

Twelve River RIPPLES



Favourite Poem

The Trees

by Philip Larkin

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

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.

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

I reread Larkin's poem recently and it seemed to be just what I needed for spring 2021. Hope and realism melded together. The vaccination programme is bringing some semblance of normality back into our lives, albeit a 'new normal', and is something for us to look forward to and *Begin afresh*.

On the face of it, this appears a simple poem about spring made up of three quatrains. Larkin has chosen the rhythm of the poem to be a steady iambic tetrameter, like the predictability of the seasons, and his abba rhyme scheme mimics the seasons cycling round and round. And yet Larkin's personification of the trees unsettles us and a deeper meaning relating to our own mortality emerges.

In the first stanza the simile of trees coming into leaf, as *Like something almost being said*, is magical and yet Larkin goes on to tell us their greenness is a *kind of grief*. Grief! What grief? Surely grief is grey or black, not vibrant green? The second stanza makes this clear, for although trees appear to be *born again* each spring, Larkin reminds us that eventually *they*

die too and that *looking new* each year is simply a *trick*.

The final stanza uses the unexpected metaphor of trees in full leaf being *unresting castles*. For me, this conjures up an image of mature oaks in a British landscape. However, his use of *castles* is also interesting as they are man-made, and this helps to reinforce the link between trees and humanity. And these *castles* are not only *unresting*, but they even *thresh in full grown thickness*. The action of threshing suggests a fight against unavoidable mortality.

The trees are personified again as *they seem to say / Last year is dead* – and, reading this in the contemporary covid situation – a difficult year that I am pleased to see *dead*. But for every year *Last year is dead* is also realistic because some trees, humans and members from all living species will have died in the year that has passed. Yet Larkin ends (untypically) on an upbeat note as if telling us that, although death is inevitable, we should make the most of the promise of spring and *Begin afresh, afresh, afresh*.

Fran Reader