

# H A M P S T E A D I N C I D E N T



S T E P H E N E D G A R

The sort of heat in which we are cajoled  
To put the daily and unspoken pact  
Casually on hold.  
Memory still recites,  
Four decades on, that spell when the London sky  
Was tempted to retract  
Its pallid caul and shock itself with heights  
Of lazuli

(The flaws of retrospect make this seem rare),  
A clear blue window framing one weekend.  
And crowds were out to share  
The sunstruck parks and streets  
Of Hampstead – us among them to advance  
The summertime and spend  
All of our daylight savings on the heat's  
Extravagance.

And through the midst of us two women strode –  
Two mothers? – flowing-haired and floating-skirted,  
Directly down the road,  
Before an Indian file  
Of naked children stepping with complete,  
Care-free, undisconcerted  
Abandon, looking round them all the while,  
On sandaled feet:

All ages – young ones bringing up the rear;  
Both sexes – and, most striking, at the head  
A girl who would appear  
To verge upon pubescence.

And when her glance met mine, did she profess  
The uninhibited  
Boldness of a child, or an adolescent's  
New knowingness?

She marched on proudly, almost smugly, daring  
Some challenge from the wry astonishment  
Of those who passed them staring,  
Or maybe to provoke  
Those who did not. And so, baring their stark  
And sunless skin, they went,  
To the fountain, no doubt, for a splash and soak  
Down in the park.

We watched them part the morning to reveal  
A wish-fulfilling glimpse of Eden, or  
A page of the surreal,  
That tempted us away.  
Or would a barked instruction of "Take two!"  
Betray the conjuror?  
The crowd peeled back, and closed on them, and they  
Were lost to view.