

W. H. Auden (1907-73)

1 *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 5  
I heard a lover sing  
Under an arch of the railway:  
'Love has no ending.

'I'll love you, dear, I'll love you 10  
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 15  
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.' 20

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 25  
Where Justice naked is,  
Time watches from the shadow  
And coughs when you would kiss.

'In headaches and in worry 30  
Vaguely life leaks away,

And Time will have his fancy  
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. 35

'O plunge your hands in water,  
Plunge them in up to the wrist;  
Stare, stare in the basin  
And wonder what you've missed. 40

'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 45  
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; 50  
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 55  
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. 60

1937

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