

The Common Life (For Chester Kallman) by W.H. Auden

A living-room, the catholic area you
(Thou, rather) and I may enter
without knocking, leave without a bow, confronts
each visitor with a style,

a secular faith: he compares its dogmas
with his, and decides whether
he would like to see more of us. (Spotless rooms
where nothing's left lying about

chill me, so do cups used for ash-trays or smeared
with lip-stick: the homes I warm to,
though seldom wealthy, always convey a feeling
of bills being promptly settled

with cheques that don't bounce.) There's no We at an instant,
only Thou and I, two regions
of protestant being which nowhere overlap:
a room is too small, therefore,

if its occupants cannot forget at will
that they are not alone, too big
if it gives them any excuse in a quarrel
for raising their voices. What,

quizzing ours, would Sherlock Holmes infer? Plainly,
ours is a sitting culture
in a generation which prefers comfort
(or is forced to prefer it)

to command, would rather incline its buttocks
on a well-upholstered chair
than the burly back of a slave: a quick glance
at book-titles would tell him

that we belong to the clerisy and spend much
on our food. But could he read
what our prayers and jokes are about, what creatures
frighten us most, or what names

head our roll-call of persons we would least like
to go to bed with? What draws
singular lives together in the first place,
loneliness, lust, ambition,

or mere convenience, is obvious, why they drop
or murder one another
clear enough: how they create, though, a common world
between them, like Bombelli's

impossible yet useful numbers, no one
has yet explained. Still, they do
manage to forgive impossible behavior,
to endure by some miracle

conversational tics and larval habits
without wincing (were you to die,
I should miss yours). It's a wonder that neither
has been butchered by accident,

or, as lots have, silently vanished into
History's criminal noise
unmourned for, but that, after twenty-four years,
we should sit here in Austria

as cater-cousins, under the glassy look
of a Naples Bambino,
the portrayed regards of Strauss and Stravinsky,
doing British cross-word puzzles,

is very odd indeed. I'm glad the builder gave
our common-room small windows
through which no observed outsider can observe us:
every home should be a fortress,

equipped with all the very latest engines
for keeping Nature at bay,
versed in all ancient magic, the arts of quelling
the Dark Lord and his hungry

animivorous chimaeras. (Any brute
can buy a machine in a shop,
but the sacred spells are secret to the kind,
and if power is what we wish

they won't work.) The ogre will come in any case:
so Joyce has warned us. Howbeit,
fasting or feasting, we both know this: without
the Spirit we die, but life

without the Letter is in the worst of taste,
and always, though truth and love
can never really differ, when they seem to,
the subaltern should be truth.