

Auden at Swarthmore

by Bill Yarrow

I was first in line that
Sunday, but it wasn't like
I hadn't heard other poets
read there. I had.

Rexroth, Berrigan, Padgett
Strand, Sidney Goldfarb
Jean Valentine, Daniel
Hoffman, Galway Kinnell.

They were known
or emerging but
not outlandishly famous
not like W. H. Auden.

So I went to see the wrinkled
and rumped poet who insisted
on reading from memory, stumbling
through his sheaf of poems.

Someone in the audience
should have heckled him
but everyone was in awe
of his assembled glory.

When I saw him, I was barely
twenty, and he was solidly
sixty four, years younger
than I am now.

Two years later, he died in Vienna.
That winter I returned to Philly

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to see the exile Joseph Brodsky
read at the Broad Street Y.

He read his elegy to Auden, declaiming
Poetry without you equals only us.
"More blood! More adrenalin, you
parasite!" a drunk poet cried.

As they dragged out the young
man yelling like jealousy
the future Nobel laureate
bowed his head.

