

THE FALL OF ICARUS



— Pieter Bruegel the Elder

MUSEE DES BEAUX ARTS

W.H. Auden

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking
dully along;

5 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:

They never forgot

10 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away

15 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

20 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

LANDSCAPE WITH THE FALL OF ICARUS

William Carlos Williams

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring
a farmer was ploughing
5 his field
the whole pageantry
of the year was
awake tingling
near

10 the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself
sweating in the sun
that melted

15 the wings' wax
unsignificantly
off the coast
there was
a splash quite unnoticed

20 this was
Icarus drowning

ICARUS

Edward Field

Only the feathers floating around the hat
Showed that anything more spectacular had occurred
Than the usual drowning. The police preferred to ignore
The confusing aspects of the case,
5 And the witnesses ran off to a gang war.
So the report filed and forgotten in the archives read simply
Drowned, but it was wrong: Icarus
Had swum away, coming at last to the city
Where he rented a house and tended the garden.
10 That nice Mr. Hicks the neighbors called him,
Never dreaming that the gray, respectable suit
Concealed arms that had controlled huge wings
Nor that those sad, defeated eyes had once
Compelled the sun. And had he told them
15 They would have answered with a shocked, uncomprehending stare.
No, he could not disturb their neat front yards;
Yet all his books insisted that this was a horrible mistake:
What was he doing aging in a suburb?
Can the genius of the hero fall
20 To the middling stature of the merely talented?
And nightly Icarus probes his wound
And daily in his workshop, curtains carefully drawn,
Constructs small wings and tries to fly
To the lighting fixture on the ceiling:
25 Fails every time and hates himself for trying.
He had thought himself a hero, had acted heroically,
And now dreamt of his fall, the tragic fall of the hero;
But now rides commuter trains,
Serves on various committees,
30 And wishes he had drowned.



The Lament for Icarus
Herbert Draper

TO A FRIEND WHOSE WORK HAS COME TO TRIUMPH

Anne Sexton

Consider Icarus, pasting those sticky wings on,
testing this strange little tug at his shoulder blade,
and think of that first flawless moment over the lawn
of the labyrinth. Think of the difference it made!
5 There below are the trees, as awkward as camels;
and here are the shocked starlings pumping past
and think of innocent Icarus who is doing quite well:
larger than a sail, over the fog and the blast
of the plushy ocean, he goes. Admire his wings!
10 Feel the fire at his neck and see how casually
he glances up and is caught, wondrously tunneling
into that hot eye. Who cares that he fell back to the sea?
See him acclaiming the sun and come plunging down
while his sensible daddy goes straight into town.

ICARUS

By Tony Curtis

Out of an English summer morning's sky
drops an Indian who failed in flight
miles short of heaven. This frozen Icarus
thrown from the wheel-bay of a 747,
5 splashes into a Surrey reservoir,
cracking the water like a whip.
This poor man stowed away
in the Delhi heat, curled
himself into an oven of rubber and oil,
10 and dreamed as he rose in the deafening take-off
of food and rain and Coca-Cola
and television where the colour never ends.
The waitress at the Granada stop
tapping in two coffees and a Danish
15 at the till, for no reason at all,
looked up, saw a bird, or an engine,
or a man, and then nothing
but blue sky again.

Icarus' Diatribe

By Aaron Pastula

How we have wasted the years here, Father;
Grounded in the shadow of Talus, whom you envied
Too much, and murdered. We might be free
If
5 Ariadne had not received a precious ball of thread
With which to save her lover, yet you would rescue
Another even though we are trapped, and only
Two left.
I've watched your shadows sleep against stone walls
10 While I ran our labyrinth, the sun above
Driving me as if I should call for my final repose
Alone.
Do you remember the torrid wind maneuvering
Around the angles of our useless garrison,
15 Filling empty mouths with surrogate conversation?
We
Seldom spoke, you and I, roaming like languid souls
When the Minotaur's threat was dead.
And yet I felt the lyre singing in my breast,
20 Always
Crying out background noise for the construction
Of my cunningly wrought wings; my only means to rise
Above these steadfast fortress walls, lest I
Surrender
25 To your silence. I know the gulls were wailing
When I robbed them, but they had flown too close:
I am not to blame for the necessity of my purpose.
To you
I am as your own divided heart - double-sexed
30 And beating as a thief's in the falling hours of twilight,
Awaiting my time to retire. Instead I take flight,
The sun
Drawing me as an opiate away from our
Etherized utopia, leaving you puzzled; compelling
35 You to follow me out above the open,
Beguiling sea

ICARUS

By Christine Hemp

It was his idea, this flying thing.
We collected feathers at night, stuffing
our pockets with mourning dove down. By day,
we'd weave and glue them with the wax
5 I stole after we'd shooed the bees away.
Oh, how it felt, finally, to blow off Crete
leaving a labyrinth of dead-ends:
my clumsiness with figures, father's calm
impatience, cool logic, interminable devising.
10 The sea wind touched my face like balm.
He thought I'd tag along as usual,
in the wake of his careful scheme
bound by the string connecting father and son,
invisible thread I tried for years to untie.
15 I ached to be a good-for-something on my own.
I didn't know I'd get drunk with the heat,
flying high, too much a son to return.
Poor Daedalus, his mouth an O below,
his hands outstretched to catch the rain
20 of wax. He still doesn't know.
My wings fell, yes - I saw him hover
over the tiny splash - but by then I'd been
swallowed into love's eye, the light I've come to see
as home, drowning in the yes, this swirling
25 white-hot where night will never find me.
And now when my father wakes
each morning, his bones still sore
from his one-time flight, his confidence undone
because the master plan fell through,
30 he rises to a light he never knew, his son.

The Fall of Icarus (Metamorphosis, VIII: 183-235)

By Ovid, Translated by Sir Samuel Garth

These, as the angler at the silent brook,
Or mountain-shepherd leaning on his crook,
Or gaping plowman, from the vale describes,
They stare, and view 'em with religious eyes,
5 And strait conclude 'em Gods; since none, but they,
Thro' their own azure skies cou'd find a way.
When now the boy, whose childish thoughts aspire
To loftier aims, and make him ramble high'r,
Grown wild, and wanton, more embolden'd flies
10 Far from his guide, and soars among the skies.
The soft'ning wax, that felt a nearer sun,
Dissolv'd apace, and soon began to run.
The youth in vain his melting pinions shakes,
His feathers gone, no longer air he takes:
15 Oh! Father, father, as he strove to cry,
Down to the sea he tumbled from on high,
And found his Fate; yet still subsists by fame,
Among those waters that retain his name.