

Auden in Winter (by Avedon)

*1960*

James Harms

On St. Mark's Place, Auden  
has stepped from his apartment  
into the falling snow  
wearing a topcoat and shabby  
shoes, though he's forgotten  
to put on his socks or has decided  
not to, the portrait by Avedon  
less a sitting than a snapshot  
of time. By 1960,  
Auden has suffered more from love  
than war, lived in books  
instead of life, or so sayeth  
his many critics who wonder  
"what's become of Wystan?"  
His poems now talk when they  
need to sing, which is to say  
they seem sure of themselves,  
happy to hum between avowals,  
though most of this comes from  
those too envious to trust.  
What if the poems simply  
understand something (always  
a danger), perhaps  
what to do with suffering  
or how to suffer less?  
They remind me a bit  
of Bill Murray: a little rueful,  
not so much sure of anything  
as resigned to something:  
resignation in the midst  
of wonder. It occurs to me  
that Bill Murray is beginning  
to look like Auden,  
and that suffering itself  
is a sort of knowing. Or perhaps

it's learning not knowing,  
a slow erosion instead of  
a solid cliff face, a slow erosion  
of wonder. Or is that true  
only for those who step onto  
a sidewalk covered in snow  
as if into a field stretching  
all the way to nothing—  
a nothing that is or was or might  
someday be. But that's  
the business of faith not poetry,  
and Auden is clear on that  
in a way that Stevens will never  
own: It's people, not nothing,  
who pass on their suffering.  
And so we leave it all behind  
or learn to live with the loss, with  
what can't be forgotten, however  
beneficent the forgiveness.  
The ever-growing past:  
a far horizon slowly blurring  
to white, to erasure and silence.  
Still, it's the learning-to-live-with  
that is so difficult. But that's me  
talking, not Auden.