

# PHILIP LARKIN

1922 - 1985

## COMING

*written in 1950*

On longer evenings,  
Light, chill and yellow,  
Bathes the serene  
Foreheads of houses.  
A thrush sings,  
Laurel-surrounded  
In the deep bare garden,  
Its fresh-peeled voice  
Astonishing the brickwork.  
It will be spring soon,  
It will be spring soon—  
And I, whose childhood  
Is a forgotten boredom,  
Feel like a child  
Who comes on a scene  
Of adult reconciling,  
And can understand nothing  
But the unusual laughter,  
And starts to be happy.

## **DAYS**

*written in 1953*

What are days for?  
Days are where we live.  
They come, they wake us  
Time and time over.  
They are to be happy in:  
Where can we live but days?

Ah, solving that question  
Brings the priest and the doctor  
In their long coats  
Running over the fields.

## I REMEMBER, I REMEMBER

*written in 1954*

Coming up England by a different line  
For once, early in the cold new year,  
We stopped, and, watching men with number plates  
Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,  
'Why, Coventry!' I exclaimed. 'I was born here.'

I leant far out, and squinted for a sign  
That this was still the town that had been 'mine'  
So long, but found I wasn't even clear  
Which side was which. From where those cycle-crates  
Were standing, had we annually departed

For all those family hols? ... A whistle went:  
Things moved. I sat back, staring at my boots.  
'Was that,' my friend smiled, 'where you "have your roots"?'  
No, only where my childhood was unspent,  
I wanted to retort, just where I started:

By now I've got the whole place clearly charted.  
Our garden, first: where I did not invent  
Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,  
And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.  
And here we have that splendid family

I never ran to when I got depressed,  
The boys all biceps and the girls all chest,  
Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be  
'Really myself'. I'll show you, come to that,  
The bracken where I never trembling sat,

Determined to go through with it; where she  
Lay back, and 'all became a burning mist'.  
And, in those offices, my doggerel  
Was not set up in blunt ten-point, nor read  
By a distinguished cousin of the mayor,

Who didn't call and tell my father *There  
Before us, had we the gift to see ahead* –  
'You look as though you wished the place in Hell,'  
My friend said, 'judging from your face.' 'Oh well,  
I suppose it's not the place's fault,' I said.  
'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.'

## AN ARUNDEL TOMB

*written in 1956*

Side by side, their faces blurred,  
The earl and countess lie in stone,  
Their proper habits vaguely shown  
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,  
And that faint hint of the absurd—  
The little dogs under their feet.

Such plainness of the pre-baroque  
Hardly involves the eye, until  
It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still  
Clasped empty in the other; and  
One sees, with a sharp tender shock,  
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

They would not think to lie so long.  
Such faithfulness in effigy  
Was just a detail friends would see:  
A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace  
Thrown off in helping to prolong  
The Latin names around the base.

They would not guess how early in  
Their supine stationary voyage  
The air would change to soundless damage,  
Turn the old tenantry away;  
How soon succeeding eyes begin  
To look, not read. Rigidly they

Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths  
Of time. Snow fell, undated. Light  
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright  
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same  
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths  
The endless altered people came,

Washing at their identity.  
Now, helpless in the hollow of  
An unarmorial age, a trough  
Of smoke in slow suspended skeins  
Above their scrap of history,  
Only an attitude remains:

Time has transfigured them into  
Untruth. The stone fidelity  
They hardly meant has come to be  
Their final blazon, and to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love.

## THE WHITSUN WEDDINGS

*written in 1958*

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:  
Not till about  
One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday  
Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,  
All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense  
Of being in a hurry gone. We ran  
Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street  
Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence  
The river's level drifting breadth began,  
Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.

All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept  
For miles inland,  
A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.  
Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and  
Canals with floatings of industrial froth;  
A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped  
And rose: and now and then a smell of grass  
Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth  
Until the next town, new and nondescript,  
Approached with acres of dismantled cars.

At first, I didn't notice what a noise  
The weddings made  
Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys  
The interest of what's happening in the shade,  
And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls  
I took for porters larking with the mails,  
And went on reading. Once we started, though,  
We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls  
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,  
All posed irresolutely, watching us go,  
As if out on the end of an event  
Waving goodbye  
To something that survived it.  
Struck, I leant  
More promptly out next time, more curiously,  
And saw it all again in different terms:  
The fathers with broad belts under their suits  
And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;  
An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,

The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,  
The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.  
Yes, from cafés  
And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed  
Coach-party annexes, the wedding-days  
Were coming to an end. All down the line  
Fresh couples climbed aboard: the rest stood round;  
The last confetti and advice were thrown,  
And, as we moved, each face seemed to define  
Just what it saw departing: children frowned  
At something dull; fathers had never known

Success so huge and wholly farcical;  
The women shared  
The secret like a happy funeral;  
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared  
At a religious wounding. Free at last,  
And loaded with the sum of all they saw,  
We hurried towards London, shuffling gout of steam.  
Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast  
Long shadows over major roads, and for  
Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem

Just long enough to settle hats and say  
*I nearly died,*  
A dozen marriages got under way.  
They watched the landscape, sitting side by side  
An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,  
And someone running up to bowl – and none  
Thought of the others they would never meet  
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.  
I thought of London spread out in the sun,  
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:  
There we were aimed. And as we raced across  
Bright knots of rail  
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss  
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail  
Travelling coincidence; and what it held  
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power  
That being changed can give. We slowed again,  
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled  
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower  
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming railn.

## ESSENTIAL BEAUTY

*written in 1962*

In frames as large as rooms that face all ways  
And block the ends of streets with giant loaves,  
Screen graves with custard, cover slums with praise  
Of motor-oil and cuts of salmon, shine  
Perpetually these sharply-pictured groves  
Of how life should be. High above the gutter  
A silver knife sinks into golden butter,  
A glass of milk stands in a meadow, and  
Well-balanced families, in fine  
Midsummer weather, owe their smiles, their cars,  
Even their youth, to that small cube each hand  
Stretches towards. These, and the deep armchairs  
Aligned to cups at bedtime, radiant bars  
(Gas or electric), quarter-profile cats  
By slippers on warm mats,  
Reflect none of the rained-on streets and squares

They dominate outdoors. Rather, they rise  
Serenely to proclaim pure crust, pure foam,  
Pure coldness to our live imperfect eyes  
That stare beyond this world, where nothing's made  
As new or washed quite clean, seeking the home  
All such inhabit. There, dark rafted pubs  
Are filled with white-clothed ones from tennis-clubs,  
And the boy puking his heart out in the Gents  
Just missed them, as the pensioner paid  
A halfpenny more for Granny Graveclothes' Tea  
To taste old age, and dying smokers sense  
Walking towards them through some dappled park  
As if on water that unfocused she  
No match lit up, nor drag ever brought near,  
Who now stands newly clear,  
Smiling, and recognising, and going dark.

## **WATER**

*written in 1964*

If I were called in  
To construct a religion  
I should make use of water.  
Going to church  
Would entail a fording  
To dry, different clothes;  
My litany would employ  
Images of sousing,  
A furious devout drench,  
And I should raise in the east  
A glass of water  
Where any-angled light  
Would congregate endlessly.

## ANNUS MIRABILIS

*written in 1967*

Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(which was rather late for me) –  
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban  
And the Beatles' first LP.

Up to then there'd only been  
A sort of bargaining,  
A wrangle for the ring,  
A shame that started at sixteen  
And spread to everything.

Then all at once the quarrel sank:  
Everyone felt the same,  
And every life became  
A brilliant breaking of the bank,  
A quite unlosable game.

So life was never better than  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Though just too late for me) –  
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban  
And the Beatles' first LP.

## TO THE SEA

*written in 1969*

To step over the low wall that divides  
Road from concrete walk above the shore  
Brings sharply back something known long before –  
The miniature gaiety of seashores.  
Everything crowds under the low horizon:  
Steep beach, blue water, towels, red bathing caps,  
The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse  
Up the warm yellow sand, and further off  
A white steamer stuck in the afternoon –

Still going on, all of it, still going on!  
To lie, eat, sleep in hearing of the surf  
(Ears to transistors, that sound tame enough  
Under the sky), or gently up and down  
Lead the uncertain children, frilled in white  
And grasping at enormous air, or wheel  
The rigid old along for them to feel  
A final summer, plainly still occurs  
As half an annual pleasure, half a rite,

As when, happy at being on my own,  
I searched the sand for Famous Cricketers,  
Or, farther back, my parents, listeners  
To the same seaside quack, first became known.  
Strange to it now, I watch the cloudless scene:  
The same clear water over smoothed pebbles,  
The distant bathers' weak protesting trebles  
Down at its edge, and then the cheap cigars,  
The chocolate-papers, tea-leaves, and, between

The rocks, the rusting soup-tins, till the first  
Few families start the trek back to the cars.  
The white steamer has gone. Like breathed-on glass  
The sunlight has turned milky. If the worst  
Of flawless weather is our falling short,  
It may be that through habit these do best,  
Coming to the water clumsily undressed  
Yearly; teaching their children by a sort  
Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.

## THE EXPLOSION

*written in 1970*

On the day of the explosion  
Shadows pointed towards the pithead:  
In the sun the slagheap slept.

Down the lane came men in pitboots  
Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke  
Shouldering off the freshened silence.

One chased after rabbits; lost them;  
Came back with a nest of lark's eggs;  
Showed them; lodged them in the grasses.

So they passed in beards and moleskins  
Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter  
Through the tall gates standing open.

At noon there came a tremor; cows  
Stopped chewing for a second; sun,  
Scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed.

*The dead go on before us, they  
Are sitting in God's house in comfort,  
We shall see them face to face –*

Plain as lettering in the chapels  
It was said, and for a second  
Wives saw men of the explosion

Larger than in life they managed—  
Gold as on a coin or walking  
Somehow from the sun towards them

One showing the eggs unbroken.