

■ W. H. Auden, *FOR THE TIME BEING: A Christmas Oratorio*

### III

*Narrator*

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,  
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes --  
Some have got broken -- and carrying them up to the attic.  
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,  
And the children got ready for school. There are enough  
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week --  
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,  
Stayed up so late, attempted -- quite unsuccessfully --  
To love all of our relatives, and in general  
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again  
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed  
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable  
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,  
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,  
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.  
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,  
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware  
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought  
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now  
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,  
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city  
Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid's geometry  
And Newton's mechanics would account for our experience,  
And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.  
It seems to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets  
Are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten  
The office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen  
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,  
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.  
For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly  
Outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be  
Grew up when it opened. Now, recollecting that moment  
We can repress the joy, but the guilt remains conscious;  
Remembering the stable where for once in our lives  
Everything became a You and nothing was an It.  
And craving the sensation but ignoring the cause,  
We look round for something, no matter what, to inhibit  
Our self-reflection, and the obvious thing for that purpose  
Would be some great suffering. So, once we have met the Son,  
We are tempted ever after to pray to the Father;  
"Lead us into temptation and evil for our sake."

They will come, all right, don't worry; probably in a form  
That we do not expect, and certainly with a force  
More dreadful than we can imagine. In the meantime  
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,  
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem  
From insignificance. The happy morning is over,  
The night of agony still to come; the time is noon:  
When the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing  
Without even a hostile audience, and the Soul endure  
A silence that is neither for nor against her faith  
That God's Will will be done, That, in spite of her prayers,  
God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph.

#### **IV**

##### *Chorus*

He is the Way.  
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;  
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.  
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;  
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.  
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;  
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.