



## Simon Heffer Hinterland

Larkin is being cancelled for his private letters. So what happened to separating the life from the art?

We are experiencing a period of headless chickenism about the extent of our racism as a society. Of course, most of us aren't racists, and therefore shouldn't feel ashamed or contrite; and we shouldn't condone those who are. But this raises the problem of Philip Larkin. In his well-documented private utterances, notably his correspondence with Kingsley Amis and the Sovietologist Robert Conquest, the poet was unquestionably awful about black people.

He was asked to write a poem for the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 and in a letter to a friend facetiously suggested this: "After Healey's squalid crew, / And the rising tide of n-----s, / What a treat to look at you." Another squib gives full vent to his misanthropy: "Prison for the strikers / Bring back the cat / Kick out the n-----s / How about that?"

The idea that Larkin actually actively despised black people

deeming death itself "the anaesthetic from which we never come round". Indeed, the restive lower orders upset him more than any racial minority. "I want to see them starving, / The so-called working class, / Their wages weekly halving, / Their women stewing grass, / When I go out each morning, / In one of my new suits, / I want to see them fawning, / To clean my car and boots." He was, in short, a pretty miserable old boy.

Next year is Larkin's centenary, and when the time comes we should celebrate the genius of his poetry wholeheartedly. But for now, a public that perhaps needs Larkin's penetrating realism and lack of cant and hypocrisy more than ever also needs to be protected from his critics: critics who attack him not for the quality of his verse, because they would make fools of themselves doing that, but because of his frankly objectionable character. There are those who make the case for not listening to Wagner because he was a blatant anti-Semite, or to Britten because of his unhealthy interest in young boys; or for not admiring Eric Gill because of his unhealthy interest in young girls; or who won't read Dickens because he was a wife-beater. Larkin was a racist, then which there is currently no worse transgression in our culture.

Young people may not believe this, but one could have walked into any saloon bar in England in the late 1970s and heard such sentiments as Larkin's openly expressed, albeit less carefully crafted. Britain was a tired, fractious, badly governed and increasingly impoverished country run by the trades unions, and in that sense, though in no other, Larkin was its poet laureate. None of those three pieces of racist doggerel was meant for publication; they were to show off to his friends in writing in default of their meeting in the pub.

Did Larkin actually believe what he wrote, or was he just ranting in a way designed to amuse his equally choleric pals? The latter, I feel sure. But Hull, where he worked as university librarian, is fretting about housing his statue; and Coventry, his birthplace, is being "UK City of Culture 2021" while barely noticing him. He is being cancelled already. But this is insane. Whatever his private opinions, he was the greatest poet in English since Eliot. And that is where we should begin our evaluation of him on his centenary.



Mary has acute myeloid leukemia. She is 34 years old

## 'Each day she asks me to send more'

As a dying friend slowly lost her senses, I tried to bring the world to her bedside – through pictures

By Cig HARVEY

In 2017, my friend Mary is diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. She is 34 years old. She has a bone marrow transplant, lives in a bubble, and goes into remission. But the disease comes back.

As Mary's world becomes more and more restricted, she texts and FaceTimes, asking me to send pictures. Each day I go out and make something to send her. Each day she asks me to send more.

It is late spring and then summer in Maine – glorious. As she loses her senses, I want her to experience them through my pictures. I finally feel useful.

There is precedence for being drawn to colour and nature when

dying or surrounded by death. Josef Albers dedicated his last years to the study of colour, publishing *Interaction of Color* in his mid-70s. Derek Jarman wrote *Chroma*, a journal of his garden through colour, while dying of Aids.

On one visit to Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, I hang prisms in the window, and in the afternoon, for a brief 20 minutes when the sun moves between the two high-rises opposite her hospital bed, Mary's room fills with rainbows. A gift of light. It becomes her favorite time of day.

When she dies at 3:36pm on July 16 2019, a wave of hot magenta moves through me.

A year later, on July 16, we scatter Mary's ashes off an island in Penobscot Bay in Maine. Her ashes are pink. Not the neon pink that had rushed through me that day the year before, but a very pale pink.

A friend standing next to me says that her dad's ashes were different. That they were dark grey. Problematic, coarse ashes, with a weight to them of the things left unsaid.

Not Mary's. Mary's ashes are a fine powder, and they shimmer in the sunlight as they are released into the air.

Extracted from *Blue Violet* by Cig Harvey, published in *September* by Monacelli Press

## Photography



◀ 'I finally feel useful': Carnations, above, and clockwise from left, Poppies 2; Summer Flowers; High Tide; and Rununculus, all by Cig Harvey



▲ 'Each day I go out and make something for her': Velvet Cushion by Cig Harvey

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