

W. H. Auden (1907-73)

5 *O What Is That Sound*

O what is that sound which so thrills the ear
Down in the valley drumming, drumming?
Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,
The soldiers coming.

O what is that light I see flashing so clear 5
Over the distance brightly, brightly?
Only the sun on their weapons, dear,
As they step lightly.

O what are they doing with all that gear,
What are they doing this morning, this morning? 10
Only their usual manoeuvres, dear,
Or perhaps a warning.

O why have they left the road down there,
Why are they suddenly wheeling, wheeling?
Perhaps a change in their orders, dear. 15
Why are you kneeling?

O haven't they stopped for the doctor's care,
Haven't they reined their horses, their horses?
Why, they are none of them wounded, dear,
None of these forces. 20

O is it the parson they want, with white hair,
Is it the parson, is it, is it?
No, they are passing his gateway, dear,
Without a visit.

O it must be the farmer who lives so near. 25
It must be the farmer so cunning, so cunning?
They have passed the farmyard already, dear,
And now they are running.

O where are you going? Stay with me here!
 Were the vows you swore deceiving, deceiving? 30
No, I promised to love you, dear,
 But I must be leaving.

O it's broken the lock and splintered the door,
 O it's the gate where they're turning, turning;
Their boots are heavy on the floor 35
 And their eyes are burning.

1932

(From *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*. Ed. Edward
Mendelson. Franklin Center, PA: The Franklin Library,
1976)