

Heat Wave

Heat brought the day to its senses.
We are not used to such direct
expressions of feeling here
with our wishy-washy weather,
our dry intervals and showers,

our clearance spreading from the west;
rain and shine—ham actors—
mixing up their lines.
But there it was, the real thing,
an unstinting summer day,

not rationing its reserves of heat,
not squeezing out its precious metal
between cracks in cloud.
Poppy dishes tracked the sun's path
across the radar screen of sky.

Apples swelled but still fell
short of breaking point.
The taut skin of black currants
would spurt open at a touch.
Ripening grain was hoarded

in the aprons of corn stalks.
A bee paused as if to dab its brow,
before lapping up more gold reserves.
Tar splashed the ankles of cars
as they negotiated honey-sticky routes.

Foxglove, ox-eyed daisy, vetch
jostled for attention on the verges.
Spiders hung flies out to dry.

A coiled snake—puff adder
or reticulated python—would

have thrived in that environment,
peaches supplanting gooseberries.
Were the river not reduced
to a trickle of juice between
reed-bearded banks, it might

have furnished cover for a crocodile
with sloped back patterned
like heat-soaked patio bricks.
A sudden low-lying cat dashed
between houses like a cheetah.

If that sun had made itself heard
it would have sounded like the inner
ferment of a cask of vintage wine,
the static on a trunk-call line
when someone phones out of the blue...

Birds retreated into silence, perched
deep inside leaf-camouflaged trees,
having nothing meaningful to add,
no dry-throated chalk-screeching
jungle note that would fit the bill.

A day that will say summer always
to the child, too young to speak,
who romped outside among flower beds,
his mother's voice pressed thin and flat
as she summoned him languidly back

to the cool, flagstoned kitchen,
ice-cream blotches daubed
like sun block on his pudgy face.

Last Words

What an absolute creep
Philip Larkin
seems to have been.

Have you read
the letters yet?
The biography?

Did you hear
the TV pundit
cut him down to size?

And, true to form,
he proved a sleazy
bastard to the last:

as he was dying,
he squeezed his
nurse's hand

(she should,
strictly speaking,
have ordered

him to keep
his filthy paws
to himself),

while he croaked
as best the
throat cancer

(which he'd brought
on himself with
smokes and booze)

allowed: *I am going
to the inevitable.*
So negative always.

So obsessed with death.
1.24 a.m., the time.
Except for the nurse,

he was alone—no
visitors, of course,
at that unearthly hour;

no wife or kids
to line up tearfully
around the single bed.

A selfish swine
without doubt;
and, by all accounts,

no great loss.