

*Poems of W.H. Auden*  
(1907-1973)

**September 1, 1939**

I sit in one of the dives  
On Fifty-second Street  
Uncertain and afraid  
As the clever hopes expire  
Of a low dishonest decade:  
Waves of anger and fear  
Circulate over the bright  
And darkened lands of the earth,  
Obsessing our private lives;  
The unmentionable odour of death  
Offends the September night.

Accurate scholarship can  
Unearth the whole offence  
From Luther until now  
That has driven a culture mad,  
Find what occurred at Linz,  
What huge imago made  
A psychopathic god:  
I and the public know  
What all schoolchildren learn,  
Those to whom evil is done  
Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides knew  
All that a speech can say  
About Democracy,  
And what dictators do,  
The elderly rubbish they talk  
To an apathetic grave;  
Analysed all in his book,  
The enlightenment driven away,  
The habit-forming pain,  
Mismanagement and grief:  
We must suffer them all again.

Into this neutral air  
Where blind skyscrapers use  
Their full height to proclaim  
The strength of Collective Man,

Each language pours its vain  
Competitive excuse:  
But who can live for long  
In an euphoric dream;  
Out of the mirror they stare,  
Imperialism's face  
And the international wrong.

Faces along the bar  
Cling to their average day:  
The lights must never go out,  
The music must always play,  
All the conventions conspire  
To make this fort assume  
The furniture of home;  
Lest we should see where we are,  
Lost in a haunted wood,  
Children afraid of the night  
Who have never been happy or good.

The windiest militant trash  
Important Persons shout  
Is not so crude as our wish:  
What mad Nijinsky wrote  
About Diaghilev  
Is true of the normal heart;  
For the error bred in the bone  
Of each woman and each man  
Craves what it cannot have,  
Not universal love  
But to be loved alone.

From the conservative dark  
Into the ethical life  
The dense commuters come,  
Repeating their morning vow;  
"I will be true to the wife,  
I'll concentrate more on my work,"  
And helpless governors wake  
To resume their compulsory game:  
Who can release them now,  
Who can reach the deaf,  
Who can speak for the dumb?

All I have is a voice  
To undo the folded lie,

The romantic lie in the brain  
Of the sensual man-in-the-street  
And the lie of Authority  
Whose buildings grope the sky:  
There is no such thing as the State  
And no one exists alone;  
Hunger allows no choice  
To the citizen or the police;  
We must love one another or die.

Defenceless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.

### Musée 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 Breughel'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.

### Law, Like Love

Law, say the gardeners, is the sun,  
Law is the one  
All gardeners obey  
To-morrow, yesterday, to-day.  
Law is the wisdom of the old,  
The impotent grandfathers feebly scold;  
The grandchildren put out a treble tongue,  
Law is the senses of the young.

Law, says the priest with a priestly look,  
Expounding to an unpriestly people,  
Law is the words in my priestly book,  
Law is my pulpit and my steeple.

Law, says the judge as he looks down his nose,  
Speaking clearly and most severely,  
Law is as I've told you before,  
Law is as you know I suppose,  
Law is but let me explain it once more,  
Law is The Law.  
Yet law-abiding scholars write:  
Law is neither wrong nor right,  
Law is only crimes  
Punished by places and by times,  
Law is the clothes men wear  
Anytime, anywhere,  
Law is Good morning and Good night.  
Others say, Law is our Fate;  
  
Others say, Law is our State;  
  
Others say, others say  
Law is no more,  
Law has gone away.

And always the loud angry crowd,  
Very angry and very loud,  
Law is We,  
And always the soft idiot softly Me.

If we, dear, know we know no more  
Than they about the Law,  
If I no more than you  
Know what we should and should not do  
Except that all agree

Gladly or miserably  
That the Law is  
And that all know this  
If therefore thinking it absurd  
To identify  
Law with some other word,

Unlike so many men I cannot say  
Law is again,  
No more than they can we suppress

The universal wish to guess  
Or slip out of our own position  
Into an unconcerned condition.

Although I can at least confine  
Your vanity and mine  
To stating timidly  
A timid similarity,  
We shall boast anyway:  
Like love I say.  
Like love we don't know where or why,  
Like love we can't compel or fly,  
Like love we often weep,  
Like love we seldom keep.

### In Praise of Limestone

If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones,  
Are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly  
Because it dissolves in water. Mark these rounded slopes

With their surface fragrance of thyme and, beneath,  
A secret system of caves and conduits; hear the springs  
That spurt out everywhere with a chuckle,  
Each filling a private pool for its fish and carving  
Its own little ravine whose cliffs entertain  
The butterfly and the lizard; examine this region  
Of short distances and definite places:  
What could be more like Mother or a fitter background  
For her son, the flirtatious male who lounges  
Against a rock in the sunlight, never doubting  
That for all his faults he is loved; whose works are but  
Extensions of his power to charm? From weathered outcrop  
To hill-top temple, from appearing waters to  
Conspicuous fountains, from a wild to a formal vineyard,  
Are ingenious but short steps that a child's wish  
To receive more attention than his brothers, whether  
By pleasing or teasing, can easily take.

Watch, then, the band of rivals as they climb up and down  
Their steep stone gennels in twos and threes, at times  
Arm in arm, but never, thank God, in step; or engaged  
On the shady side of a square at midday in  
Volatile discourse, knowing each other too well to think  
There are any important secrets, unable  
To conceive a god whose temper-tantrums are moral  
And not to be pacified by a clever line  
Or a good lay: for accustomed to a stone that responds,  
They have never had to veil their faces in awe  
Of a crater whose blazing fury could not be fixed;  
Adjusted to the local needs of valleys  
Where everything can be touched or reached by walking,  
Their eyes have never looked into infinite space  
Through the lattice-work of a nomad's comb; born lucky,  
Their legs have never encountered the fungi  
And insects of the jungle, the monstrous forms and lives  
With which we have nothing, we like to hope, in common.  
So, when one of them goes to the bad, the way his mind works  
Remains incomprehensible: to become a pimp  
Or deal in fake jewellery or ruin a fine tenor voice  
For effects that bring down the house, could happen to all

But the best and the worst of us...

That is why, I suppose,

The best and worst never stayed here long but sought  
Immoderate soils where the beauty was not so external,

The light less public and the meaning of life  
Something more than a mad camp. 'Come!' cried the granite wastes,  
"How evasive is your humour, how accidental  
Your kindest kiss, how permanent is death." (Saints-to-be  
Slipped away sighing.) "Come!" purred the clays and gravels,  
"On our plains there is room for armies to drill; rivers  
Wait to be tamed and slaves to construct you a tomb  
In the grand manner: soft as the earth is mankind and both  
Need to be altered." (Intendant Caesars rose and  
Left, slamming the door.) But the really reckless were fetched  
By an older colder voice, the oceanic whisper:  
"I am the solitude that asks and promises nothing;  
That is how I shall set you free. There is no love;  
There are only the various envies, all of them sad."

They were right, my dear, all those voices were right  
And still are; this land is not the sweet home that it looks,  
Nor its peace the historical calm of a site  
Where something was settled once and for all: A back ward  
And dilapidated province, connected  
To the big busy world by a tunnel, with a certain  
Seedy appeal, is that all it is now? Not quite:  
It has a worldly duty which in spite of itself  
It does not neglect, but calls into question  
All the Great Powers assume; it disturbs our rights. The poet,  
Admired for his earnest habit of calling  
The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle, is made uneasy  
By these marble statues which so obviously doubt  
His antimythological myth; and these gamins,  
Pursuing the scientist down the tiled colonnade  
With such lively offers, rebuke his concern for Nature's  
Remotest aspects: I, too, am reproached, for what  
And how much you know. Not to lose time, not to get caught,  
Not to be left behind, not, please! to resemble  
The beasts who repeat themselves, or a thing like water  
Or stone whose conduct can be predicted, these

Are our common prayer, whose greatest comfort is music  
Which can be made anywhere, is invisible,  
And does not smell. In so far as we have to look forward  
To death as a fact, no doubt we are right: But if  
Sins can be forgiven, if bodies rise from the dead,  
These modifications of matter into  
Innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains,  
Made solely for pleasure, make a further point:  
The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,  
Having nothing to hide. Dear, I know nothing of  
Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love  
Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur  
Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.

### Funeral Blues

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone.  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling in the sky the message He is Dead,  
Put crêpe bows round the white necks of the public doves,  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last forever, I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun.  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

