

This poem is inspired by a painting by Peter Breughel named *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.

Icarus was a mythological boy who escaped the Labyrinth (maze) with his father Daedalus, who created wings for them both out of feathers and wax. His father warned him not to fly too close to the sun, because the wax would melt. Icarus ignored the warning, and when he flew too close to the sun, his wings fell apart and he drowned in the sea below.

This painting shows Icarus plunging into the sea, but interestingly, he is not the central focus of the picture. His legs can be seen at the bottom left of the painting, surrounded by a busy scene where shepherds and sailors and farmers go about their business as if they are oblivious to the tragedy.

In this dark poem, Auden reflects on the way in which people express indifference towards the suffering of others, when that suffering does not impact them. He illustrates that humanity has always been indifferent (uncaring) towards the suffering of others, going back to ancient times with the fall of Icarus, or the crucifixion of Christ. Auden feels that the same callousness exists in the modern era, and that it is captured effectively in Breughel's paintings.

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About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters*: how well they understood ** ancient philosophers*
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth,* there always must be **the birth of Christ*
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom* must run its course **the death of Christ*
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
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
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

W. H. Auden

