lite did seem to shine more brilliantly than
and evening star. It has a correspondence wi
um flares sometimes seen from a plane, v
pool or windscreen seems to signal back to
om the earth miles below; the hothouse that 'flashed
in Philip Larkin's poem 'The Whitsun Weddings'.

*

o go back to our notes and check whether our encounter
Iridium watcher had taken place on 10 February 2009 at
T (it hadn't). Because we later discovered that this was the
one satellite, Iridium 33, had collided with a retired
orbiter, Kosmos 2251. This was a fairly momentous occa-
ause in the fifty years humans have been launching objects
e, this marked the first time two intact spacecraft had hit
er at hypervelocity while orbiting earth. Most satellites
peeds ranging from 3.1 kilometres per second to 7.8 kilo-
er second, so impacts cause massive disintegration: about
ew pieces of debris larger than a centimetre across were
in low earth orbit following the Iridium 33 collision.
s a 70 per cent increase in debris at 570 kilometres, the
the Hubble space telescope.
e and more of us have become dependent on GPS satellites
unications and navigation, so the orbital debris population
. Objects in the 1 to 10 centimetre size range are causing
cern, because they are the most dangerous, and known
hal population' (objects larger than 10 centimetres, which
cked, are known as the 'catalogued population'; objects
an 1 centimetre are called the 'risk population'): too small
track, but large enough to cause massive damage if they