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Icarus Regained

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Icarus Regained

THOMAS TAYLOR

And who over the ruins of his life pursued its fleeting, fluttering significance, while he suffered its seeming meaninglessness and lived its seeming madness, and who hoped in secret at the last turn of the labyrinth of chaos for revelation and God's presence?

Hermann Hesse, Steppenwolf

Now he came in his wanderings to those long trips, swirling up and down the darkened country highways, speeding in borrowed cars and fleeing what was most obvious in all the countrysides: the stark hills with their dark trees caught against the moon in the night. He was in the car that night with two shadows of people, leaning forward from the back seat, cradling the cup of wine between his hands, looking down the highway, talking to the two young men in the front seat. They all sat leaning forward a little from the softness of the seats and spoke, drinking the cool sweet wine slowly from paper cups. Night world, time of man's terror, child's pain and joy, woman's suffering. Shame of bodies and monks by the tower in their sad grey robes. Time of snakes and beetles.

The days were long, in the early part of the summer. The car sped on in the dawn, as if passing from one country to another, the talk slowed, one sleeping.

How they sped the length of the coast so often was wonder, flying at a moment, spinning through frozen portrait towns, feeling they could not stop, knowing they could if only they would say so.

The flight of birds swooping crazily from the beach into the unknown and the boy's Icarus imitation of these feathers. ("Strap them to your arms son. Carefully, now. They're a bit heavy, eh?") Sweeping turns in the sky; the great bird must look down upon his domain, its imprisoned inhabitants, and feel pride in great flight, humble with the power in his sweeping wings.

And later they swept up through the mountains, pushing the tiny dot of an automobile through the solid mountains. They sped, talked and smoked, now tired, talking to stay awake. There had been quiet coffee smells and early morning cigarettes in King City at Sally's, three young faces gazing in wonder at the waitress who seemed from
another world, a novel or a movie or a dream: she was gaunt and her skin wrinkled like the covering of some weird fruit. She talked like other people. And later, early day jukebox sounds in Pismo Beach, the sight of the surf crackling onto the white line of the beach three hundred yards from the highway. It looked like a quiet beach town and the waitress talked to her friend on and on. Night world and cricket’s glow into day sound, bright with surf smell and road sounds, they whistled the coast once again, seeing the old-face familiarity of the outposts they had found before. He sat in the back seat the whole way, watching the road, lying down to sleep, stretching half length in the smallness, feeling himself almost roll onto the floor with every stop of the car.

Steven talked continuously from the front seat. Not about nothing, not trying to impress, he simply spoke, responding directly and quickly to the environment, watching the light moving across the land.

“...My uncle bought me a Maseratti. And it was too bad I was only twelve or I might have enjoyed or understood it. I was meant only to drive in our driveway in Philadelphia in it; it was two miles long. One day Uncle Alf came barreling up to me, he smelled like a brewery (Steven said broo-rey) and said, ‘Stevie, how’s about a little spin with Uncle Alfie? Huh?’ Well, I sort of blanched and got out of the way and let him at it. He got into the little Maseratti and roared off, Christ, like all the noise I’d ever heard; and around that driveway, around, faster and faster, until, well, he just couldn’t hold it and he spun out, swirling up the gravel toward the great house. Pow! right up the stairs and through the great oak door. The maid went up to old Granny Spokes who paid for all of us anyway and said, ‘Madam, Alfred is at the front door.’ We didn’t see him for quite awhile.”

And they sped on, Steven talking, blonde young Corbey sipping, laughing occasionally, saying ‘yes.’ Corbey was a serious young man, who would look, put his hands in his pockets and hunch his shoulders a little before he’d talk to you.

And he sat, thinking, “The real thing between people is in this bottle, where Icarus sweeping the sky that day, doing his high looping turns, his father there by the low hanging clouds, saying ‘Take it easy boy,’ knowing that the kid would fall, fall down into the ocean where the man from the Breughel painting wouldn’t ever in four hundred years look up and say, ‘Why what’s that falling into my world, kicking, shrieking his terror? Did a man fall into my picture?’ He knew how to fly and then he got the OK. ‘Go get it, son.’ And off he went, right into the burner.”

The sun was hot now; they moved the wine bottle into the front seat and put it by the air conditioner, covering that with their jackets to capture the cold air.
The car turned from the freeway into the slow, warm countryside. Cattle in the fields, fields between the houses, green grass growing high from the rain. The car stopped by a small collection of houses and he got out, agreeing on a time to meet them for the trip back up north on Sunday afternoon. He was in front of a small neat house.

Often in the afternoons we sang, Dick and I, into the stillness of a Mexican neighborhood, our home that year, a long time ago. Bagpipes in the Saturday stillness, the shocked nut-brown faces next door. I remember this person. Dick had come back from his trip and married the girl he had gone into the world from. They had a strange marriage. They had known of it and waited for it for five years, had known each other for twelve years, and now moved with each other like dances against old music. Dick would forget, Bette would remember. He was tall, energetic, nearsighted, she was slender, dark, slow. He an art student, she a teacher. He would make circles in the air to describe a drawing, she would talk in a slow but passionate voice about her kids, describing the progress of the dull and the energy of the bright.

The car had gone from him and he knocked on the door in the light of early morning.

"Yeah! Who is it?" Muffled, from the house. Anybody. Peter Rabbit with a carrot. "Young D. H. Lawrence from Salinas."

"Wait a minute."

The door opened, smiling wife and friend greeting him in the early morning with arms and kisses.

"C'mon in—have some coffee—where have you been. Look at this—the horses next door had colts."

After an hour's talk and an hour's sleep, they washed, drank more steaming coffee and ate strips of bacon, fried eggs and toast, digging in sticky jars of preserves with a knife.

"C'mon outside, I'll show you something."

Striding through knee-high grass, throwing lumps of dirt by their weed handles at each other. Where is the city and its yelling? Where the hurrying blank Saturday faces whispering, "To the park." Dick pulling long green stalks from the soil, biting holes into them, making flutes. Whistling, they wandered around behind the house to the shed which was Dick's studio. Morning sun on the grass, music coming from the house, Bette running with her kite, nursing it up into the air and then tying it to the fence, so that it stood a hundred feet up, waiting.

"C'mon, I'll show you something." Dick said.

Against the wall of his studio, the long apparently misshappen handle and dull glinted razor fine blade of a scythe.

"Bet you've forgotten how to use one."
“I never knew. Let me try it.”
“You’d whisk off a foot, then how’d you be in the hopscotch tourney? Watch.”

Dick bends into the swing as the blade snicks off the green grass. It piles up behind the blade, and he scoops it up, walks over to the fence and drops it on the ground for the horses. The shetland ponies hobble over and mill around Dick’s grass, unmindful of the field growing around them.

“Sometimes I’d walk in the city park, looking for the three squirrels who had become tame. I would throw them bits of things and cheep back at them. One day one of them wasn’t there and I heard it had been transformed by a car.”

They walked down toward the beach; a short walk from Dick’s house.

“What are you doing now?” Dick asked.
“I say to people I’m waiting for the next thing to happen.”
“You’ve got your MA.”
“Yes. And now I’m watching instead of participating—for awhile. There may be a trip.”
“I think you should go.”
“I . . . where?”
“Go—anywhere—what’s to keep you here? Go anywhere. Hitchhike across the country. Stay away.”
“Yes, I’d like to, but . . .”
“I know: ‘There are some things I’d like to do first.’ Say that and you’ll always be in the city, waiting, observing.”

They walked along the beach, throwing rocks at the sea, at the sea gulls, walking in the bright clean tunnel between the surf and the cliff. They watched the water fall and fall again onto the white sand. That moment, just before the crash of the contained eternity, all time caught in the half second when a small bird might have flown the entire great tunnel of curling water, swinging loops. He would crawl inside that bird and fit his arms into the bird’s wings, warmly surrounded by its body; wearing his Icarus suit the sky would seem small domain and never stopping, never knowing the first compromise of speech or step he’d see the sun and swirl up through its hot gasses. Interminable temporal speech snuck into the corners of the sky. God’s voice mitigated, translated from a thousand Babels onto a beach where two friends walked, throwing pebbles at the ocean.

“Listen,” Dick said, “what’d you come down here for?”
"To learn to fly, I suppose. I always come down here to learn something that I forgot yesterday. I think it was who I am. The city wipes you out. Teen marriages and angry faces in the parks at night. Rambling mad lost faces pushing in great restless herds through the streets."

"Not the country, though," Dick said slowly. "The city is one universe and the beach another. You bleat your way through childhood to find old Father chinking up the last part of the maze. 'Dad, what's in the building?' you say. 'Son, it's the minotaur—we'll never see it, it's not real.' 'But it's what we came here for, here to the queen who walks silently through the darkness of her house—here for our job.' 'And now it's done and we're supposed to forget it happened?' 'Son, the minotaur is not for us—not for our eyes.'"

"Wait, there's more, Dick." The sun hot and mad Van Gogh birds wheeling on the sand, flying up to the cliff beside them as they walk past the surf's noise. "Sure, they've got to leave; 'Dad,' he says, 'the queen says she'll kill us because we saw that bull-boy creeping sadly in the maze. We've got to get far away from this island, join the birds.' And maybe the father looks quietly at his son with a first realization that the boy thinks too, and they go get some wax and feathers and go to a cave. And later, when it's dark—after a couple of months of eating seagulls the boy caught with nets and working in the cave all day—going out at night to check the traps. 'OK, let's go.' Sunny morning—like finally somebody pulls a cork and the moths fly for the ceiling light, having been four months in a specimen jar.

"And they finally fly off from where they were, scarcely remembering where the mainland is. 'Hey boy, don't fly too high,' but the kid is really excited . . . he pulses, feeling his arms rise and fall, wind whistling through his long hair. And he's flying.

Alice through the looking glass—where birds are on the sand waiting for the sardines to run down the coast, when a boy goes for the sun, goes for God's eye with a Gulliver saber—like a pin in an egg. But flying is hard work and the hoarse cry of the father while he's jerking his arms and gasping his old age for the coastline, sees his son's shadow on the water under him, soaring over him. His head is down now and he finds it hard to breathe. 'Easy boy,' he whispers, 'watch the sun.' Son's shadow follows the contours of the waves and the land they're now flying over, and like when an airplane comes whistling over and you see its shadow matched with an airplane on the ground for that split second instant, the father as he flies feels his son's shadow's coolness on his sweaty tired back and in that instant knows that they'll both die. 'Easy boy.'"

"And puff! One of the boy's feathers goes off in the bright glare because he's gone too high. The fall of man, Michael and the arch-
angels putting down the rebels because they fell out of faith, and the kid looks over and sees horrified in one brief second the carefully molded wax and feather contraption melting slowly as he begins to lose altitude.

"Kicking, spinning over and over, whirling upside down through the air past his father who's thinking that they shouldn't have been there in the first place. Horror now as he spins and plummets, maybe soars, he doesn't know now, Icarus only knows the air is moving.

"And maybe some day Breughel's plowman will suddenly jerk his head up and shout 'Jesus Christ! That sure wasn't no bird or dish splashing in the water but a boy with wings.' And he'll run to the village to tell about it and they might even drag the bay for the body.

Bette and Dick looked at their guest across the small table which showed only what was left over from dinner. They smoked and sat in the dining room, sleepy with food and talking.

"Honey, Herbie called while you two were down at the beach. They're going out after boar at five in the morning. He wanted to know if you'd like to go."

"You want to go?" Dick asked his wife.

"At five in the morning? Are you nuts? You two should if you want to, though."

They washed the dishes and talked about boar hunting. They went after a small local variety that charged at you when they came snorting out of the dense underbrush which was north of the little town in the rugged hills. Periodically seven or eight young men went into the hills with pistols and dogs and hunted down the wild pigs. Then they were gutted, spitted and roasted on festive occasions—usually the day after they were shot.

They slept for three hours and then heard a scuffling outside Dick's house which meant that the party was waiting for them. It was still dark when he rolled over on the couch and reached around for a cigarette. They got into old cars and went off on the hunt. He went back to sleep and rolled in the back seat of the car, vaguely aware that they bumped over rutted dirt roads, up and up to where the sun came out of the hills.

They were stopped and there was yelling outside the car. It sat on a rigid angle and he lay against someone's shoulder. Five dark figures stood around the car talking about the road.

"Jesus, look at those lights down there." They were pin pricks on the floor of the valley like bits of fluff on a negative.

"God, we could have slid down anytime. It's good he's drunk—
only way to travel.”

Outside, the cold late night air and a little stinging breeze. ‘Of all things I have done,’ he thought, ‘few have had any coherence, few sequences have congealed into a series which would express anything. A weekend and here I am suddenly after talking and riding in cars, standing cold on the ridge of a mountain waiting for the sun.’

He went to the mountain side of the road and scrambled up it, holding onto shrubs and rocks, getting his shoes caught in sucking mud pockets. The road curved sharply around and came back just above the place where his car was stuck. He got into the lead car and they roared off, the other car following a little later.

The sky edgily grey, stars winked noiselessly up and around them. The group was silent, in awe of the silence. They separated into five pairs and spread out over the countryside. Eight of them had weapons; he and Dick did not. Dick went down toward a small canyon. There was a sound of scuffling and low conversation, but no tell tale grunts. Someone had seen a few tracks.

There might be a hairy red-eyed grunting beast, watching them minotaurlike in the dawn. ‘I will wait and then rush them one at a time,’ it might think.

His hunting companion wore a gunbelt thick with a row of bullets, and from it dangled a holster containing a heavy revolver. He walked steadily down the hills, stopping to peer in the gradually lessening gloom at scratches in the dirt. They didn’t talk much.

It got hot. From far off to his left, like an elfin popgun, the echoing crackle of a shot bounced from hill to hill. He glanced at his watch. It was 9:30 and the sun had dried the green hills. They walked over a streambed, past some cow skulls. They stopped by the skulls and he looked down at the white flaking grins of the old bone. He heard a galloping noise off to his right, up over the near hill. There were five of them, old black bulls with humped backs. They carried their heads low and ran together down the hill toward the two men standing by the tree near the stream. The ground shook lightly under the pounding of the bulls full gallop, and the sun caught the richness of black hair. The air smelled of force and running and violence on edge near them. Without stopping or turning at all, the bulls rushed on and into a group of thick green trees and on out of sight. The ground continued to sound the running for a few seconds. The two men went across the trail the bulls had cut into the soft sod and into some other trees, thin sharp-looking trees that smelled of cow’s urine. They walked up the side of a steep hill to the top and looked out into a little ravine and over to another hilltop.

They had seen three rabbits, one cow standing by a tree and
the galloping bulls. The man with the pistol at his side had stopped and pointed at something four or five times.

When the sun was almost at its midpoint, they stopped by another stream and drank from it. They leaned out and over the rocks by supporting themselves with their arms. They drank the cold water and their arms began to hurt from the effort of holding themselves up from the rocks. The water tasted as clean and fresh as the air smelled.

They began to walk back to the ridge where the cars were parked. It was about three miles up a steep gulley. They walked up the cow paths, heads down, putting one foot in front of the other methodically. They had stopped looking for tracks or for pigs.

The hills were like boxes and ladders, branches reaching out and grabbing at their clothes, offering hands to be grasped. The sun was hot, and they stopped again to drink. Then they walked on in the sun, the empty green countryside still and quiet in the closeness of the heat. They had heard two more distant crackles of gunfire. It was quiet except for the rustle of the brush as they strained up hill.

He was exhausted after an hour. They walked up to the sun; they got hot and he began to sweat, water running down his back, darkening his shirt and the waistband of his trousers. They scrambled up one hill, only to pause and look at another. The sun was hot. He turned from the other and slowly walked up the side of a steep and thickly clogged hill. The other stood and watched. He pushed whole bushes out of the way, grabbing at others, digging his feet into the sandy dirt. His shadow fell behind him as he crackled his way up, panting, grabbing at bushes. He watched for the top of the hill. He had disappeared inside the dense thicket of scrub brush.

There was a low grunt and a rustling of brush, then no sound. Then a steady rustling from the thicket followed by two more grunts. The rustling seemed to come down the hill and then the one with the pistol on his hip saw him rolling down the hill, end over end, arms flailing, grabbing for bushes but pulling them out. As he rolled past the other one he looked up and either gasped or grunted and held out his hand, but then rolled on down the hill. Then there was no sound.

The other one walked down the hill to where the body lay. It faced up into the sun, twisted the wrong way. His left hand was stretched out, palm up. The index finger of his right hand was caught in his pocket, as if he was going to reach in and pull something out. His head was in the stream, face down, as if he were drinking from it.

The other one stood and looked for a minute. Then he pulled out his long revolver and raised it into the air. He fired two shots rapidly and then sat down on a rock fifteen feet away from the body and waited for the others to come.