From the very first coming down
Into a new valley with a frown
Because of the sun and a lost way.
You certainly remain: to-day
I, crouching behind a sheep-pen, heard
Travel across a sudden bird,
Cry out against the storm, and found
The year’s arc a completed round
And love’s worn circuit re-begun,
Endless with no dissenting turn.
Shall see, shall pass, as we have seen
The swallow on the tile, spring’s green
Preliminary shiver, passed

A solitary truck, the last
Of shunting 1 in the Autumn. But now,
To interrupt the homely brow,
Thought warmed to evening through and through,
Your letter comes, speaking as you,
Speaking of much, but not to come.

Nor speech is close nor fingers numb,
If love not seldom has received
An unjust answer, was deceived.
I, decent with the seasons, move
Different or with a different love,
Nor question much the nod,
The stone smile of this country god
That never was more reticent,
Always afraid to say more than it meant.

1927

1 to cause to go on a different course, as in transferring trains to a different track; as a noun, it is a low-resistance conductor or passageway to divert or facilitate the flow, as in an electrical or arterial shunt.
W[YSTAN]. H[UGH]. AUDEN
(English, 1907–73)

“Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks)”

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum\(^1\)
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.\(^2\)

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message “He is Dead.”
Put crepe 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\(^*\);  \(^*\) forests
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

1936, 1938

\(^1\) Muffled drumming is most frequently associated with the slow and stately drumming done at military funerals or funerals of other dignitaries, although here it could also be metaphoric of the solemn march of pallbearers bringing out a coffin.

\(^2\) Quatrains with an ABAB (or more rarely, AABB) rhyme scheme are often used in elegies, thus gaining the description “elegiac stanzas.”
“Lullaby”

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral:
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds:
To lovers as they lie upon
Her tolerant enchanted slope
In their ordinary swoon,
Grave the vision Venus sends
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope;
While an abstract insight wakes
Among the glaciers and the rocks
The hermit’s* carnal ecstasy. * recluse, loner

Certainty, fidelity
On the stroke of midnight pass
Like vibrations of a bell,
And fashionable madmen raise
Their pedantic boring cry:
Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreaded cards foretell,
Shall be paid, but from this night
Not a whisper, not a thought,
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
Let the winds of dawn that blow
Softly round your dreaming head
Such a day of welcome show
Eye and knocking heart may bless, (continued)
Find the mortal world enough;  
Noons of dryness find you fed  
By the involuntary powers,  
Nights of insult let you pass  
Watched by every human love.

1937

1 One of Auden’s most beloved love poems, it is also a fine example of his poetic ingenuity and expertise. The poem consists of 4 10-line stanzas, mostly unrhymed but with regular patterns: ll. 3 and 7 of each stanza rhyme, and the other pairs share consonance or assonance in each stanza: ll. 1 and 5, ll. 2 and 4, ll. 6 and 10, and ll. 8 and 9. The resulting pattern is thus ABCBADCEED.

2 Almost certainly a term of endearment in this context, but it also is intended to reinforce that sense of an offered prayer or plea (“But . . . / Let . . .”) in the face of a world where all passes “ephemeral.”

3 Venus’s (see 2 lines later)

4 “fidelity . . . pass”: confirming the jarring “faithless” in line two was not a misprint. Note that the transitory theme is flanked (and reinforced) by not one, but two references to time, a clock (“stroke” of midnight) and a bell, which tolls the time.

5 an anachronism—a former British coin no longer in use, and even when it was, it was only worth about one-fourth of a penny
WYSTAN. HUGH. AUDEN
(English, 1907–73)

“As I Walked Out One Evening”

As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.

And down by the brimming river
I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway:
‘Love has no ending.

‘I’ll love you, dear, I’ll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street,

‘I’ll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky.

‘The years shall run like rabbits,
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And the first love of the world.’

But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
‘O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time.

‘In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.

‘In headaches and in worry
Vaguely life leaks away,
And Time will have his fancy (continued)
To-morrow or to-day.

‘Into many a green valley
    Drifts the appalling snow;
Time breaks the threaded dances
    And the diver’s brilliant bow.’

‘O plunge your hands in water,
    Plunge them in up to the wrist;
Stare, stare in the basin
    And wonder what you’ve missed.

‘The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
    The desert sighs in the bed;
And the crack in the tea-cup
    Opens a lane to the land of the dead.

‘Where the beggars raffle the banknotes
    And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,
And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer,
    And Jill goes down on her back.

‘O look, look in the mirror,
    O look in your distress:
Life remains a blessing
    Although you cannot bless.

‘O stand, stand at the window
    As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
    With your crooked heart.’

It was late, late in the evening,
    The lovers they were gone;
The clocks had ceased their chiming,
    And the deep river ran on.

1937
The narrator begins the poem, but we will soon see that there are two other narrators—lovers and clocks—and all three have a different measure and attitude.

a street in Birmingham, England

as opposed to Spring or Summer. And be sure to pay attention to all the connotations of the stanza following (ll. 5–8); the words are NOT chosen at random.

There are seven stars in the star cluster Pleiades in the constellation Taurus, also known as the Seven Sisters. Moreover, in Revelation, seven stars refer to the angels representing the seven churches of early Christianity. Either way, the implication is cosmic if not apocalyptic, as the disturbing image of squawking geese suggests in the next line.

not only amusing, but also a frequent sign of disease/death, Times ultimate trump card.

likely the traditional dances, like the Maypole dance, that represent the coming of Spring, rebirth, here thwarted

the momentary, seemingly time-suspending “bow” at the top of a dive, before time and gravity plunge it downward, a segue to the next stanza

“glaciers . . . bed”: Glaciers are barren places, whereas ideally cupboards should be filled with nourishing food; similarly, deserts are barren, whereas beds that are barren not only lack the fruit of love but are unable to produce children.

Tea is an ancient beverage often associated with a healthy life, meditative qualities (e.g., tea ceremonies), and the ability to cure certain ailments.

Auden has structured this poem as a ballad (normally, quatrains rhyming ABCB, with ll. 1 & 3 in tetrameter and ll. 2 & 4 in trimeter) for a reason: sing-songy ballads are customarily the form taken by traditional children’s nursery rhymes, the “childlike”—hence the appearance of nursery rhymes. (continued)

powerless to "bless" ourselves or anyone else with the ability to escape Time's ultimate triumph
“Musée des Beaux Arts” [Museum of Fine Arts]

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters\(^1\); 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:\(^2\)
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.\(^3\)

In Brueghel’s *Icarus*,\(^4\) 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.

1938

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\(^1\) “Old Masters” customarily refers to paintings who worked before 1800, usually before 1700. The clumsy syntactical inversion that begins the poem is deliberate for several reasons, not least that Auden wanted to call special attention to the fact that the poem’s emphasis is about suffering, not the “Old Masters.” Note that Auden reverses the usual sequence of presentation, contextual description before analysis, slamming us with the relevance before giving the context.

\(^2\) This ekphrastic exercise—ekphrastics is when a work of art, usually a poem, describes a painting as part of its content—which Auden begins in ll. 5–8, is noting Pieter Breugel the Elder’s allusion in his painting (the one Auden is...
describing) to the famous story of the “Census at Bethlehem” referenced in the Gospel of Luke (there are over a dozen different paintings depicting this story). Common elements of these depictions, captured by Breugel, are an ordinary village scene, someone loading firewood, people carrying sacks across a frozen stream, a pig being gutted, a man changing his shoes, a woman sweeping, a house being built, and children playing on the frozen river. In the left foreground people crowd at a house to register for the census which has brought them to Bethlehem and to collect their meat (the pig being gutted) which is their reward for having complied with their duty. In the center-foreground Mary and Joseph arrive unnoticed by the village, notwithstanding the passionate, reverent waiting for the miraculous birth. As he often did, Breugel the Elder treats a biblical story as if it were an event in his own time. Breugel the Elder’s version (1566) is housed in the Royal Museums of Fine Art (Museum van Buuren, Musees royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique) in Brussels, Belgium. Note that in this 1st painting there is no suffering at all depicted.

3 Another incorporated allusion, in ll. 9–13, to a Breugel the Elder painting, this one Christ Carrying the Cross (1564), currently housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

4 A 3rd Breugel allusion in the last 8 lines of the poem: to Landscape with the Fall of Icarus (c.1555–60), a painting by Pieter Breugel, the Elder, about the tragedy of Icarus, currently also housed at the Royal Museums of Fine Art (Museum van Buuren, Musees royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique) in Brussels, Belgium. In Greek mythology, in order to escape their exile on an island by King Minos of Crete, Icarus’s father Daedalus fashions two pairs of wings, using feathers secured with wax, which they use to fly away. However, the youthful and exuberant Icarus flies too close to the sun, ignoring his father’s warnings and thus melting the wax, whereupon he fall into the sea and drowns.
“Victor”

Victor was a little baby,
Into this world he came;
His father took him on his knee and said:
“Don’t dishonor the family name.”

Victor looked up at his father
Looked up with big round eyes:
His father said; “Victor, my only son,
Don’t you ever ever tell lies.”

Victor and his father went riding
Out in a little dog-cart;
His father took a Bible from his pocket and read;
“Blessed are the pure in heart.”

It was a frosty December
Victor was only eighteen,
But his figures were neat and his margins were straight
And his cuffs were always clean.

He took a room at the Peveril,
A respectable boarding-house;
And Time watched Victor day after day
As a cat will watch a mouse.

The clerks slapped Victor on the shoulder;
“Have you ever had woman?” they said,
“Come down town with us on Saturday night.”
Victor smiled and shook his head.

The manager sat in his office,
Smoked a Corona cigar:
Said; “Victor’s a decent fellow but
He’s too mousy to go far.”

Victor went up the his bedroom,
Set the alarum bell;
Climbed into bed, took his Bible and read
Of what happened to Jezebel.¹

It was the First of April,²
Anna to the Peveril came;
Her eyes, her lips, her breasts, her hips
And her smile set men aflame,

She looked as pure as a schoolgirl
On her First Communion day,
But her kisses were like the best champagne
When she gave herself away.

It was the Second of April.
She was wearing a coat of fur;
Victor met her upon the stair
And he fell in love with her.

The first time he made his proposal,
She laughed, said “I’ll never wed;
The second time there was a pause;
Then she smiled and shook her head.

Anna looked into her mirror,
Pouted and gave a frown:
Said “Victor’s as dull as a wet afternoon
But I’ve got to settle down.”

The third time he made his proposal,
As they walked by the Reservoir:
She gave him a kiss like a blow on the head,
Said; “You are my heart's desire.”

They were married early in August,
She said; “Kiss me, you funny boy”;
Victor took her in his arms and said;
“O my Helen of Troy.”³

It was the middle of September,
Victor came to the office one day;
He was wearing a flower in his buttonhole,     (continued)
He was late but he was gay.

The clerks were talking of Anna,
The door was just ajar:
One said, “Poor old Victor, but where ignorance
Is bliss, et cetera.”

Victor stood still as a statue,
The door was just ajar:
One said, “God, what fun I had with her
In that Baby Austin car.”

Victor walked out into the High Street,
He walked to the edge of town:
He came to the allotments and the rubbish heap
And his tears came tumbling down.

Victor looked up at the sunset
As he stood there all alone;
Cried; “Are you in Heaven, Father?”
But the sky said “Address not known.”

Victor looked at the mountains,
The mountains all covered in snow
Cried; “Are you pleased with me, Father?”
And the answer came back, No.

Victor came to the forest,
Cried: “Father, will she ever be true?”
And the oaks and the beeches shook their heads
And they answered: “Not to you.”

Victor came to the meadow
Where the wind went sweeping by:
Cried; “O Father, I love her so,”
But the wind said, “She must die.”

Victor came to the river
Running so deep and so still:
Crying; “O Father, what shall I do?”
And the river answered, “Kill.” (continued)
Anna was sitting at table,
Drawing cards from a pack;
Anna was sitting at table
Waiting for her husband to come back.

It wasn’t the Jack of Diamonds
Nor the Joker she drew first;
It wasn’t the King or the Queen of Hearts
But the Ace of Spades reversed.\textsuperscript{6}

Victor stood in the doorway,
He didn’t utter a word:
She said; “What’s the matter, darling?”
He behaved as if he hadn’t heard.

There was a voice in his left ear,
There was a voice in his right,
There was a voice at the base of his skull
Saying, “She must die tonight.”

Victor picked up a carving-knife,
His features were set and drawn,
Said; “Anna it would have been better for you
If you had not been born.”\textsuperscript{7}

Anna jumped up from the table,
Anna started to scream,
But Victor came slowly after her
Like a horror in a dream.

She dodged behind the sofa,
She tore down a curtain rod,
But Victor came slowly after her:
Said; “Prepare to meet thy God.”

She managed to wrench the door open,
She ran and she didn't stop.
But Victor followed her up the stairs
And he caught her at the top.

He stood there above the body,
He stood there holding the knife;  
And the blood ran down the stairs and sang,  
“I’m the Resurrection and the Life.”

They tapped Victor on the shoulder,  
They took him away in a van;  
He sat as quiet as a lump of moss  
Saying, “I am the Son of Man.”

Victor sat in a corner  
Making a woman of clay:  
Saying; “I am Alpha and Omega, I shall come  
To judge the earth some day.”

1 9th century BC Phoenician princess, daughter of Ethbaal and wife to Israeli king Ahab. Often portrayed as the supreme temptress figure, she is in the Bible reviled for killing God’s prophets and promoting the worship of Baal instead of Yahweh. For her wickedness she was eaten by the dogs after her death (see 1st Kings 18:4, 1st Kings 16:32-33, 2nd Kings 9:30-37).

2 April is generally consider the arrival of Spring, which marks the revival of life, but the 1st is also April Fool’s Day.

3 Having come to symbolize the archetypal ravishing beauty, Helen of Troy was also Greek king Menelaus’s young and beautiful wife, who bolted to Troy with her lover, Paris (much younger and more attractive than his husband), bringing about the Trojan War, which led to the loss of countless lives and ruination for everyone.

4 Traditionally, the Biblical prophets would often go alone up a steep mountain, or to a high place, in order to communicate with God.

5 an allusion to “Still waters run deep” (“altissima quaeque flumina minimo sono labuntur”), a Latin proverb by Curtius, which argues that a placid and dull exterior often betrays a passionate or temperamental nature. (continued)
Spades in tarot (where cards can be either straight or reversed depending on the facing towards the asker) often herald trouble or danger of some kind. When using a standard deck in order to read the Tarot, the Ace of Spades is identified with the Tarot’s 13th Major Arcana—namely, Death. Inversion is a traditional sign of evil or perversion (an upside down heart being a sign of perverse love, etc.).

references Matthew 26:24, regarding Judas Iscariot: “The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.”

references John 11:25, comforting Martha and Mary: “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.”

references Matthew 16:13, on Jesus: “When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, ‘Whom do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?’”

references Revelation 22:13, on God: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”
W[YSTAN]. H[UGH]. AUDEN  
(English, 1907–73)  

“The Unknown Citizen”¹  

(To JS/07/M/378 This Marble Monument Is Erected by the State)²  

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 War³ till the day he retired  
He worked in a factory and never got fired,  
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.⁴  
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 Living⁵ declare  
He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan⁶  
And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,⁷  
A phonograph, 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 Eugenist⁸ says was the right number for a parent of his generation,  
And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.  
Was he free? Was he happy? The question⁹ is absurd:  
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.  

1939  

¹ This elegy is a parodic allusion to “The Unknown Soldier,” the monument solemnly honoring the thousands of soldiers who died anonymously (without their
remains having been identified) for their country. To give in some historical context, we are so familiar with officious bureaucrats that we forget that we did not always have bureaucrats on the scale we have now. Auden’s parody in 1939 would have appeared much more troubling (and funnier) to less jaded readers than we are now.

2 Although Auden would not have known it, at the time this poem was written the Nazis were already starting to identify Jewish prisoners with numbered tattoos. In retrospect, this grisly and chilling parallel makes the “marble monument” seem that much more sinister (and Auden’s theme of the numbing effects of modern [totalitarian] life more prescient).

3 another of the kind of inversions for which Auden was famous: the exclusionary phrase “except for the War” would ordinarily come at the end of the sentence, after what is included had been identified.

4 The Detroit-based Ford Motors, Inc. was the first and largest auto company in the world at the time. And “Fudge” at the time was a common middle-class euphemism for a curse expletive also beginning with “F.”

5 probably stand-ins for Good Housekeeping and Consumer Reports, both of which were around when Auden wrote the poem.

6 Virtually obsolete now, buying major goods on “layaway” and paying for them in installments before taking them home was the normal way the middle class made such purchases in the 40s and 50s. The idea of buying something before one could pay for it would probably have struck Auden as “weird” (but then he was a Brit in the days before credit cards).

7 Note several concepts are joined (and conflated) here: What is “everything,” “necessary,” and “everything necessary” in a human (as opposed to advertizing) terms? And in what respects is Modern Man reductionist (or compelled to be) with respect to these concepts?

8 “Eugenics” was a social movement, growing out of the theory of evolution and the relatively new field of genetics, which believed that the human species could be improved by engineering changes in its gene pool. It was an extremely popular concept until Hitler started putting it into practice.

9 Note that “question” is singular here, as if being free and being happy were the same thing, which is a relevant issue in a poem that joins (and disjoins) the concepts is striking ways.
“Refugee Blues”¹

Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:
Yet there’s no place for us, my dear, yet there’s no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you’ll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,²
Every spring it blossoms anew:
Old passports³ can’t do that, my dear, old passports can’t do that.

The consul⁴ banged the table and said,
“If you’ve got no passport you’re officially dead”:
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;
Asked me politely to return next year:
But where shall we go to-day⁵, my dear, but where shall we go to-day?

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said;
“If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread”⁶:
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;
It was Hitler over Europe, saying, “They must die”:
O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:
But they weren’t German Jews, my dear, but they weren’t German Jews.

Went down the harbor and stood upon the quay,
Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:
Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.

Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;
They had no politicians and sang at their ease:  (continued)
They weren’t the human race, my dear, they weren’t the human race.

Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,
A thousand windows and a thousand doors:
Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.

Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;
Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:
Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.

1939

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1 Auden uses the blues tradition, which has its origins in slave songs; though composed through improvisation, the blues has a rigid pattern of repetition.

2 type of gnarled tree often found in churchyards, traditionally associated with death.

3 passports of Jews were seized by the government in accordance with the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, in which Jews were stripped of their identities and citizenships.

4 representing a country to which the refugees wanted to travel.

5 Other countries, by international law, were obligated to respect the laws of other countries (including the Nuremberg Laws of 1935). Also, other countries were disinclined to accept German immigrants at this time in case they were Nazi spies.

6 Historically, “stateless” people are customarily assumed to be criminals.

7 a walkway beside a river, normally on a lower level where boats can be kept at harbor.
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;
Analyzed 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
(continued)
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.\textsuperscript{12}

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light\textsuperscript{13}
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.

1939

\textsuperscript{1} the day Hitler invaded Poland, officially beginning WWII

\textsuperscript{2} In fact, a gay bar, probably the Dizzy Club, to which Auden had been introduced to his American lover Chester Kallman. Therefore, although it is ostensibly in the form of a private communication, the poem is also an effort to communicate with a public of “strangers.”

(continued)
Martin Luther. It is not clear which of Luther’s ideas Auden though ultimately drove a whole culture mad—his antisemitism, his deference to secular powers, his overturning authority in favor of [untutored] personal interpretation—but the real point is Auden’s belief that grand political events can be traced to the theoretical concepts of long-dead authors.

Hitler’s hometown

a Jungian term meaning roughly “idealized self” or “personal paradigm”

Athenian historian, political philosopher and general, considered to be the father of “scientific history” because of his strict standards of evidence-gathering and analysis of cause and effect. Thucydides was unjustly exiled from democratic Athens for a military failure, at which he point he wrote his great history of the Peloponnesian War that contains Pericles’s paean to democracy (the strongest pro-democratic statement of ancient times), although Thucydides probably meant the presentation to be ironic, to suggest that it was propaganda, like all politics.

Perhaps this is a reason why Auden's nine stanzas all have the same pattern of eleven lines that, while they do not rhyme, tend to repeat vowel and consonant sounds at the ends of lines (for example, the last four lines of stanza 1: earth/lives/death/night; stanza 2: know/learn/done/return; stanza 3: away/pain/grief/again).

The United States was neutral in the war at this time, hence at peace, but also complicit because we did nothing to stop Hitler. Auden presents himself as a citizen of a combatant nation who is guiltily safe in neutral Manhattan. Neutrality had been a characteristic failure of the “low dishonest decade” that Auden invoked in the first stanza.

lead male ballet dancer of the Ballet Russes, the undisputed premier ballet company of the late 19th and early 20th centuries

founder and director of the Ballet Russes

Auden hated these last lines, because they were false (dishonest): we will die even if we do love one another.

that is, detached from mass beliefs and political agendas.
“Shield of Achilles”

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,³
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
Without expression, waiting for a sign.⁴

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,
Libation⁵ 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:   (continued)
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. 6

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. 7

1952, 1955

(continued)
the shield that Achilles uses in his fight with Hector, famously described in a passage in Book 18, lines 478-608 of Homer’s Iliad. In the poem, Achilles has lost his armor after lending it to his companion Patroclus, who is killed in battle by Hector and his weapons taken as spoils. Achilles’ mother Thetis asks the blacksmith of the gods Hephaestus to provide replacement armor for her son. Auden’s poem “The Shield of Achilles” reimagines Homer’s description in 20th century terms, that is, as an allegory of the Cold-War world of the 1950s.

For dramatic purposes, to contrast the different perspectives of Thetis (representing the ancient civilization from which we should learn) and Hephaestos (representing a savage and menacing modern world), Auden has Thetis look over Hephaestos’s shoulder as he is making the armor, whereas Homer had her view the shield on Achilles’s shoulder.

Rather like T. S. Eliot, Auden represents the modern world as devoid of principles and ethics and thus has lost any rational sense of the true meaning of life.

The poem is written in alternating eight-line stanzas in a ballad format (ABCBDEFE)—representing the loving expectations of Thetis, Achilles’ mother, to images of what her son will be fighting for: civilization, joy, piety, etc.—and seven-line stanzas of rime royal (ABABBCC), representing the tired and jaded view of the god Hephaestos, the blacksmith of the gods, who depicts irrationality, war, wilderness, immorality, injustice, and punishment.

There is some reason why Hephaestos might be tired and jaded, as his life had been filled with disappointments. In Greek mythology, Hephaestus (Vulcan in Roman mythology) was the son of Zeus and Hera, the king and queen of the gods. In another version, Hephaestus was Hera’s child by parthenogenious, birthed as revenge against Zeus for his asexual birthing of Athena (Minerva, to the Romans), warrior goddess of wisdom and crafts, among other things. Hera rejected Hephaestus because of he was born with a shriveled foot, and so she threw him out of heaven & down to earth (he was later returned by trickery and against his will). Zeus, trying to prevent conflict between the other gods over the goddess of love Aphrodite (Venus to the Romans), arranged her marriage to Hephaestus, as he was the most steadfast of the gods. Unfortunately, Aphrodite, who was not keen on being married to the crippled and unsightly Hephaestus, had affairs with a number of gods and mortals, including Ares (Mars), the god of war. There is more to Hephaestus’s woes, but you get the point.

pouring forth of liquid (usually wine or olive oil) in honor of a god

literally prisoners of war, but of course the allusion to the crucifixions on Calvary are probably self-evident. (continued)
Not least of the ironies here, of course, is that shields are by definition instruments designed for protection.
W[YSTAN]. H[UGH]. AUDEN
(English, 1907–73)

“The More Loving One”

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well
That, for all they care, I can go to hell,
But on earth indifference is the least
We have to dread from man or beast.

How should we like it were stars to burn
With a passion for us we could not return?
If equal affection cannot be,
Let the more loving one be me.

Admirer as I think I am
Of stars that do not give a damn,
I cannot, now I see them, say
I missed one terribly all day.

Were all stars to disappear or die,
I should learn to look at an empty sky
And feel its total dark sublime,
Though this might take me a little time.

1957