

## The Whitsun Weddings

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:

Not till about

One-twenty on the sunlit Sunday

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 rain.

(1964)

by Philip Larkin (1922 – 1985)