

1. The Shield of Achilles

W. H. Auden, 1907 - 1973

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas,
But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead.

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of
neighborhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude,
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
Without expression, waiting for a sign.

Out of the air a voice without a face
Proved by statistics that some cause was
just
In tones as dry and level as the place:
No one was cheered and nothing was
discussed;
Column by column in a cloud of dust
They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else,
to grief.

She looked over his shoulder
For ritual pieties,
White flower-garlanded heifers,
Libation and sacrifice,
But there on the shining metal
Where the altar should have been,
She saw by his flickering forge-light
Quite another scene.

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
Where bored officials lounged (one
cracked a joke)
And sentries sweated for the day was hot:
A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved
nor spoke

As three pale figures were led forth and
bound
To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The mass and majesty of this world, all
That carries weight and always weighs the
same
Lay in the hands of others; they were small
And could not hope for help and no help
came:
What their foes like to do was done, their
shame
Was all the worst could wish; they lost their
pride
And died as men before their bodies died.

She looked over his shoulder
For athletes at their games,
Men and women in a dance
Moving their sweet limbs
Quick, quick, to music,
But there on the shining shield
His hands had set no dancing-floor
But a weed-choked field.

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a
third,
Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
Of any world where promises were kept,
Or one could weep because another wept.

The thin-lipped armorer,
Hephaestos, hobbled away,
Thetis of the shining breasts
Cried out in dismay
At what the god had wrought
To please her son, the strong
Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles
Who would not live long.

2. Sir, no man's enemy, forgiving all

Sir, no man's enemy, forgiving all
But will his negative inversion, be prodigal:
Send to us power and light, a sovereign

touch
Curing the intolerable neural itch,
The exhaustion of weaning, the liar's quinsy,
And the distortions of ingrown virginity.
Prohibit sharply the rehearsed response
And gradually correct the coward's stance;
Cover in time with beams those in retreat
That, spouted, they turn though the reverse
were great;
Publish each healer that in city lives
Or country houses at the end of drives;
Harrow the house of the dead; look shining
at
New styles of architecture, a change of
heart.

3. A Thanksgiving

A Thanksgiving

When pre-pubescent I felt
that moorlands and woodlands were sacred:
people seemed rather profane.
Thus, when I started to verse,
I presently sat at the feet of
Hardy and Thomas and Frost.
Falling in love altered that,
now Someone, at least, was important :
Yeats was a help, so was Graves.
Then, without warning, the whole
Economy suddenly crumbled:
there, to instruct me, was Brecht.
Finally, hair-raising things
that Hitler and Stalin were doing
forced me to think about God.
Why was I sure they were wrong?
Wild Kierkegaard, Williams and Lewis
guided me back to belief.
Now, as I mellow in years
and home in a bountiful landscape,
Nature allures me again.
Who are the tutors I need?
Well, Horace, adroitest of makers,
beeking in Tivoli, and
Goethe. devoted to stones,
who guessed that-he never could prove
itNewton
led Science astray.
Fondly I ponder You all:
without You I couldn't have managed

even my weakest of lines.

7 May 1973

4. The Unknown Citizen

The Unknown Citizen

To /SI071M1378

This Marble Monument is Erected by the State

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official
complaint.

And all the reports on his conduct agree
That. in the modern sense of an old-fashioned
word.

he was a saint.

For in everything he did he served the Greater
Community.

Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired.
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues.
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a
drink.

The Press are convinced that he bought a paper
every day

And that his reactions to advertisements were
normal in

every way.

Policies taken out in his name prove that he
was fully insured.

And his Health-card shows he was once in
hospital but

left it cured.

Both Producers Research and High-Grade
Living declare

He was fully sensible to the advantages of the
Installment Plan

And had everything necessary to the Modern
Man.

A gramophone. a radio. a car and a frigidaire.

Our researchers into Public Opinion are
content

That he held the proper opinions for the time of
year;

When there was peace, he was for peace ;
when there
was war. he went.
He was married and added five children to the
population.
Which our Eugenist says was the right number
for a parent of
his generation.

85

And our teachers report that he never interfered
with
their education.

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is
absurd:

Had anything been wrong, we should certainly
have heard.

March 1939

5. In Memory of W.B. Yeats

(d. January 1939)

I

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the air-ports almost
deserted,

And snow disfigured the public statues ;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying
day.

o all the instruments agree

The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness

The wolves ran on through the evergreen
forests,

The peasant river was untempted by the
fashionable quays ;

By mourning tongues

The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours ;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed: he became his
admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections

;

To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of
conscience.

The words of a dead man

Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the
floor of the Bourse,

And the poor have the sufferings to which
they are fairly accustomed,

And each in the cell of himself is almost
convinced of his freedom;

A few thousand will think of this day

As one thinks of a day when one did something

-

slightly unusual.

o all the instruments agree

The day of his death was a dark cold day.

II

You were silly like us: your gift survived it all;
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself; mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.

Now Ireland has her madness and her weather
still,

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives

In the valley of its saying where executives

Would never want to tamper; it flows south

From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,

Raw towns that we believe and die in; it

survives,

A way of happening, a mouth.

III

Earth, receive an honoured guest;

William Yeats is laid to rest:

Let the Irish vessel lie

Emptied of its poetry.

Time that is intolerant

Of the brave and innocent,

And indifferent in a week

To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives

Everyone by whom it lives ;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet.

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons him for writing well.

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate ;

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice ;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.
February 1939

6. Orpheus

What does the song hope for? And the moved
hands
A little way from the birds, the shy, the
delightful?
To be bewildered and happy,
Or most of all the knowledge of life?

But the beautiful are content with the sharp
notes of the air;
The warmth is enough. O if winter really
Oppose, if the weak snowflake,

What will the wish, what will the dance do?

April 1937

8. Prospero to Ariel

I

Stay with me, Ariel, while I pack, and with
your first free act
Delight my leaving; share my resigning
thoughts
As you have served my revelling wishes: then,
brave spirit,
Ages to you of song and daring, and to me
Briefly Milan, then earth. In all, things have
turned out better
Than I once expected or ever deserved;
I am glad that I did not recover my dukedom
till
I do not want it ; I am glad that Miranda
No longer pays me any attention ; I am glad I
have freed you,
So at last I can really believe I shall die.
For under your influence death is
inconceivable :
On walks through winter woods, a bird's dry
carcass
Agitates the retina with novel images,
A stranger's quiet collapse in a noisy street
Is the beginning of much lively speculation,
And every time some dear flesh disappears
What is real is the arriving grief; thanks to your
service,
The lonely and unhappy are very much alive.
But now all these heavy books are no use to me
any more, for
Where I go, words carry no weight: it is best,
Then, I surrender their fascinating counsel
To the silent dissolution of the sea
Which misuses nothing because it values
nothing;
Whereas man overvalues everything
Yet, when he learns the price is pegged to his
valuation,
Complains bitterly he is being ruined which, of
course, he is.
So kings find it odd they should have a million
subjects
Yet share in the thoughts of none, and seducers

Are sincerely puzzled at being unable to love
What they are able to possess ; so, long ago,
In an open boat, I wept at giving a city,
Common warmth and touching substance, for a
gift
In dealing with shadows. If age, which is
certainly
Just as wicked as youth, look any wiser,
It is only that youth is still able to believe
It will get away with anything, while age
Knows only too well that it has got away with
nothing:
The child runs out to play in the garden,
convinced
That the furniture will go on with its thinking
lesson,
Who, fifty years later, if he plays at all,
Will first ask its kind permission to be
excused.
When I woke into my life, a sobbing dwarf
Whom giants served only as they pleased,
I was not what I seemed;
Beyond their busy backs I made a magic
To ride away from a father's imperfect justice,
Take vengeance on the Romans for their
grammar,
Usurp the popular earth and blot out for ever
The gross insult of being a mere one among
many:
Now, Ariel, I am that I am, your late and lonely
master,
Who knows now what magic is :-the power to
enchant
That comes from disillusion. What the books
can teach one
Is that most desires end up in stinking ponds,
But we have only to learn to sit still and give
no orders,
To make you offer us your echo and your
mirror;
We have only to believe you, then you dare not
lie ;
To ask for nothing, and at once from your calm
eyes,
With their lucid proof of apprehension and
disorder.
All we are not stares back at what we are. For
all things,

In your company, can be themselves: historic
deeds
Drop their hauteur and speak of shabby
childhoods
When all they longed for was to join in the
gang of doubts
Who so tormented them; sullen diseases
Forget their dreadful appearance and make
silly jokes ;
Thick-headed goodness for OIice is not a bore.
No one but you had sufficient audacity and
eyesight
To find those clearings where the shy
humiliations
Gambol on sunny afternoons, the waterhole to
which
The scarred rogue sorrow comes quietly in the
small hours :
And no one but you is reliably informative on
hell;
As you whistle and skip past, the poisonous
Resentments scuttle over your unrevolted
feet,
And even the uncontrollable vertigo,
Because it can scent no shame, is un obliged to
strike.
Could he but once see Nature as
In truth she is for ever,
What oncer would not feU in love?
Hold up your mirror, boy, to do
Your vulgar friends this favour:
One peep, though, will be quite enough;
To those who are not true,
A statue with no figleaf has
A pornographic flavour.
Inform my hot heart straight away
Its treasure loves another,
But turn to neutral topics then,
Such as the pictures in this room,
Religion or the Weather;
Pure scholarship in Where and When,
How Often and With Whom,
Is not for Passion that must play
The Jolly Elder Brother.
Be frank about our heathen foe,
For Rome will be a goner
If you soft-pedal the loud beast;
Describe in plain four-letter words

This dragon that's upon her:
 But should our beggars ask the cost,
 Just whistle like the birds;
 Dare even Pope or Caesar know
 The price of faith and honour?
 To-day I am free and no longer need your
 freedom:
 You, I suppose, will be off now to look for
 likely victims ;
 Crowds chasing ankles, lone men stalking
 glory,
 Some feverish young rebel among amiable
 flowers
 In consultation with his handsome envy,
 A punctual plump judge, a fly-weight hermit in
 a dream
 Of gardens that time is for ever outside
 To lead absurdly by their self-important noses.
 Are you malicious by nature? I don't know.
 Perhaps only incapable of doing nothing or of
 Being by yourself, and, for all your wry faces,
 May secretly be anxious and miserable without
 A master to need you for the work you need.
 Are all your tricks a test? If so, I hope you find,
 next time,
 Someone in whom you cannot spot the
 weakness
 Through which you will corrupt him with your
 charm. Mine
 you did
 And me you have : thanks to us both, I have
 broken
 Both of the promises I made as an apprentice :-
 To hate nothing and to ask nothing for its love.
 All by myself I tempted Antonio into treason;
 However that could be cleared up ; both of us
 know
 That both were in the wrong, and neither need
 be sorry:
 But Caliban remains my impervious disgrace.
 We did it, Ariel, between us ; you found on me
 a wish
 For absolute devotion; result-his wreck
 That sprawls in the weeds and will not be
 repaired:
 My dignity discouraged by a pupil's curse,
 I shall go knowing and incompetent into my
 'grave.

The extravagant children, who lately
 swaggered
 Out of the sea like gC!ds, have, I think, been
 soundly hunted
 By their own devils into their human selves :
 To all, then, but me, their pardons. Alonso's
 heaviness
 Is lost; and weak Sebastian will be patient
 In future with his slothful conscience-after all,
 it pays ;
 Stephano is contracted to his belly, a minor
 But a prosperous kingdom; stale Trinculo
 receives,
 Gratis, a whole fresh repertoire of stories, and
 Our younger generation its independent joy.
 Their eyes are big and blue with love; its
 lighting
 Makes even us look new: yes, to-day it all
 looks so easy.
 Will Ferdinand be as fond of a Miranda
 Familiar as a stocking? Will a Miranda who is
 No longer a silly lovesick little goose,
 When Ferdinand and his brave world are her
 profession,
 Go into raptures over existing at all?
 Probably I over-estimate their difficulties;
 Just the same, I am very glad I shall never
 Be twenty and have to go through that business
 again,
 The hours of fuss and fury, the conceit, the
 expense.
 Sing first that green remote Cockaigne
 Where whiskey-rivers run,
 And every gorgeous number may
 Be laid by anyone;
 For medicine and rhetoric
 Lie mouldering on shelves,
 While sad young dogs and stomach-aches
 Love no one but themselves.
 Tell then of witty angels who
 Come only to the beasts,
 Of Heirs Apparent who prefer
 Low dives to formal feasts;
 For shameless Insecurity
 Prays for a boot to lick,
 And many a sore bottom finds
 A sorer one to -kick.
 Wind up, though, on a moral note:-

That Glory will go bang,
Schoolchildren shall co-operate,
And honest rogues must hang;
Because our sound committee man
Has murder in his heart:
But should you catch a living eye,
Just wink as you depart.
Now our partnership is dissolved, I feel so
peculiar:
As if I had been on a drunk since I was born
And suddenly now, and for the first time, am
cold sober,
With all my unanswered wishes and unwashed
days
Stacked up all around my life ; as if through
the ages I had dreamed
About some tremendous journey I was taking,
Sketching imaginary landscapes, chasms and
cities,
Cold walls, hot spaces, wild mouths, defeated
backs,
Jotting down fictional notes on secrets
overheard
In theatres and privies, banks and mountain
inns,
And now, in my old age, I wake, and this
journey really exists,
And I have actually to take it, inch by inch,
Alone and on foot, without a cent in my
pocket,
Through a universe where time is not
foreshortened,
No animals talk, and there is neither floating
nor flying.
When I am safely home, oceans away in Milan,
and
Realise once and for all I shall never see you
again,
Over there, maybe, it won't seem quite so
dreadful
Not to be interesting any more, but an old man
Just like other old men, with eyes that water
Easily in the wind, and a head that nods in the
sunshine,
Forgetful, maladroit, a little grubby,
And to like it. When the servants settle me into
a chair
In some well-sheltered corner of the garden,

And arrange my muffler and rugs, shall I ever
be able
To stop myself from telling them what I am
doing,-
Sailing alone, out over seventy thousand
fathoms-?
Yet if I speak, r shall sink without a sound
Into unmeaning abysses. Can I learn to suffer
Without saying something ironic or funny
On suffering? I never suspected the way of
truth
Was a way of silence where affectionate chat
Is but a robbers' ambush and even good music
In shocking taste; and you, of course, never
told me.
If I peg away at it honestly every moment,
And have luck, perhaps by the time death
pounces
His stumping question, I shall just be getting to
know
The difference between moonshine and
daylight
I see you starting to fidget. I forgot. To you
That doesn't matter. My dear, here comes
Gonzalo
With a solemn face to fetch me. O Ariel, Ariel,
How I shall miss you. Enjoy your element.
Good-bye.
Sing, Ariel, sing,
Sweetly, dangerously
Out of the sour
And shiftless water,
Lucidly out
Of the dozing tree,
Entrancing, rebuking
The raging heart
With a smoother song
Than this rough world,
Unfeeling god.
a brilliantly, lightly,
Of separation,
Of bodies and death,
Unanxious one, sing
To man, meaning me,
As now, meaning always,
In love or out,
Whatever that mean,
Trembling he takes

The silent passage
Into discomfort.

9. Prologue At Sixty (FOR FRIEDRICH HEER)

Dark-green upon distant heights
the stationary flocks foresters tend,
blonde and fertile the fields below them:
browsing a hog-back, an oak stands
post-alone, light-demanding.
Easier to hear, harder to see,
limbed lives, locomotive,
automatic and irritable,
social or solitary, seek their foods,
mates and territories while their time lasts.
Radial republics, rooted to spots,
bilateral monarchies, moving frankly,
stoic by sort and self-policing,
enjoy their rites, their realms of data,
live well by the Law of their Flesh.
All but the youngest of the yawning mammals,
Name-Giver, Ghost-Fearer,
maker of wars and wise-cracks,
a rum creature, in a crisis always,
the anxious species to which I belong,
whom chance and my own choice have arrived
to bide here yearly from bud-haze
to leaf-blush, dislodged from elsewhere,
by blood barbarian, in bias of view
a Son of the North, outside the limes.
Rapacious pirates my people were,
crude and cruel. but not calculating,
never marched in step nor made straight roads,
nor sank like senators to a slave's taste
for grandiose buildings and gladiators.
But the Gospel reached the unroman lands.
I can translate what onion-towers
of five parish churches preach in Baroque :
to make One, there must be Two,
Love is substantial, all Luck is good,
Flesh must fall through fated time
from birth to death, both unwilling,
but Spirit may climb counterwise
from a death, in faith freely chosen,
to resurrection, a re-beginning.
And the Greek Code got to us also:
a Mind of Honor must acknowledge
the happy eachness of all things,

distinguish even from odd numbers,
and bear witness to what-is-the-case.
East, West. on the Autobahn
motorists whoosh, on the Main Line
a far-sighted express will snake by.
through a gap granted by grace of nature:
still today, as in the Stone Age,
our sandy vale is a valued passage.
Alluvial flats. flooded often,
lands of outwash, lie to the North,
to the South litters of limestone alps
embarrass the progress of path-seekers.
Their thoughts upon ski-slope or theatre-
opening.
few who pass us pay attention
to our squandered hamlets where at harvest
time
chugging tractors, child-driven,
shamble away down sheltered lanes.
Quiet now but acquainted too
with unwelcome visitors, violation,
scare and scream, the scathe of battle:
Turks have been here, Boney's legions,
Germans, Russians, and no joy they brought.
Though the absence of hedge-rows is odd to
me
(no Whig landlord, the landscape vaunts,
ever empired on Austrian ground),
this unenglish tract after ten years
into my love has looked itself,
added its names to my numinous map
of the Solihull gas-works, gazed at in awe
by a bronchial boy, the Blue John Mine,
the Festiniog railway, the Rhayader dams,
Cross Fell, Keld and Cauldron Snout,
of sites made sacred by something read there,
a lunch, a good lay, or sheer lightness of heart,
the Fiirbringer and the Friedrich Strasse,
Isafjordur, Epomeo,
Poprad, Basel, Bar-Ie-Due,
of more modern holies, Middagh Street,
Carnegie Hall and the Con-Ed stacks
on First Avenue. Who am I now?
An American? No, a New Yorker,
who opens his Times at the obit page,
whose dream images date him already,
awake among lasers, electric brains,
do-it-yourself sex manuals.

bugged phones, sophisticated
weapon-systems and sick jokes.
Already a helpless orbited dog
has blinked at our sorry conceited 0,
where many are famished, few look good,
and my day turned out torturers
who read Hilke in their rest periods.
Now the Cosmocrats are crashed through time-
zones
in jumbo jets to a Joint Conference:
nor sleep nor shit have our shepherds had,
and treaties are signed (with secret clauses)
by Heads who are not all there.
Can Sixty make sense to Sixteen-Plus?
What has my camp in common with theirs,
with buttons and beards and B e-Ins?
Much, I hope. In Acts it is written
Taste was no problem at Pentecost.
To speak is human because human to listen,
beyond hope, for an Eighth Day,
when the creature Image shall become the
Likeness :
Giver-of-Life, translate for me
till I accomplish my corpse at last.
April 1967

10. Muse Des Beaux Arts

Musee des Beaux Arts
About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters : how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a
window or just
walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently,
passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to
happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its
course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy
life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance : how
everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the
ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure ; the
sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into
the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that
must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the
sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.
December 1938