

## 9 Three reasons to re-read *High Windows* by Philip Larkin March 2019

Many may have been put off reading Philip Larkin for several very understandable reasons. In spite of his poems' popularity he was, let's face it, a white, middle-class bachelor, who was right-wing (a Powellite who later adored Margaret Thatcher!), at times racist and sexist in his outlook. In terms of love, he had relationships, openly avowed, with two women in particular, on and off: Monica Jones and later Maeve Brennan, both of whom he unfairly kept dangling, committing himself to neither in the end. A persistent moaner and deplorer, he certainly seems hard to take in terms of personality alone. In many photographs he looks glum and dour, sometimes glaring at the lens in seemingly open hostility.

I wish, however, to enter a plea for his poetry and also to try to show why I still enjoy reading and rereading his very last collection, *High Windows*. If you, like me, bought the *Collected Poems*, which became a best seller, it is actually quite hard to locate the poems that make up that work. The *Collected Poems* arranges the poems chronologically, whereas the published volumes were carefully arranged and none more so, I feel, than *High Windows*. So, I'm armed with my slim *faber & faber* volume instead.



Here, briefly are my three reasons. First, and most importantly, his poetry says important things, not just about him (his despondency, his impatience with many things, his worries and hang-ups, his enthusiasms, like jazz and books), but about the human condition, even, yes, about love. Then, he has a very strong aesthetic sense, which is seen, not just in his awareness of beauty in nature: trees, grass, the sea or clouds, but also in the perfect craftsmanship of his poems. They may use modern idioms and have a chatty, conversational feel, but underneath, there is a steely beauty to the rigorous shaping of his stanzas, with their careful rhyming and metrical precision. And lastly, his great saving grace (as so many of his *many* friends have testified) is his sense of humour (and, believe it or not, his *kindness!*). In spite of racist and bigoted comments in private letters and, purportedly, his diaries (don't forget that his father was pro-Nazi and actually kept a bust of Hitler on the family mantelpiece!), Larkin could be very funny ("I feel like the Israelites in the desert looking at manna and thinking 'what the fuck is *that?*'") and also self-deprecating. He never took himself too seriously; in the poems, there is an underlying humility and humanity that transcends the ill-judged tirades and schoolboy fulminations that were often to show off to friends like Kingsley Amis and other chums. The racism or the fascism, of which there is little sign in his poems, should not, then, be the final legacy of someone who was contradictory, complex and deeply ambiguous in nearly all his responses to the world around him.



*High Windows* is the intriguing title of his final collection (1974 and a full eleven years before his death) and it is also the title of one of the poems near the beginning of the volume. As an image, the phrase ‘high windows’ is an intriguing one and can be read in at least two diametrically opposed ways which can be discovered in the poems themselves. The poet could be looking up, at and through, ‘high windows’ (possibly church windows) that (as in the title-poem) reveal,

The sun-comprehending glass,  
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows  
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

In other words, an ambiguous sort of transcendence ‘above’ the world, where beauty carries him away from the tawdry and mundane reality of human relationships and problems down below. The poem, itself, ironically juxtaposes modern sexual freedoms (which Larkin envies *and* mistrusts) with the somewhat similar intellectual freedoms that his own generation sought. He pictures everybody going down a “long slide” to happiness – another deeply ambiguous image of... childish happiness?... or a descent into hell (“*like free bloody birds...*”)?

Or else, ‘high windows’ could possibly refer to the views the poet has *from* a high vantage point, looking *down*, aloofly, somewhat remotely, on his fellow-mortals beneath him. This is the case, for example, in “The Building”, a deeply ominous poem, which never uses the word ‘hospital’, using “building” as a euphemism instead. Looking down from this “clean-sliced cliff” the poet thinks despairingly,

O world,  
Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch  
Of any hand from here!

So, we should bear in mind this idea of poems *themselves* offering ‘views’ like ‘high windows’.

Let us start in reverse order with the sense of humour, for, in spite of the *deadly* seriousness of many of the weightier poems, there are moments of amusing frivolity. In two very funny poems early on, Larkin imagines how posterity might view him. In “Sympathy in White Major” he imagines pouring himself a very generous gin and tonic and ironically salutes himself in the imagined words (and clichés) of others,

*He devoted himself to others...*  
.....  
I set myself to bring to those  
Who thought I could the lost displays;  
It didn’t work for them or me,  
But all concerned were nearer thus  
(Or so we thought) to all the fuss  
Than if we’d missed it separately.

*A decent chap, a real good sort,  
Straight as a die, one of the best,  
A brick, a trump, a proper sport,...*

Even funnier, in “Posterity”, he imagines a despondent (even *whinier* than Larkin himself) American PhD student grumbling about having to study ‘Philip Larkin’:

‘I’m stuck with this old fart at least a year.’

.....

‘What’s he like?’

Christ, I just told you. Oh, you know the thing,  
That crummy textbook stuff from Freshman Psych,  
Not out for kicks or something happening –  
One of those old-type natural fouled up guys.’

And, of course, grimly and outrageously funny, still shockingly so, is “This Be the Verse”, whose jokey title actually warns that this is at heart a serious poem. It’s outrageous because you would never normally juxtapose “They fuck you up...” with the homely, children-addressing, comfortably positive terms of “mum and dad”! Don’t be under any illusions, however – Larkin is here measuring *himself*, and it is a bitter poem with a bleak ending:

Man hands on misery to man,  
It deepens like a coastal shelf.  
Get out as early as you can,  
And don’t have any kids yourself.

“Money” is also amusing (and sad!). As so often, Larkin is in his usual mock-moaning mood:

Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me:  
‘Why do you let me lie here wastefully?  
I am all you never had of goods and sex.  
You could get them still by writing a few cheques.’

The poem ends with another of his windows, this time looking down:

I listen to money singing. It’s like looking down  
From long french windows at a provincial town,  
The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad  
In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.

He always feels he has missed out! But, although he claims it is “intensely sad”, he is actually setting himself up to be laughed at. We might feel a little irritated by this posture of whingeing self-pity, but it can be very humorous and also perceptive. In “Annus Mirabilis”, we get the grumpy old whiner again,

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

But behind the humorous tone, the poet wants to make a point about the casualness with which he thought relationships in the 'swinging sixties' and after, were entered into. Larkin is ambivalent; he would *like* to have had that sort of guilt-free liberty, but the poem also questions (humorously) whether such freedoms *can* be summarised as "A brilliant breaking of the bank, A quite unlosable game".

Two short poems, for me, particularly show Larkin's sensitivity to nature and natural beauty. "The Trees", near the very beginning, is mirrored near the end of the collection by "Cut Grass". Both poems reflect on mortality. Larkin meditates on how we view trees in spring, when they burst into leaf:

Is it that they are born again  
And we grow old? No, they die too.  
Their yearly trick of looking new  
Is written down in rings of grain.

There are haunting alliterations at the end which bring us the sound of the trees: 's' and 'sh' sounds.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh  
In fullgrown thickness every May.  
Last year is dead they seem to say,  
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

Similarly, "Cut Grass" plays with the age-old conceit that we are cut down by Time's Scythe like grass, but its simplicity of utterance is also a lament for the "Lost lanes of Queen Anne's lace" (the beautiful name for that mundanely lovely plant of the roadsides: cow parsley) – a nostalgia for old English country lanes "With chestnut flowers, With hedges snowlike strewn."

I often wondered why Larkin wrote as the ending,

And that high-builded cloud  
Moving at summer's pace.

until I suddenly remembered "And was Jerusalem *builded* here, In England's green and pleasant land?" in Blake's strong condemnation of England's Industrial Revolution. Yes, all right, so there *is* a political agenda in *High Windows*: of conservative (Conservative?) nostalgia for an idealised England of the past. We see it in "Homage to a Government" and also in "Going, Going...", but we are all *entitled* to our views and, beyond scathing criticism of rampant capitalism, which he sees as the root of all evil, - "move Your works to the unspoilt dales, (Grey area grants!)" - there is no whiff in these final poems of fascism, sexism or racism. Instead he mourns the loss of a world that he sees rapidly disappearing, because "greeds And garbage are too thick-strewn To be swept up now...".

Let us turn instead to the aesthetics of form, for Larkin's poems for me represent architecturally beautiful 'buildings' or 'windows' – they are particularly clever, in that the utterance seems always rather casual and vernacularly chatty. They are also a compliment to the intelligence of his readers, who will be aware of how beautifully the courses of bricks have been laid. Whether you like the poems or not, there is never any clumsiness nor any

pretentious flights of diction. The poem that begins the collection is elegant in its construction, but it is also a lovely poem in its gently teasing, ironic meditation on our fascination with the sea. It is called “To the Sea”, which in itself is ironic. Is this a *journey to* the sea, or is it a wry eulogy *addressed* to the sea? I have paired it with Keats’ poem “On The Sea”, which Larkin may have had at the back of his mind. Where Keats’ poem extols the sea with breathless (and properly Romantic) enthusiasm, Larkin’s enthusiasm is qualified and restrained. Let’s read both poems before we notice the distinctive artistry of each.

### **ON THE SEA    By John Keats (1817)**

It keeps eternal whisperings around  
     Desolate shores, and with its mighty swell  
     Gluts twice ten thousand Caverns, till the spell  
 Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.  
 Often 'tis in such gentle temper found,  
     That scarcely will the very smallest shell  
     Be moved for days from where it sometime fell.  
 When last the winds of Heaven were unbound.  
 Oh, ye! who have your eyeballs vexed and tired,  
     Feast them upon the wideness of the Sea;  
     Oh ye! whose ears are dinned with uproar rude,  
     Or fed too much with cloying melody---  
     Sit ye near some old Cavern's Mouth and brood,  
 Until ye start, as if the sea nymphs quired!

### **To the Sea    (by Philip Larkin)**

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.

Keats' sonnet begins eulogistically with a rapturous description of the sea's power. In 1817 sea-bathing was just starting to become fashionable. This was a time when the Picturesque aesthetic dominated and shaped the way "tourists" (a new word) viewed landscapes (and seascapes). In true "Romantic" manner, landscapes were idealised and "read" classically – so every country house with their carefully constructed "views" should have had a grotto (preferably with a god lurking), a temple to Diana, trees and lakes artistically "arranged" to look "natural" (which might mean removing a whole village (!), and so on. Here, Keats, as a Londoner, is haunted in his mind by "Cavern(s)" and "nymphs" and the seaside is imagined as "Desolate shores...". In the octet, Keats, with unconscious irony actually pleads with other city dwellers like himself (stressed out with the pressures of city life!) to come and taste the pleasures of this escape to solitude. Hmm! How lonely will it be if they *all* follow his suggestion? And, in fact, Keats is not really after solitude anyway. In a truly modern way (and with his youthful hormones at full stretch), he is succumbing to the modern equation of 'sea, sand, sun and...sex'. What else are sea-nymphs imagined as, but as singing temptresses (think of Odysseus) luring us into their sensual clutches under the waves. So, Keats offers us mystery, the power of Nature, solitude, replenishment and solace – and the tantalising prospect of encounters with beauties!

Has anything changed by 1974? Well, yes, quite a lot, actually. In Larkin's imagined seascape, we are brought down to earth with a concrete wall we have (like him) to step over. This is a world which is carefully delimited. Down on the beach, we still have nature, and it still retains some beauty ("The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse" – we can hear the sound of the waves in the onomatopoeic alliterations) but unlike Keats' shoreline, this one is littered with people and, later, with actual litter! People have *become* the problem.

"Still going on, all of it, still going on!" Is this marvelling, or is it tetchy disbelief (as in "why bother with all of this?")? I love the grumbly distaste with which Larkin can hear "transistors that sound tame enough" – I have to gloss this for modern teenagers whose i-pods, Spotify etc. usage with headphones mercifully spares us nowadays from the transistor

radios that bedevilled the world of Larkin's era. Well, yes, it can be intrusive to hear other people's music – unless they are nymphs, of course.

He goes on to compare his own, lonelier childhood at the sea. Searching for cigarette cards (these were the must-have collectibles, of England cricket teams or footballers, that could only be found in packs of cigarettes) sounds a sorry occupation, though he claims he was "happy at being on my own". There is a family connection, he decides, and, although he lists many negative features of the sea as a 'family day-out, he recognises, finally that it is not so bad after all – "helping the old as they ought". It is "half an annual pleasure, half a rite."

Two cheers, then, not three. He notices details – "blue water... red bathing caps... yellow sand, and a "white ship". These are primary colours that attract children. He is good on how people behave:

"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..."

If Keats' poem was urging "tourists" to visit the sea to taste its Romantic and Picturesque pleasures as a form of therapy, Larkin's poem shows us what this has led to

150 years later, though, interestingly he doesn't discount the therapy angle totally!

Both poems are very carefully crafted, though Keats' sonnet is more obviously traditional and classically framed. Keats' octet sets out the tantalising picture and the sestet is used to urge (strongly, "O ye.... O ye...") people to follow his example and taste the pleasures. However, Keats' seaside is entirely imaginary. There are few "Cavern(s)" along our shores and most are dank, dark and dangerous.



There were certainly no nymphs. This is more what painters like Joseph Wright of Derby had popularised in the late eighteenth century. His picture (left) comes from Italy but shows how caverns might have been experienced in the popular imagination as 'romantic' experiences based on classical imaginings.

Larkin's poem goes for a sort of "ottava rima" (an eight-line stanza) with, you will notice, an added-on ninth line that does not tie in with the *ababcdc* rhyme scheme, but instead throws in a *new* rhyme which will be picked up in the following stanza. In the final stanza, this gives a satisfying feeling of closure, as it repeats the "short", "sort" rhymes and ends very finally with a rhyming couplet on "ought" giving it and the poem more weight.

We find this sort of subliminal attention to form in nearly all of Larkin's very carefully *wrought* verse throughout his poems. Here, it creates an interesting tension between the freedom of the lines (look at all the enjambment or run-on lines, that create a casual tone of voice which is modern, informal, colloquial, democratic, unsnobbish and, importantly, chatty – we, as readers, are privileged to be addressed as if we were friendly neighbours, almost), contrasting with the strict, intellectually rigorous, disciplined and beautifully crafted structure which complements the ideas and the images.

We see this attention to form in nearly every poem. In “Vers de Société”, for example which is a laugh-out-loud reflection on Larkin’s loathing of being invited out to dinner by a friend, ( he wants to reply, “In a pig’s arse, friend.”) the poem turns into a meditation on how modern society sets its face against solitariness (seen as a form of selfishness - “the big wish Is to have people nice to you, which means Doing it back somehow.”). Wearily, he comes to the conclusion that it is better, or easier on his conscience, to say ‘yes’, so that in the end, he *will* dutifully turn up for his friend’s invitation. Here, again, in spite of the poem’s freedom and candour, Larkin rings out the changes on his six-line rhyme scheme, like a bell-ringer – the effortless of the artistry contrasts with the appalling *effort* that socially, he feels he is ‘required’ to make. It has an almost comic side to it.

As I was thinking about all of this, I was also reading Tobias Wolff’s “Old School” (2004), in which Robert Frost is seen visiting the school and causing waves of excitement amongst the American ‘prep’ school boys in the early sixties. One boy in particular has this amusing tirade against Frost and his reluctance to write poetry that was more *modernist*, freed from the shackles of rhyme and metre.

“Rhyme is bullshit. Rhyme says that everything works out in the end. All harmony and order. When I see a rhyme in a poem, I know I’m being lied to. Go aheadf, laugh! It’s true – rhyme’s a completely dead device. It’s just wishful thinking. Nostalgia.”

I love Tobias Wolff’s Robert Frost in the novel putting down the schoolmaster who dares to question his ‘modern consciousness’, asking the poet publicly - “...should form give way to more spontaneous modes of expression, even at the cost of a certain disorder?” Frost replies with,

“Would you honor your own friend by putting words down anyhow, just as they come to you – with no thought for the sound they make, the meaning of their sound, the sound of their meaning? Would that give a true account of the loss?

Frost had been looking right at Mr Ramsey as he spoke. Now he broke off and let his eyes roam over the room.

I am thinking of Achilles’ grief, he said. That famous, terrible grief. Let me tell you boys something. Such grief can only be told in form. Maybe it only really exists in form. Form is everything. Without it you’ve got nothing but a stubbed-toe cry – sincere, maybe, for what that’s worth, but with no depth or carry. No echo. You may have a grievance but you do not have grief, and grievances are for petitions, not poetry. “

But Larkin *is* up to speed on modernism and at least two poems are written in free verse, though still in stanzas – “Solar”, an invocation to the sun, is a poem for once, entirely positive – “You give for ever”; and the very last poem of the collection, though it is not quite Larkin’s last ever published poem, is also in free verse. It’s called “The Explosion” and I will come to it later, as it is quite special in other ways also.

Let us lastly consider, more importantly, perhaps, what Larkin’s poetry has to say about the human condition. Sex has already been mentioned. Larkin was always uneasy about sex, to which he was both attracted but deeply fearful of (a fear probably of



rejection). Many of the poems are about an even deeper fear: of old age and the looming prospect of death. Larkin was extremely frightened of death, unapologetically so. In his very, very last poem “Aubade” he wrote,

“Courage is no good:  
It means not scaring others. Being brave  
Lets no one off the grave.  
Death is no different whined at than withstood.”

In this collection two poems stand out in his attempts to look death in the face and offer us not a calm, philosophical, reassuring standpoint, but rather a terrified and terrifying look into the abyss. It’s almost (and *is* in places) funny, his black-humour ‘take’ on death (death is horrible, unfair, sordid, demeaning AND it *will* happen). One poem, already mentioned, is “The Building”, the place most of us will end up in, to be removed feet first! It is, of course, the hospital. The other poem, horribly cruel-sounding and almost offensive, is “The Old Fools”. In both poems, Larkin is at pains to *try* to frighten his readers – to shake them out of their comfortable refusal to confront the reality of death, which for him is just around the corner. This is how the poem begins,

“What do they think has happened, the old fools,  
To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose  
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,  
And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember  
Who called this morning? Or that, if they only chose,  
They could alter things back to when they danced all night,  
Or went to their wedding, or sloped arms some September?  
Or do they fancy there's really been no change,  
And they've always behaved as if they were crippled or tight,  
Or sat through days of thin continuous dreaming  
Watching the light move? If they don't (and they can't), it's strange;  
Why aren't they screaming?”

and it ends like this,

“For the rooms grow farther, leaving  
Incompetent cold, the constant wear and tear  
Of taken breath, and them crouching below  
Extinction's alp, the old fools, never perceiving  
How near it is. This must be what keeps them quiet:  
The peak that stays in view wherever we go  
For them is rising ground. Can they never tell  
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not at night?  
Not when the strangers come? Never, throughout  
The whole hideous inverted childhood? Well,  
We shall find out.”

The image of “extinction’s alp”, which the “old fools” cannot see the top of because they are ON the mountain, whereas, we, further off, *can* see the end towards which they, unrealising, are inexorably heading – is brilliant and revealing. The last line is a stunner, also. Up till then, he has seemed so peculiarly heartless in his description of “the old fools” – “Ash hair, toad

hands, prune face dried into lines” How darkly callous and disrespectful of the old can you get? It is the last line, however, that particularly reveals the humanity and the strategy of Larkins’ seemingly unfeeling diatribe against the old – the ‘old fools’ are *not* others – *we* shall become “the old fools” ourselves and discover the truth of how it feels to be very old, if we’re so lucky!

“The Building”, as a poem, strikes just as much fear at its heart, because of its weighty, impersonal meting out of fate. It is, in every sense, a big poem and a fearful one, so I shall quote it in full.

### **The Building by Philip Larkin**

Higher than the handsomest hotel  
The lucent comb shows up for miles, but see,  
All round it close-ribbed streets rise and fall  
Like a great sigh out of the last century.  
The porters are scruffy; what keep drawing up  
At the entrance are not taxis; and in the hall  
As well as creepers hangs a frightening smell.

There are paperbacks, and tea at so much a cup,  
Like an airport lounge, but those who tamely sit  
On rows of steel chairs turning the ripped mags  
Haven't come far. More like a local bus.  
These outdoor clothes and half-filled shopping-bags  
And faces restless and resigned, although  
Every few minutes comes a kind of nurse

To fetch someone away: the rest refit  
Cups back to saucers, cough, or glance below  
Seats for dropped gloves or cards. Humans, caught  
On ground curiously neutral, homes and names  
Suddenly in abeyance; some are young,  
Some old, but most at that vague age that claims  
The end of choice, the last of hope; and all

Here to confess that something has gone wrong.  
It must be error of a serious sort,  
For see how many floors it needs, how tall  
It's grown by now, and how much money goes  
In trying to correct it. See the time,  
Half-past eleven on a working day,  
And these picked out of it; see, as they climb

To their appointed levels, how their eyes  
Go to each other, guessing; on the way  
Someone's wheeled past, in washed-to-rags ward clothes:  
They see him, too. They're quiet. To realise  
This new thing held in common makes them quiet,  
For past these doors are rooms, and rooms past those,  
And more rooms yet, each one further off

And harder to return from; and who knows  
 Which he will see, and when? For the moment, wait,  
 Look down at the yard. Outside seems old enough:  
 Red brick, lagged pipes, and someone walking by it  
 Out to the car park, free. Then, past the gate,  
 Traffic; a locked church; short terraced streets  
 Where kids chalk games, and girls with hair-dos fetch

Their separates from the cleaners - O world,  
 Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch  
 Of any hand from here! And so, unreal  
 A touching dream to which we all are lulled  
 But wake from separately. In it, conceits  
 And self-protecting ignorance congeal  
 To carry life, collapsing only when

Called to these corridors (for now once more  
 The nurse beckons -). Each gets up and goes  
 At last. Some will be out by lunch, or four;  
 Others, not knowing it, have come to join  
 The unseen congregations whose white rows  
 Lie set apart above - women, men;  
 Old, young; crude facets of the only coin

This place accepts. All know they are going to die.  
 Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,  
 And somewhere like this. That is what it means,  
 This clean-sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend  
 The thought of dying, for unless its powers  
 Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes  
 The coming dark, though crowds each evening try

With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

Perhaps we can start by noticing that amongst all this deliberate invoking of fear, the rhyme scheme might *appear* randomly erratic, but the rhymes are cleverly picked up, not necessarily within the stanzas even. Perhaps they stand as a hope, a trust in art and order (of sorts) in an environment which seemingly denies people any hope. Of course, we all tell ourselves, hospitals are *good* places, manned by caring human beings...! Well, here is another view to shake your complacency. Here, too, is another *window*.

“Look down at the yard. Outside seems old enough:  
 Red brick, lagged pipes, and someone walking by it  
 Out to the car park, free. Then, past the gate,  
 Traffic; a locked church; short terraced streets  
 Where kids chalk games, and girls with hair-dos fetch

Their separates from the cleaners - O world,  
 Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch  
 Of any hand from here!"

You might say, "Poetry should try to comfort, reassure us. Poetry should show us beauty and the meaningfulness of our lives, rather than trying to scare us witless and show us how horrible life is!" Well, that's an idea. But Larkin is not trying merely to frighten us; he is trying to jolt us out of our unthinking, over-protected comfort-zones. There is an ambiguity (when isn't there ambiguity with Larkin?) in those last lines. Will hospitals really outlast cathedrals? Will secularism really stand the test of time? The "wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers" offered up (ironically, as at a funeral), *cannot* contravene the dark, as we know, and so, taking the place of religion, about which Larkin is generally scornful (eg "That vast moth-eaten musical brocade Created to pretend we never die" *Aubade*), hospitals may *try*, but cannot really offer any more hope in the end than religion tried to offer – the "unless..." is wiped out by the knowledge that, actually, cathedrals *will* probably outlast hospitals, even though religion is superseded now!

What is also significant and I think very positive, in the collection is that, although Philip Larkin's own persona is very much to the fore, he nevertheless enters into *many* other lives here, with great curiosity and empathy: from travelling salesmen and university dons ("Livings"), hotel residents ("Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel"), uncouth old peasants in a Dutch painting ("The Card Players"), men going off to war in 1914 ("How Distant"), a Dublin funeral ("Dublinesque") to agricultural fairs ("Show Saturday"). And, finally, to mining communities in the very last poem, "The Explosion" (and well before the Miners' Strike of 1984-85).

This poem, deliberately positioned at the very end, is an oddity and worth looking at carefully. It *doesn't* rhyme or have a particular metre, as was mentioned before. It is about death, but it is also about a social tragedy affecting a whole community. Here is Larkin reversing the engines (so to speak). While much of the poetry may have seemed very self-centred, piss-taking, teasing, we end up with *other* people, working class, poor, simple people who are having to face the tragic death of loved ones.

### **The Explosion**

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.

*What* a line of optimism, you might think, on which to end your public collections of poetry! And with a gentle play on words, for these are *larks'* eggs – Larkin's eggs for the future?! The irony and comic complaining and teasing has here paused. Religion is even invoked as a source of comfort – and it is not ridiculed. The tone is sober and very plain, almost starkly so. Larkin seems to be showing us another facet of his poetry. It *can* be inclusive and generous. He *is* part of a wider community, perhaps, though he does not always fit in easily or comfortably. And, while not having kids himself (thank heavens?!?), “the eggs unbroken” point to a belief in furthering lives, looking to the future. Surely?!?

As to kindness, Fred Clough came and taught English in Sèvres 1993-4 and he had been a student at Hull:University. “Contrary to his public persona,” I remember him saying of Larkin, the University Librarian there, “he couldn't have been nicer and more helpful to us students. Nothing was too much trouble and he was always a terrifically kind person to everybody, but particularly the students.”

P.S. Here, for the hell of it, is his very last published poem, “Aubade”, not in *High Windows* or any collection of verse. It is incredibly bleak but is one of his very finest poems and one which ticks all the boxes above. It is, of course, ironic – how could it not be? “Aubade” refers to dawn, traditionally a time of awakening to a new day, to beauty and hope. The poem is also very carefully structured. Here, perhaps, is Achilles' “grief” given structure and number. Notice that telling phrase “an only life”! It is understated and there are no clues as to whether this phrase represents regret, pride, remorse. Perhaps all three. But, the poem is *classic* Larkin! What a way to go out artistically! “The mind blanks at the glare” – “glare” has brightness and anger attached to it. In a sense, Larkin's poetry offers “glare”, but he doesn't wish our minds to “blank” out before this glare. Auden famously wrote that “poetry makes nothing happen”, but no poet, surely, worth his or her salt, would ever write for an audience unless they thought that their words *could* alter people's ways of seeing and hearing and, most importantly, feeling.

Here is “Aubade” below:

## Aubade

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.  
 Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
 In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
 Till then I see what's really always there:  
 Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
 Making all thought impossible but how  
 And where and when I shall myself die.  
 Arid interrogation: yet the dread  
 Of dying, and being dead,  
 Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse  
 —The good not done, the love not given, time  
 Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because  
 An only life can take so long to climb  
 Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;  
 But at the total emptiness for ever,  
 The sure extinction that we travel to  
 And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,  
 Not to be anywhere,  
 And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid  
 No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
 That vast moth-eaten musical brocade  
 Created to pretend we never die,  
 And specious stuff that says *No rational being  
 Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing  
 That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,  
 No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
 Nothing to love or link with,  
 The anaesthetic from which none come round.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,  
 A small unfocused blur, a standing chill  
 That slows each impulse down to indecision.  
 Most things may never happen: this one will,  
 And realisation of it rages out  
 In furnace-fear when we are caught without  
 People or drink. Courage is no good:  
 It means not scaring others. Being brave  
 Lets no one off the grave.  
 Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.  
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,  
Have always known, know that we can't escape,  
Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.  
Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring  
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring  
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.  
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.  
Work has to be done.  
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.