

# DROUGHT

GEOFFREY JOHNSON

Horses, resigned to their black plagues of flies,  
Peer over hedges, where ditch-water dries  
And strands its agate skeletons of fish.  
But for a silken rustle of oats, or swish  
Of a slow tail, the tyranny of Noon  
Is absolute, watching the landscape swoon  
And quiver naked to his whips of fire.  
Even the wiry tribes of ants, so dire  
Their longing is for damp and cool and dark,  
Hurry like hosts of Israel with their ark,  
Column on column, file on burnished file,  
Down the great gorges which the drought has cracked.

The silence here is that of cities sacked  
And left in ruins for an ageless while;  
As hard as footprints baked in Roman tile,  
The hoof-marks stare in idle ancientness  
Along this drove of calcined gault, where press,  
Loosing or clinging, mothwings in and out,  
Like wavering soots and flames along a flue,  
Glossily black and brilliantly blue,  
And make the time-bewildered traveller doubt  
If ever carters, mud-rimmed wheels were here.

Now is his worship's time to domineer,  
The dragon-fly, the dynast of the drought.  
True to the day, true to the very hour,  
He flashes vibrant, coruscating power,  
His great eyes goggling like a Hindu god's  
Over the herbless grey of baked clods,  
His body beautiful, but bright with bane  
As the lithe leanness of an aeroplane  
Freighted with death; his whizzing wings of gauze  
Soft silken veilings of voracious jaws.  
True to the very hour, the very minute, he,  
Nature's malignance in epitome,  
Comes, just as when the Fens were reedy sea,  
With here and there an isle above the swamp  
Blazing with noon and dripping with its pomp.