

## 4 Poems and Storytelling (October 2018)

E.M. Forster famously (in – *Aspects of the Novel* 1927) imagined himself saying “in a sort of drooping regretful voice, ‘Yes – oh, dear, yes – the novel tells a story’”, describing his wish for something better than mere “story”, which he termed “a low atavistic form”! Nowadays, however, we embrace the concept of narrative, and ‘*narratology*’ even, without any such regrets. We are all encouraged to “tell our stories” and to consider what the slant is in almost everything we come across. “What’s the *narrative*?”

More oddly, perhaps, is the way our age has lost sight, almost completely, of poetry as peculiarly suited to narration and story-telling, particularly at length. Of course, *The Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Byron’s hugely popular *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan* spring to mind as obvious examples of now largely unread feats of storytelling in verse. In the nineteenth century, also, Browning’s *The Ring and The Book* was essentially a psychological murder thriller, told from different points of view in a manner that is instantly recognisable as ‘novelistic’. Only Vikram Seth, a modern Indian novelist, could have dared to write his first novel in poetic form, *The Golden Gate* (1986), with 590 *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin-inspired stanzas.

Somehow, perhaps nudged on by the school curriculum and tight examination requirements, we seem to have lost that taste for verse forms of storytelling that existed before the age of televised drama series. Certainly, popular verse, if it does anything nowadays, veers more towards lyric poetry rather than narrative poems. Who has recently taken a class, even rapidly, through *The Ancient Mariner*? (I have done, in the past, with the wonderful Gustave Doré illustrations, but you need to have copies available...)

Leaving aside *The Ring and the Book*, Browning, for me, at least, is also a favourite ‘short’ storyteller in verse and I would urge you, if you don’t already know it, to read or reread, *My Last Duchess*. With teenage classes (14-year olds and upwards) it’s good to read it aloud, cold, and then invite reactions. Getting pupils to ask the right questions is important because the poem’s brilliance lies in having only a single narrative ‘point-of-view’ – that of a psychopathic murderer (but don’t disclose that yet!). The Duke is determined to persuade his audience (it takes a little while to spot who that audience actually is) of the *reasonableness* of his conduct, while issuing a scarcely veiled threat for the ears of his future (and ‘next’ duchess - the ‘last’ was the *previous* one, but clearly *not* the very *last*!). The clever ones will spot what is going on, but good questions from the teacher will allow others to join in with the game being played out. Point out, also, the *cleverness* of the form used, rhyming blank verse. Typical of the Duke is the freedom of expression seen in the language of the poem, with colloquial speech, lots of enjambement, smooth rhetoric and dramatic climaxes, but underneath, there is the utter control and discipline (the man is after all a control freak! - eg. the curtain for the picture) of strict rhymes and iambic pentameter. It is a *tour de force*, quite literally!

I’ve printed the poem at the end for reference, but on this occasion, I’d like to look at two relatively recent poems from the 20th century (1938 and 1999), which also set out to tell ‘stories’. Luckily, they are short enough to be considered here quite easily and they seem to me to do what poetry does so well: subvert our expectations, shock us somewhat, and shake us up in a linguistically concentrated way, laying bare the tale by using all the rhetorical devices that poems deal in so expertly.

So, I will paraphrase an upbeat ‘Forster’ this time, perhaps remarking, “Ah, yes! *Poetry* can tell a story, and how *necessary* stories are!” The first poem, ‘*Miss Gee*’, is by W.H. Auden, known by many of his readers surely by 1938 to be homosexual, but I don’t think he ever declared himself openly as such, although in some poems, such as ‘*Dear, Though the Night is Gone*’, he hints at incomplete stories with a gay agenda. Auden, perhaps by virtue of

this part of his background, sides with the oppressed and vulnerable in society, exploring how their powerlessness has come about or how people prey on weakness, why they are faithless or imperfect. I want, then, to consider a more complete story than *Dear, Though the Night is Gone* and it is, interestingly, this time, concerned with a woman, Miss Edith Gee.

**Miss Gee (1938)**

*To be sung to the tune of 'St James'  
Infirmary Blues'*

Let me tell you a little story  
About Miss Edith Gee;  
She lived in Clevedon Terrace  
At number 83.

She'd a slight squint in her left eye,  
Her lips they were thin and small,  
She had narrow sloping shoulders  
And she had no bust at all.

She'd a velvet hat with trimmings,  
And a dark grey serge costume;  
She lived in Clevedon Terrace  
In a small bed-sitting room.

She'd a purple mac for wet days,  
A green umbrella too to take,  
She'd a bicycle with shopping basket  
And a harsh back-pedal brake.

The Church of Saint Aloysius  
Was not so very far;  
She did a lot of knitting,  
Knitting for the Church Bazaar.

Miss Gee looked up at the starlight  
And said, 'Does anyone care  
That I live on Clevedon Terrace  
On one hundred pounds a year?'

She dreamed a dream one evening  
That she was the Queen of France  
And the Vicar of Saint Aloysius  
Asked Her Majesty to dance.



But a storm blew down the palace,  
 She was biking through a field of corn,  
 And a bull with the face of the Vicar  
 Was charging with lowered horn.

She could feel his hot breath behind her,  
 He was going to overtake;  
 And the bicycle went slower and slower  
 Because of that back-pedal brake

Summer made the trees a picture,  
 Winter made them a wreck;  
 She bicycled to the evening service  
 With her clothes buttoned up to her neck.

She passed by the loving couples,  
 She turned her head away;  
 She passed by the loving couples,  
 And they didn't ask her to stay.

Miss Gee sat in the side-aisle,  
 She heard the organ play;  
 And the choir sang so sweetly  
 At the ending of the day,

Miss Gee knelt down in the side-aisle,  
 She knelt down on her knees;  
 'Lead me not into temptation  
 But make me a good girl, please.'

The days and nights went by her  
 Like waves round a Cornish wreck;  
 She bicycled down to the doctor  
 With her clothes buttoned up to her neck.

She bicycled down to the doctor,  
 And rang the surgery bell;  
 'O, doctor, I've a pain inside me,  
 And I don't feel very well.'

Doctor Thomas looked her over,  
 And then he looked some more;  
 Walked over to his wash-basin,  
 Said, 'Why didn't you come before?'

Doctor Thomas sat over his dinner,  
 Though his wife was waiting to ring,  
 Rolling his bread into pellets;

Said, 'Cancer's a funny thing.

'Nobody knows what the cause is,  
Though some pretend they do;  
It's like some hidden assassin  
Waiting to strike at you.

'Childless women get it.  
And men when they retire;  
It's as if there had to be some outlet  
For their foiled creative fire.'

His wife she rang for the servant,  
Said, 'Dont be so morbid, dear';  
He said: 'I saw Miss Gee this evening  
And she's a goner, I fear.'

They took Miss Gee to the hospital,  
She lay there a total wreck,  
Lay in the ward for women  
With her bedclothes right up to her neck.

They lay her on the table,  
The students began to laugh;  
And Mr. Rose the surgeon  
He cut Miss Gee in half.

Mr. Rose he turned to his students,  
Said, 'Gentlemen if you please,  
We seldom see a sarcoma  
As far advanced as this.'

They took her off the table,  
They wheeled away Miss Gee  
Down to another department  
Where they study Anatomy.

They hung her from the ceiling  
Yes, they hung up Miss Gee;  
And a couple of Oxford Groupers  
Carefully dissected her knee.

What are we to make of this? Well, it's a ballad, of course, something which signals 'popular' taste. Hymns, nursery rhymes, stories like 'Robin Hood' and folk songs (eg Bob Dylan's massive debt to the genre) tend to be ballads; there is, besides, a strong tradition of gruesome balladeers, who made up, sang and sold ballads based on executions, tragic murders, grisly tales to while away a winter evening. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* by Oscar Wilde taps into this tradition, as does Kipling's grim *Danny Deever*. Auden is giving us a subversive modernisation of this rather macabre but historically highly popular genre.

It subverts, firstly, by imagining it as coupled with *St James' Infirmary Blues*, a black American blues piece. There are many slightly different versions, by Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong amongst others. Here is one set of lyrics that seems to connect with the ironic version of the 'infirmary' that Auden has produced.

### **St. James Infirmary Blues**

I went down to St. James Infirmary  
To see my baby there,  
She was lyin' on a long white table,  
So sweet, so cool, so fair.

Went up to see the doctor,  
"She's very low," he said;  
Went back to see my baby  
Good God! She's lying there dead.

I went down to old Joe's barroom,  
On the corner by the square  
They were serving the drinks as usual,  
And the usual crowd was there.

On my left stood old Joe McKennedy,  
And his eyes were bloodshot red;  
He turned to the crowd around him,  
These are the words he said:

Let her go, let her go, God bless her;  
Wherever she may be  
She may search the wide world over  
And never find a better man than me

Oh, when I die, please bury me  
In my ten dollar Stetson hat;  
Put a twenty-dollar gold piece on my watch chain  
So my friends'll know I died standin' pat.

Get six gamblers to carry my coffin  
Six chorus girls to sing me a song  
Put a twenty-piece jazz band on my tail gate  
To raise Hell as we go along

Now that's the end of my story  
Let's have another round of booze  
And if anyone should ask you just tell them  
I've got the St. James Infirmary blues.

Auden's piece follows the tragic hospital drama to a certain extent, but there are obvious differences. Instead of the feckless, public-grieving of some poor black, gambling

male drinker - who may well be responsible for the girl's illness (or pregnancy?) - we have a lower middle-class white woman, who is so sexually inhibited that, according to the more upwardly mobile Dr Thomas (he has a servant), she contracts cancer as a direct result. Her sexual inhibition is made obvious by the repeated details of her clothing and then her bedclothes being tightly drawn up "to her neck". She also fantasises nightmarishly about being gored by the bull-like vicar – half Picasso, half Freud!

The increasingly terrible thing about the poem is that it is transposed into a comic mode. The "back pedal brake" that is a symbol of her life somehow, harshly slowing her down, comically causes the nightmare of her being caught up with by the rampant vicar. The upper-class doctor makes a sobering, thoughtful remark,

'Nobody knows what the cause is,  
Though some pretend they do;  
It's like some hidden assassin  
Waiting to strike at you.

'Childless women get it.  
And men when they retire;  
It's as if there had to be some outlet  
For their foiled creative fire.'

and ironically his wife, who, as a woman, one might expect more sympathy for Miss Gee, carelessly responds with, "Don't be morbid, dear!" Is that pure heartlessness, or is it the human reaction of not wishing to consider her own possible fate, for the wife may well be equally inhibited?

Poor Miss Gee's fate is detailed in all its awfulness at the hands of the surgeon, Mr Rose, and his students whose reaction, laughter, is equally ambiguous. Again, is it cruel lack of sympathy or is it a deep-seated fear that makes the students laugh? Society, with its self-centred couples who turn away from Miss Gee, doesn't really want to know or help lonely, repressed, unfulfilled women like this. There is something very pathetic in "She turned her head away" – she cannot bear to see the couples' happiness, but to some extent, this turning away from others leads to her own tragedy; society's reaction is negligent but also to some extent predictable.

It's hard to know sometimes where the poem's sympathies lie. "Cancer's a funny thing," says Dr Thomas. A very obvious irony is that cancer clearly isn't funny at all, but jokes are always made, aren't they, about the most fearsome things? We as readers are constantly challenged in this poem both to see what happens as 'funny' (black humour funny) and immediately also to feel bad about our going along with the humour.

Gallows humour has always been a feature of ballads. You can compare *The Night Before Larry Was Stretched* (c. 1816 Anonymous) for the sort of black humour in ballads that has always existed, often as a subversive substratum of literature – anonymous mainly, unpublished officially, often vulgar and in direct opposition to middle and upper-class 'belles lettres'. Here, it's clear that Larry is not only poor and part of a possible criminal underworld, but also this is Ireland, Kilmainham being the gaol in Dublin at a time when Ireland was ruled by the British.

**The Night Before Larry was Stretched** (c. 1816 Anonymous)

I

The night before Larry was stretch'd,  
 The boys they all paid him a visit;  
 A bit in their sacks, too, they fetch'd—  
 They sweated their duds till they riz it; *pawned their clothes/ raised the sum*  
 For Larry was always the lad,  
 When a friend was condemn'd to the squeezer, *gallows or rope*  
 But he'd pawn, all the togs that he had, *clothes*  
 Just to help the poor boy to a sneezer, *drink*  
 And moisten his gob 'fore he died. *mouth*

II

'Pon my conscience, dear Larry', says I,  
 'I'm sorry to see you in trouble,  
 And your life's cheerful noggin run dry, *bottle, drink*  
 And yourself going off like its bubble!  
 'Hould your tongue in that matter,' says he;  
 'For the neckcloth I don't care a button, *halter or noose*  
 And by this time to-morrow you'll see  
 Your Larry will be dead as mutton:  
 All for what? 'Cause his courage was good!'

III

The boys they came crowding in fast;  
 They drew their stools close round about him,  
 Six glims round his coffin they placed— *candles (coffins were actually left in  
 the condemned cells!)*  
 He couldn't be well waked without 'em, *a wake = a party at a funeral*  
 I ask'd if he was fit to die,  
 Without having duly repented?  
 Says Larry, 'That's all in my eye,  
 And all by the clergy invented,  
 To make a fat bit for themselves.

IV

Then the cards being called for, they play'd,  
 Till Larry found one of them cheated;  
 Quick he made a hard rap at his head—  
 The lad being easily heated,  
 'So ye chates me bekase I'm in grief!  
 O! is that, by the Holy, the rason?  
 Soon I'll give you to know you d—d thief!  
 That you're cracking your jokes out of sason,  
 And scuttle your nob with my fist'. *break your head*

## V

Then in came the priest with his book  
 He spoke him so smooth and so civil;  
 Larry tipp'd him a Kilmainham look, *Gaol in Dublin*  
 And pitch'd his big wig to the devil.  
 Then raising a little his head,  
 To get a sweet drop of the bottle,  
 And pitiful sighing he said,  
 'O! the hemp will be soon round my throttle, *rope made of hemp*  
 And choke my poor windpipe to death!

## VI

So mournful these last words he spoke,  
 We all vented our tears in a shower;  
 For my part, I thought my heart broke  
 To see him cut down like a flower!  
 On his travels we watch'd him next day,  
 O, the hangman I thought I could kill him!  
 Not one word did our poor Larry say,  
 Nor chang'd till he came to King William; *statue of the king in Dublin*  
 Och, my dear! then his colour turned white.

## VII

When he came to the nubbing-cheat, *the gallows*  
 He was tack'd up so neat and so pretty;  
 The rambler jugg'd off from his feet, *cart*  
 And he died with his face to the city.  
 He kick'd too, but that was all pride,  
 For soon you might see 'twas all over;  
 And as soon as the noose was untied,  
 Then at darky we waked him in clover, *night, had a party in the fields*  
 And sent him to take a ground-sweat. *buried him*

In its black humour, the poem celebrates the subversive cohesion of Larry's mates, their sympathy, Larry's courage and refusal to bow to his "superiors". There is stinging irony in Larry's turning "white", when he sees the statue of King William. We might think this is the moment when his courage fails him, as the poem suggests, but turning white could also be from anger, and suggests that Larry may be being hanged for having acted against the ruling class somehow.

Auden, in his rather patrician, Oxford way, was rooting for the 'people' in the Thirties, aware of outmoded class differences, poverty and, increasingly, the approaching thud of fascist and Nazi jackboots. Here, in *Miss Gee*, we can sense his ironic eye taking in both class differences, womens' lack of empowerment, genteel poverty and sexual repression. In D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Paul Morel's mother is stricken with cancer in much the same way, having lived a hard life of repression and frustration, sexually as well as in terms of wider desires and life-styles.

*Miss Gee* is a 'story' with quite a kick in its telling! Pithy and powerful. For younger pupils, another brilliant piece of ballad-storytelling, also by Auden, is '*O What Is That*



*Sound*. In it, a psychological thriller is built up rapidly, while a love story (or is it a story about faithlessness and sexual exploitation...?) unfolds with a potentially tragic ending. Nothing is actually stated, but pupils will soon come up with plenty of theories (once they recognise the redcoats as being eighteenth or nineteenth century soldiers). The faithless lover may be a deserter – or a murderer, or a resistance fighter. The woman’s innocence is highlighted, but what will happen to her at the end?

The second poem under consideration here is another, more subjective ‘story’, this time told by a woman, Carol Anne Duffy, in ‘*Little Red-Cap*’. The first time I read this, I, of course, picked up on the subversion of “*Little Red Riding Hood*” which is unmissable. What only occurred to me later on is that a Red Cap is also a beautiful but hallucinogenic and potentially dangerous mushroom, and mushrooms are referenced in this poem!

### **Little Red-Cap**

At childhood’s end, the houses petered out  
 into playing fields, the factory, allotments  
 kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men,  
 the silent railway line, the hermit’s caravan,  
 till you came at last to the edge of the woods.  
 It was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf.  
 He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud  
 in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw,  
 red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears  
 he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!  
 In the interval, I made quite sure he spotted me,  
 sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and bought me a drink,  
 my first. You might ask why. Here’s why. Poetry.  
 The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods,  
 away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place  
 lit by the eyes of owls. I crawled in his wake,  
 my stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazer  
 snagged on twig and branch, murder clues. I lost both shoes  
 but got there, wolf’s lair, better beware. Lesson one that night,  
 breath of the wolf in my ear, was the love poem.  
 I clung till dawn to his thrashing fur, for  
 what little girl doesn’t dearly love a wolf?  
 Then I slid from between his heavy matted paws  
 and went in search of a living bird – white dove –  
 which flew, straight, from my hands to his open mouth.  
 One bite, dead. How nice, breakfast in bed, he said,  
 licking his chops. As soon as he slept, I crept to the back  
 of the lair, where a whole wall was crimson, gold, aglow with books.  
 Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head,  
 warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood.  
 But then I was young – and it took ten years  
 in the woods to tell that a mushroom  
 stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that birds  
 are the uttered thought of trees, that a greying wolf  
 howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out,

season after season, same rhyme, same reason. I took an axe  
to a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to a salmon  
to see how it leapt. I took an axe to the wolf  
as he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat, and saw  
the glistening, virgin white of my grandmother's bones.  
I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched him up.  
Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone.

Carol Ann Duffy 1999

It's interesting to learn, as I did later on, that Carol Ann Duffy fell for Adrian Henri, one of the so-called Liverpool 'Beat' Poets, when she was just 16, and then lived with him for just over ten years. ("He gave me confidence," she is reported as saying, "he was great. It was all poetry, very heady, and he was never faithful. He thought poets had a duty to be unfaithful."). This explains to some extent the edginess and what one might call the rueful and self-directed irony, as well as anger, driving the poem.

Particularly startling (and subversive, which this poem is, *totally!*) is the line, "what little girl doesn't dearly love a wolf?" Elsewhere, you will notice the thumping, ironic use of (subversive?) inner, *internal* rhyming (rather than any traditional – male-driven?! – line-ending rhyme schemes) to bang home points ("clues", "shoes", "lair", "beware" etc.). Pupils will probably find it hard to pick up the reference to the red "blazer", the sign particularly in Britain of a privileged education – blazer for me spells "grammar school" or "private school" and it somehow, quite humorously, mirrors Little Red Riding Hood's costume, but here with updated schoolgirl (think almost St Trinian's!) 'innocence' falling for the older male and wolfish 'experience'. Pupils will almost certainly miss the reference to "babe, waif". All sexy girls were "babes" in the sixties and seventies. The 'waif'-like "Twiggy" *look* of the sixties was what young girls aspired to in terms of beauty and fashion. A 'waif' is *per se* a vulnerable, homeless child, but here, again ironically, the "sweet sixteen, never been... babe, waif" is somewhat disingenuously looking for the *thrill* of potential predators, like so many of the Jimmy Saville-style innocent 'groupies' of that era who trailed after pop stars and celebrities. It underlines the vulnerability of the "liberated" young girls of that era.

Unlike Miss Gee, however, Duffy finally finds empowerment through poetry; nothing can be more satisfactorily violent than her response, slitting the wolf (metaphorically) from scrotum to throat. Pupils will also have to be told what the joke is about somebody being "stitched up" in slang ("set up", "framed" or here, more satisfactorily, "tricked"). Nothing, equally, can be more positive than that last line with the persona emerging from the forest, triumphantly, with her "flowers, singing and alone."

"Alone" is, however, suitably ambiguous. How much fun is it to be *all* alone? In real life, Duffy later moved on to a relationship with Jackie Kay, a female poet this time, with whom she lived for 15 years. So much for male wolves!

Both of the main poems we have considered tell stories, but both stories also refer back to other stories and other modes of story-telling, and they do so using all the rhetorical resources and resonances that poetry can offer. Consider for a minute how Auden might have told his story of Miss Gee as a short story or Duffy might have made hers an autobiographical memoir. Yet, how much more brilliantly concise and hard-hitting both stories become in "subversive" verse form!

Now, as an epilogue, sit back and enjoy (yet again if you already know it!) 'My Last Duchess'! Look at how people become turned casually into art "objects" (the word hangs ambiguously at the end) - portraits or statues, anything rather than live human beings. Note

how the references to himself, “I”, “me”, “my” build up a megalomaniac self-centredness, and how the poem culminates with the image of a delicate sea-horse being dominated by a weapon-wielding Neptune, “me” being the last word of the poem. Consider also how our sympathies are made to shift – from at first siding with the persona, the one telling us of his complaints and his difficulties with his wife. Instinctively, we tend to side with someone who is taking us into their confidence – a polite husband complaining of a flirtatious ‘airhead’ of a wife who treats everyone just the same and makes light of his superb “gift” of a noble lineage. But somehow, despite his smooth persuasions, the poem causes us to end up siding instead with his beautiful, generous-hearted, free-minded wife, who is just the opposite of her snobbish, subjugating, reifying, object-collecting husband. He cannot “stoop” to engage with her or talk out their differences, this, in spite of the Duke’s clearly clever “skill in speech”, which he claims ironically *not* to have!

The *Ferrara* in the sub-title clues us in for a piece of Renaissance skulduggery in the style of the Borgias (see below for more detailed information). As a dramatic monologue, I find it all exceptionally clever and concise, with not one word out of place. Try reading it out loud in a smoothly sinister voice with the velvety, reasonable (man-to-man, but really, master-to-privileged envoy) threats emerging. The Duke is not so crude as to reveal *how* he dealt with the situation. In many classes, I would wait with baited breath after *my* reading, until someone, usually a clever girl, would say, with awe, “Hey, wait a minute, did he actually *murder* her...?” I would say, “Hmm! Not even...!”

It is followed by ‘*O What Is That Sound*’ by Auden. Again, dramatic readings are guaranteed!

### **My Last Duchess**

BY ROBERT BROWNING

#### *FERRARA*

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
 Looking as if she were alive. I call  
 That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf’s hands  
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
 Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said  
 “Fra Pandolf” by design, for never read  
 Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
 But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
 And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
 How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ’twas not  
 Her husband’s presence only, called that spot  
 Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek; perhaps  
 Fra Pandolf chanced to say, “Her mantle laps  
 Over my lady’s wrist too much,” or “Paint  
 Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
 Half-flush that dies along her throat.” Such stuff  
 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough  
 For calling up that spot of joy. She had  
 A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,

Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
 Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
 The bough of cherries some officious fool  
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
 She rode with round the terrace—all and each  
 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
 Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked  
 Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked  
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
 With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
 In speech—which I have not—to make your will  
 Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this  
 Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
 Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let  
 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—  
 E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose  
 Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without  
 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;  
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
 As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet  
 The company below, then. I repeat,  
 The Count your master's known munificence  
 Is ample warrant that no just pretense  
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go  
 Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,  
 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

(Wikipedia is helpful in setting the background to this story.)

The poem is preceded by "Ferrara:", indicating that the speaker is most likely Alfonso II d'Este, the fifth Duke of Ferrara (1533–1598), who, at the age of 25, married Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici, the 14-year-old daughter of Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, and Eleonora di Toledo.

Lucrezia was not well educated, and the Medicis could be considered "nouveau riche" in comparison to the venerable and distinguished Este family (Alfonso II d'Este's remark regarding his gift of a "nine-hundred-years-old name" clearly indicates that he considered his bride beneath him socially). She came with a sizeable dowry, and the couple married in 1558. He then abandoned her for two years before she died on 21 April 1561, at age 17. There was a strong suspicion of poisoning. The Duke then sought the hand of Barbara, eighth daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I and Anna of Bohemia and Hungary and the sister of the Count of Tyrol, Ferdinand II.[2] The count was in charge of arranging the marriage; the

chief of his entourage, Nikolaus Madruz, a native of Innsbruck, was his courier. Madruz is presumably the listener in the poem.



Lucrezia di Cosimo de'  
Medici. (see above)

### O What Is That Sound

By W.H. Auden

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  
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?  
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.  
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 the forces.

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.  
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?  
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  
And their eyes are burning.