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Brueghel: The Fall of Icarus

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NMQ Poetry Selections

BRUEGHEL: THE FALL OF ICARUS

These countryfolk, their feet on solid ground—
suppose that they had found
Icarus drowned,
the bruised and broken body on the shore,
and the great wings of wire and melted wax
and sodden feathers that would fly no more?

Incurious, unaware
of an old man dead in the woods, or a boy in the bay:
busy, not wilful; neither blind nor deaf:
absorbed by fish or flocks
or furrows, they
had moved within the habit of their day.

But when the sun of Icarus' death had set,
if the lost wings, entangled in the net,
were drawn in on the sand—
nothing more natural than not to guess
the meaning of a marvel close at hand.

Confronted and confused by miracles
come down like meteors on them, why should not
their minds reject the inexplicable, refuse
even to wonder? If they turned to look
slack-jawed upon the sight,
if terror overcame them in the night,
no doubt the light of morning brought relief
and let them exorcise, with plow or line or crook,
this shattering of routine,
this glimpse of worlds outside, of worlds unseen.

As deep as death, deeper than all the waters
that separate the islands in the bay,
a gulf between the world of Icarus
and their world lay.

Two worlds—but which of them
Brueghel would have us praise and which condemn,
or whether neither—this he does not say.

A judgment in these matters
is ours to make: for all his eloquence,
the choice of center, of circumference,
he leaves to us.

CONSTANCE CARRIER

ELEGY FOR MY FATHER

And when my father died I felt like Homer:
I shall remember him, slow as a turning god,
his face like a brown grape that sucked the sun,
his hands as real as Mondays.

And I shall remember my father, how his laughter
rapped like knuckles at the doors of my fears,
and all the walk of him at five o'clock
with the day's work like a round fist in his pocket.

And when my father died I felt like Homer,
imperative with melody and pride
to sing of all the trouble and gold of a hero,
that my hot words might shine with a bribe's powers

to buy his death with lucky metaphors.

FELIX N. STEFANILE