

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.