

## Musée 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;  
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  
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  
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.

<http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/auden.html>

Response (unattributed by request):

"Auden famously says in his eulogy to Yeats that 'poetry makes nothing happen'. A cousin of that voice speaks here, but in this case perhaps to say that one of the essential functions of poetry is to point out to us precisely that 'failure' is not 'important' enough for the ploughman, the center from which 'everything turns away/ Quite leisurely', to effect/affect the ineffectual. This is to say that if poetry 'makes nothing happen,' poetry also happens most powerfully and crucially when and where no-one is paying attention. It makes a 'splash,' but one that isn't always obvious. Its center is in the periphery. Its gestures are often those of motion unnoticed, its insights are of what often fails to move."