HAMPSTEAD INCIDENT

STEPHEN EDGAR

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.