOOD MORNING!"

Wretched beardness.

Revealed most blindingly to me! The great collective soul of the bacterial kingdom! Strength of angels, the very bed upon which all gods sleep.

My double un-wounds me. You didn't have to do that I tell him. He says that's what doubles are for, but I know he wants me in his debt. In his shirt pocket he has two tickets to the forest of knives.

Your double unravels you. You're lying there, not sure why you let this happen. A double is always so persuasive, it's like meeting your long lost twin you're so happy to know them and so afraid you'll lose them, this knowledge of yourself, that you'll do whatever they ask. "I'm making you a sweater," she says. December's coming. "But why out of me," you ask, "I'd gladly give you one of mine." "It's not the same, it's not about the cold," she says. "Just be glad I'm not knitting socks," she says.

Carefully, a swordfish nursing.

You don't even own the air that you breathe; you place a comma, and time puts another one: have, someone else's have. Halves, knots.

I'm at a museum, and I'm watching an illumination demonstration. I ask a question about one of the tools being used and I'm seized by guards wearing white gloves, they stand in front of me and force my head still, so I can only see things peripherally. It's because, they say, I want to be the center of attention instead of knowing what's going on. I'm patient with the injustice of this, and concentrate on seeing what I'm no longer allowed to see.

Really valued sleep, I fight giving it back, maybe I'll wear a striped shirt, maybe I'll take sides, and let the traffic accidents bloom without me.

The ending is lonely because when we were in the middle we
chose to go somewhere else.

Swiftness, a hummingbird in our gingko tree.

The days I take off my glasses, put them back on; the ring on my finger, when I go to sleep I slip it over the temple tip, it slides down and clinks upon the lens and soon I fall asleep. A point where it all fuses together, a point where it all stays discrete. All things to themselves thinking to themselves. What they're thinking they won't say.

The nights I get dressed, the nights where I walk for a thousand miles, the nights where it is always dark for years on end, the nights where the stars swoop down and each one is the eye of a bird, and the birds sing, they sing on my left and my right, they sing above and around me, and that's what they say.

ERICA HAYES



A MAZE LIVES INSIDE THE SKY

A moment of lavender and rose circles the dirt on the surface of a field. There is so much to be seen, glimpsing through color and light. When I was a little girl, I believed I could capture every reflection glowing in a room. Instead my mother found my fingerprints on shiny objects all around the house. Inside shadows told stories on the wall. Outside ladybugs lived on sage leaves. There were seven spots for seven joys and sorrows, so my brother told me after collecting insects in jars. Wings opened, closed, flew, and landed on my pasty knees. Whenever father took me to the playground, I asked him to push me on swings. Motion in air, looking up at blue-grey skies, feeling a breeze float through my hair, watching my tennis shoes above ground; these were references to another presence. In our conversations, there was a pause, a distance overhead. The sunlight spilt over into the warm tea of our afternoon chats. Our faces twisted between the arrows of hallways, telling us there were different directions, other choices to be made.

L A U R A M C C U L L O U G H



OUT OF THE BLUE, WHO

*It floated across the sea
from Nagasaki he said,
but wasn't sure a float
as massive as a ship sixty
feet or more—a dock most
likely, crusted and full of crabs
and snails, sea stars and urchins,
sea grasses and flotation
devices, organic and looking
like a molting creature—
could come ashore from one
calamity to the another. How
many birds had rested there
took respite from the air?
she wondered, the drinks
at Wonder Bar half priced
in the days after the storm,
rotting meat on the streets
from restaurant kitchens
emptied and tossed no public
health plan in place for times
like this and lounge chairs
from The Empress that once
impressed and held summer
club surfers' behinds, someone
sitting on their lap if they
were lucky, the Carousel
twinkling darkly in the dance
lights shooting out, someone
in the shadows finding a stand
in for love. What can
be recovered, from what
comes out of the blue.*

JERRY BRADLEY



PHILIP LARKIN AND THE POETRY OF SELF-DEFENSE

Philip Larkin's considerable poetic reputation was built upon four thin volumes of verse *The North Ship* (1946), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), and *High Windows* (1974). In fact, *The North Ship* contributed little to Larkin's reputation, not merely because it was the work of a schoolboy poet, at times unmercifully imitative and unnecessarily obscure, but rather because its greatest popularity came after Faber and Faber reissued the volume with one additional poem in 1966, well after Larkin's reputation had been soundly established. Moreover, Larkin chose no selections from *The North Ship* for his edition of *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (1973), presumably because no poem was significantly powerful enough itself nor important enough to the period in which it was written to warrant including—the criteria for selection which Larkin outlined in the book's preface.

But as insignificant as *The North Ship* seems, the book is in many places a provocative record of suffering and a startling initiation to Larkin's poetry of self-defense. This spirit of self-preservation, which celebrates the un-heroic dimensions of man and permeates his later work, is evident in these early poems too. As unpleasant as the world seemed to Larkin—and his collected letters testify that he found physical and psychic disintegration close at hand—he always saw it as being ultimately inhabitable. In “This was your place of birth, this daytime palace,” for example, the second poem in *The North Ship*, Larkin wonders whether man can accept his final judgment unflinchingly, or will he “overturn the table and go into the next room?” (14). The card metaphor suggests excitement and an uncertainty prompted when caution is turned aside for a time and defeat hovers precariously nearby, but it does not allow him to answer assuredly when he asks, “Are you prepared for what the night will bring?” (9).

Cynicism offers little certitude beyond simple endurance, and, though not intrinsically pessimistic, Larkin's poetry is founded upon loss and upon man's reckoning of his own diminished position in the world. Consequently, his poems insist that humiliation, frustration, and demolished hopes are the melancholic processes through which man assesses his own worth. And bravery may prove an obstacle of his self-understanding in a world that no longer abides epic heroes. It is, as he says in “Conscript,” a threat to each man's birthright, one that may breed “requisite contempt of good and bad” (4). For Larkin the un-heroic dimensions of man must be viewed unsentimentally, by the individual's recognition of “the instantaneous grief of being alone” (“Kick up the fire, and let the flames break loose” 9).

Rooted in this hard realism of loss and suffering, Larkin maintains, in “To write one song, I said,” that only by visiting the dead—“headstone and wet cross, / Paths where mourners tread, / A solitary bird” (8-10)—may one begin to understand personal loss and mortality. (This idea comes to full statement later in “Church Going,” one of Larkin's most anthologized poems from his second volume.) For Larkin, life seems much like the legend of *The North Ship*: a long journey “into an unforgiving sea” (22). “If grief could burn out” (“If grief could burn out” 1), the heart might rest untormented and the troubled soul be stilled, but such Yeatsian reflection seems impossible in a troubled world. Larkin refuses to exaggerate the potentialities or the shortcomings of man. “He rejects,” A. Kingsley Weatherhead notes, “the gaudy products of imagination in favor of the drab and decent truth” (617). The truth is that “submission is the only good” (“Climbing the hill within the deafening wind” 6). Only when man becomes “an instrument sharply stringed / For all things to strike music as they please” (7-8) may the heart find mitigation for its misery, and even that brief consolation ebbs “when the street / Darkens” (9-10) and “an ancient sadness” (11) descends again upon man.

The North Ship asserts that we live essentially in a place “where no love is” (“The horns of the morning,” 9), where “beauty dries my throat” (“I see a girl dragged by the wrists,” 33), where all actions are “done in patient hopelessness” (36), where all ignore “the silences of death / Thinking no further than the hand can hold” (37-38). By keeping his imagination firmly predicated upon what is real, Larkin insists that “everything’s remade / With shovel and spade; / That each dull day and each despairing act / Builds up the crags from which the spirit leaps” (46-49). Such affirmation out of repeated failure is founded, as J.D. Hainsworth claims, upon a “disillusion that stops a long way short of despair, for Larkin’s poetry always convinces you that life is well worth having, whatever its limitations” (154). Though not labeling it as any kind of poetry of self-preservation, Philip Gardner has sensed in *The North Ship* the “sadness at the back of things” (89) and mankind’s innate ability to endure that sadness. There is in Larkin’s poems, he claims, “the human capacity for facing sorrow and accepting its statement in art without any palliative” (91).

Larkin’s second book is a more mature study of suffering. Walter Allen calls it “the most memorable book of the decade” (474), and Anthony Hartley contends that “Larkin’s volume seems to me in the running for the best published in this country [England] since the war” (801). Though written in 1956, such comments are indicative of the critical esteem in which *The Less Deceived* is still held, although Hartley’s praise arises in part from a misunderstanding of Larkin’s poetical perspective. Hartley insists that Larkin’s verse is nineteenth-century by design and thereby is imbued with a natural piety stemming from “a submission to, if not awe of, natural things, a humility before the object and before human beings” (801). To the contrary, Larkin does not elevate or deify the natural so much as he devalues the human. While Hartley is correct to note the considerable distance separating man and nature, the discrepancy occurs not because of any belief Larkin shares in natural piety but rather because of Larkin’s unobscured realism that depicts man in his common, ignoble environment.

John Ciardi suggested that Larkin’s overt realism might lead to a poetic dead end, an inability to take a “poetic chance” (32), but the narrow focus of a poet’s vision sometimes necessitates a narrowing of poetic chances. Larkin became less experimental as he matured, but he found a voice that rendered suffering and alienation with much clarity and little sentimentality.

In “Whatever Happened?” for example, Larkin reiterates his position that trouble is the common run of man: “the map / Points out how unavoidable it was” (10-11). Nature is not the site of man’s redemption; rather, it provides the arena for his floundering. While one may wonder “where’s the source” (13) of such malignity, Larkin is careful to avoid attributing any mood whatsoever to nature. Impersonal nature, much in the tradition of Thomas Hardy (one of Larkin’s favorite poets), has nothing against man but often finds itself in confrontation with him nevertheless. Man’s recourse is the psychological acceptance of pain and grief, a kind of celebration of misery.

Events in *The Less Deceived* are, for the most part, insignificant in that they are common; trouble and suffering are certainties. In “Whatever Happened?” only “perspective brings significance” (7). Unwilling to pity himself, man, in hindsight, redeems himself by adding importance to the events through which he has lived. Larkin’s thrashing over the importance of events may easily be misunderstood and seem little more than a frozen photographic moment: “what can’t be printed can be thrown away” (9). The dictates of reality supplant any heroic yearnings.

Larkin again uses camera imagery to reveal artificial assumptions about life in “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph

Album.” As in “Whatever Happened?” photographs serve as reminders of incidents that were never clearly rendered nor fully understood. The album’s contrived poses distort reality, further eroding life’s authenticity. The photographs, most notably those that depict the staged scenes of youth, lack the requisite realism—“too much confectionary, too rich: / I choke on such nutritious images” (4-5). The irony of Larkin’s observations is impressive. The camera is an instrument of deception when capturing “a sweet girl graduate; / Or lifting a heavy-headed rose / Beneath a trellis, or in a trilby hat” (8-10) but becomes an instrument of reality when recording “dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds, / And will not censor blemishes” (18-19). Despite human attempts at deception, photography itself convinces that “this is a real girl in a real place, / In every sense empirically true!” (25-26). Photographs should reveal, Larkin insists, life’s dullness, “a past that no one can now share” (41). And while man’s grief and aloneness need not be justified by such photographs, they exist nevertheless and may not be adumbrated by glorifying life’s artificialities.

A kind of sequel to “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album” is “Born Yesterday,” a poem of supplication in which Larkin asks ordinariness for the new-born daughter of his friend Kingsley Amis. Beauty, innocence, and love—the usual stuff one wishes for young girls—are the products of luck, Larkin says, and are not, therefore, likely accruals. In their absence he asks:

May you be ordinary;
 Have, like other women,
 An average of talents:
 Not ugly, not good-looking,
 Nothing uncustomary
 To pull you off your balance,
 That, unworkable itself,
 Stops all the rest from working.
 In fact, may you be dull –
 If that is what a skilled,
 Vigilant, flexible,
 Unemphasized, enthralled
 Catching of happiness is called. (12-24)

Throughout Larkin’s poems there is an acknowledgment of human limitations with little evidence of pity. The restrictions upon life and its confinements are honored. Even “the widest prairies have electric fences [...] electric limits to their widest senses” (“Wires” 1). And the more man recognizes these limitations, the more he becomes aware of his meagerness. Such realizations need not be pessimistic, however, for Larkin maintains that everyone can be satisfied “if no one has misjudged himself. Or lied” (“Reasons for Attendance” 25).

Larkin’s honesty, his lack of hyperbolic exaggeration, is distinctive. Rather than belittling man’s stature, Larkin affirms the shared commonalities of experience. He celebrates the paltry by making smallness the locus of affirmation, the defense of man rather than his degradation. “Nothing, like something, happens anywhere” (“I Remember, I Remember” 41), is uni-

versal, he assures. And the lingering notions of the romantic hero—witty, brave, and irresistible to women—are untenable to modern man. As he claims in “Toads,”

[...] something sufficiently toad-like
Squats in me. [...]
And will never allow me to blarney
My way to getting
The fame and the girl and the money
All at one sitting. (25-26, 29-32)

He indicts such romantic rebelliousness in “Poetry of Departures,” calling the ability to “swagger the nut-strewn roads” (25) an artificial and “deliberate step backwards / To create an object” (29-30). Paradoxically mankind is, he asserts in “If, My Darling,” “a swill-tub of finer feelings” (18).

A degree of passivity lurks in these poems. At times, his narrators seem almost masochistic, knowing that “beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs” (“Wants” 10). The dilemmas of life are best resolved by “the less deceived” (“Deceptions” 16), those who have held the least number of phony assumptions about life. “Church Going,” the most admired poem in *The Less Deceived*, epitomizes this process more clearly: how man is ennobled by his smallness, how his suffering comes to reflect an aspect of his freedom, and how man’s powers of perception, even when they observe a rancid universe, allow him to celebrate that observation nonetheless.

“Church Going” opens with Larkin’s narrator noting that nothing much goes on within churches. Recalling from earlier poems that *nothing* and *something* are equivalents for Larkin, the reader anticipates more understatement. On one hand, nothing goes on because services are no longer held at the church, but, on the other, something very important still occurs there, a recognition that is crucial to the movement of the poem.

The second stanza confirms the first of these notions. The narrator reflects that “the place was not worth stopping for” (18). Nothing unusual or particularly eventful strikes him. In fact, this seeming lack of meaning prompts him to reconsider his evaluation of the church. In the next stanza, he speculates upon the future use of churches. Cathedrals might be kept as museums, he offers, but will the rest go untended in the weather? “Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?” (27). Even in disuse, even when nothing goes on, meaning will persist, he claims, for, when faith dies, superstitions prevail; one meaning supplants the other. But what will prevail when superstitions die?

Just as churches may physically seem less and less like churches in the passing years, their purpose is likely to grow more obscure as well. They will become places for antique collectors to gather, or those who continue to celebrate Christmas or those lovers of ruins bent on witnessing evidence of destruction. Perhaps someone like the narrator will visit, someone ignorant and uninformed about the purposes for which they were founded, someone who retains some sense of understanding about “marriage, and birth, / And death” (50-51). Through loss the narrator’s emissary will come to his own appreciation of the church: “For, though I’ve no idea / What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth, / It pleases me to stand in silence here” (52-54).

The final stanza further delineates why churches will continue to be meaningful. A church is, above all other places, “a

serious house on serious earth” (55) and can serve as a place where’s man’s inclinations to be serious can be symbolically lived out. Men with serious thoughts will gravitate to a place “proper to grow wise in” (62) where “so many dead lie round” (63). Once again, understanding comes through recognition of loss, affirmation is gleaned from failure, and the absence of meaning evolves into meaning. This freedom to worship, not in faith but out of the collective suffering of humanity, is what invests places such as churches with meaning. And the narrator’s acute perception of the unexceptional allows him to celebrate, not mythical gods but the suffering and resolute honesty of people like himself. Suffering becomes a form of communion when the shared bonds of experience are viewed through the synthetic observations of a sensitive spokesman. Therefore, the more man suffers, Larkin reasons, the less spiritually impoverished he becomes.

Larkin continued to find value in apparent futility in his next volume, *The Whitsun Weddings*. Charles Tomlinson spoke disparagingly of Larkin’s poems as the embodiment of “his own inadequacy” and a “tenderly-nursed sense of defeat” (471), but to read *The Whitsun Weddings* carefully is to repudiate such criticism. Contrary to Tomlinson’s charge, Larkin posits the worth of life, maintaining in “Mr Bleaney” that “how we live” (25) may not be an accurate measurement of our worth. If a sense of inadequacy and defeat is present in these poems, it springs from Larkin’s having witnessed life’s anguish, disappointment, and sadness. Determined not to stifle their expression, Larkin makes no excuses for the distresses of life, but he does suggest that life may be nobler than its environment seems to suggest. It was Hardy’s similar apprehension of suffering that endeared him to Larkin and led him to call Hardy one of England’s greatest poets. Understandably, Hardy’s influence pervades Larkin’s view of suffering.

In “The Climate of Pain in Recent Poetry,” Martin Dodsworth remarked favorably upon the “taste of death in everyday living” (90) found in Larkin’s poems. It is a grand compliment. It is the temporal nature of man that, according to Larkin, gives rise to his greatness. Cut off from classical tradition by an absurd present, Larkin’s narrators employ free will to counter their lack of predestination and fate. Their lives are not wasted because they live in “rich industrial shadows” (“Here” 1) near “canals with floatings of industrial froth” (“The Whitsun Weddings” 15) or upon “acres of dismantled cars” (20); they are wasted only if they think they warrant no better. In “Self’s the Man” Larkin writes:

To compare his life and mine
Makes me feel a swine:
Oh, no one can deny
That Arnold is less selfish than I.

But wait, not so fast:
Is there such a contrast?
He was out for his own ends
Not just pleasing his friends;

And if it was such a mistake
He still did it for his own sake,

Playing his own game.
So he and I are the same,

Only I'm a better hand
At knowing what I can stand
Without them sending a van –
Or I suppose I can. (17-32)

Such a viewpoint is important to Larkin's self-defense. While "home is so sad" ("Home Is So Sad" 1) and occupations offer little more than "toad work / By being stupid or weak" ("Toads Revisited" 17-18), Larkin's poetry enables him to "deal out the old right hook / To dirty dogs twice my size" ("A Study of Reading Habits" 5-6). And since life is a process of "religious wounding" ("The Whitsun Weddings" 55) in which "never such innocence again" ("MCMXIV" 32) will be found, he must devise a way to solve the "emptiness / That lies just under all we do" ("Ambulances" 13-14).

Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
And age, and then the only end of age. ("Dockery and Son" 45-48)

There is, Larkin insists, an "essential beauty" ("Essential Beauty") to this sadness. Even though it may be impossible to "find / Words at once true and kind / Or not untrue and not unkind" ("Talking in Bed" 10-12), the potential for affirmation nevertheless exists. As the title *The Whitsun Weddings* suggests, a marriage of affirmation and despair may lead us to detect in the "cascades of monumental slithering" ("Broadcast" 8) the celebration of "hands, tiny in all that air, applauding" (18). The motivation for weddings—for love—is, Larkin assures, "what will survive of us" ("An Arundel Tomb" 42).

There exist few surprises in Larkin's last volume, *High Windows*, where he again explores the appearances of fate and free will as part of life's ordinariness. His narrators are again suffering and alienated. Though Larkin defends life's miseries more openly in *High Windows* than in his previous volumes, he writes of nights in half-vacant hotels, the "larger loneliness of knives and glass / And silence laid like carpet" ("Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" 5-6), the routine of traveling salesmen ("Living"), the middle-age nostalgia for youth ("Sad Steps" and "High Windows"). The "old fools" ("The Old Fools" 1) housed in asylums do not scream because they border upon oblivion, crouched just below "extinction's alp" (41). They do not scream at all. They age toward the time that their atoms will disperse (much as in the atomic theory of Democritus) and blend with the atoms of others "to bring to bloom the million-petalled flower" (18). In this collection, hospitals are more than places where death is accepted—"all know they are going to die. / Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end, / And somewhere like this" ("The Building" 57-59). They are edifices which "struggle to transcend / The thought of dying" (60-61). Even though in "The Explosion" a mine disaster kills some miners, it leaves unbroken "a nest of lark's eggs" (8).

The volume contains Larkin's characteristic laments over age and lost tradition. We inherit our parents' faults, he mourns, as man passes misery on to succeeding generations: "They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / They may not mean

to, but they do” (“This Be the Verse” 1-2). The cultural history of Western man becomes another generation’s garbage, “too thick-strewn / To be swept up now” (52-53), and the heritage of government is money, not the traditions of justice and equality which should enrich life. But, as Larkin admonishes, no matter how “you bank your screw, the money you save / Won’t in the end buy you more than a shave” (“Money” 11-12).

As unprepared and ill-suited for life as man may be, he may yet teach his “children by a sort / Of clowning” (“To the Sea” 35-36), providing what is necessary to keep mankind, like the white steamer in “To the Sea,” “still going on, all of it, still going on” (10). “Show Saturday,” the most optimistic poem in *High Windows*, opens at a seasonal outdoor fair that applauds the production of farm folk. Larkin’s narrator is inspired by the variety of human talents on display: produce (jellies, beans, eggs), arenas for wrestling and judging livestock, and tents that sell tweed, beer, and balloons. Larkin admires the labor, “something they share / That breaks ancestrally each year into / Regenerate union. / Let it always be there” (62-64).

Larkin’s poetry of self-defense seems peculiarly modern, borrowing from both the Romantic and Realistic traditions that preceded him. As a Romantic, Larkin speaks about the inherent dignity of man and commends what is rustic and uncomplicated; as a Realist, he recognizes the diminished dimensions of man in a stultifying, urban chaos. He is not unique in these observations (Hardy and Joyce are obvious forerunners), but he was for several decades the most articulate if reluctant spokesman on the matter. And his poetry, four slim volumes in defense of man, earned their proper acclaim.

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