The Shield of Achilles

W. H. Auden, 1907 - 1973

She looked over his shoulder

For vines and olive trees,

Marble well-governed cities

And ships upon untamed seas,

But there on the shining metal

His hands had put instead

An artificial wilderness

And a sky like lead.

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,

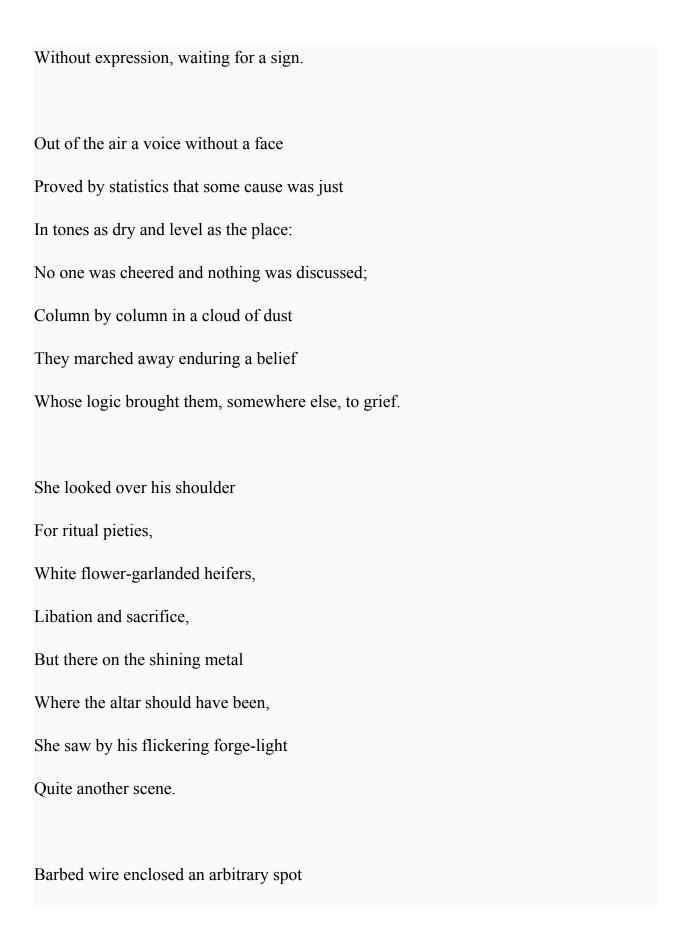
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,

Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,

Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood

An unintelligible multitude,

A million eyes, a million boots in line,



Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke) And sentries sweated for the day was hot: A crowd of ordinary decent folk Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke As three pale figures were led forth and bound To three posts driven upright in the ground. The mass and majesty of this world, all That carries weight and always weighs the same Lay in the hands of others; they were small And could not hope for help and no help came: What their foes like to do was done, their shame Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride

She looked over his shoulder

And died as men before their bodies died.

For athletes at their games,

Men and women in a dance

Moving their sweet limbs

Quick, quick, to music,

But there on the shining shield His hands had set no dancing-floor But a weed-choked field. A ragged urchin, aimless and alone, Loitered about that vacancy; a bird Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone: That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third, Were axioms to him, who'd never heard Of any world where promises were kept, Or one could weep because another wept. The thin-lipped armorer, Hephaestos, hobbled away, Thetis of the shining breasts Cried out in dismay At what the god had wrought To please her son, the strong Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles Who would not live long.