

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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## *Failing and Flying*

Everyone forgets that Icarus also flew.  
It's the same when love comes to an end,  
or the marriage fails and people say  
they knew it was a mistake, that everybody  
said it would never work. That she was  
old enough to know better. But anything  
worth doing is worth doing badly.  
Like being there by that summer ocean  
on the other side of the island while  
love was fading out of her, the stars  
burning so extravagantly those nights that  
anyone could tell you they would never last.  
Every morning she was asleep in my bed  
like a visitation, the gentleness in her  
like antelope standing in the dawn mist.  
Each afternoon I watched her coming back  
through the hot stony field after swimming,  
the sea light behind her and the huge sky  
on the other side of that. Listened to her  
while we ate lunch. How can they say  
the marriage failed? Like the people who  
came back from Provence (when it was Provence)  
and said it was pretty but the food was greasy.  
I believe Icarus was not failing as he fell,  
but just coming to the end of his triumph.

Jack Gilbert<sup>1</sup>

## ☞ Reflections

The mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) argues that myth's essential role in our societal and spiritual lives is to inspire awe. Of course, modern myth is everywhere—from *Star Wars* to comic book heroes to *Lord of the Rings*—and some say we are drawn to this form

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<sup>1</sup> "Failing and Flying" by Jack Gilbert from *Refusing Heaven*. Alfred A. Knopf. Used by permission.

of story telling because of myth's ability to speak a universal language. Luke Skywalker and Batman, for example, transcend every cultural divide.

One common conclusion—or moral lesson—to be drawn from the myth of Icarus is that personal pride breeds failure. In Greek mythology, Icarus and his father, Daedalus, attempt to escape from Crete by way of feather-and-wax wings. Daedalus, a master craftsman (he created the Labyrinth!), warns Icarus not to fly too close to the sea because the water will dampen and weigh down his wings and not to fly too close to the sun because the heat will melt the wax that gives the wings their shape. Icarus, though, enraptured by his flight, does not heed his father's advice and he does indeed fly too close to the sun. His waxen wings melt, and he falls to his death in what is now named the Icarian Sea.

The first line of the poem—that “also”—reminds us that what we do *not* forget is that Icarus fell. He *also* flew, but his failure often obscures his flying in the re-telling of the legend. That is, his failure overshadows his triumph. Aren't there a thousand examples of this, of the way our memory sometimes favors flaw and error over victory and goodness? What a triumph it is for Icarus: a man flies from prison with wings of feathers and wax! And yet what we remember first is less about Icarus' ecstasy or Daedalus' brilliance and more about hubris and punishment.

The story of Icarus frames the poem, but is not the poem itself. The real meat of this piece concerns a woman with “gentleness in her” and there are moments the poem illuminates something of the divine: “antelope standing in the dawn mist” and the “sea light” and the “huge sky.” And then the poet offers this equation: our forgetting that Icarus “also flew” is “the same when love comes to an end”; that is, the breaking down and failure of love often trumps the beginnings of love, the divinity of love, the glory of love even if it did not last. Perhaps, forgivably, we are like the stars that burn “so extravagantly” that we have trouble sustaining our brightness.

While Icarus's falling obscures his flying—the way greasy food *in* Provence one-ups the beauty *of* Provence—the poem seems to point to an idea that there is a distinction (albeit a cloudy and momentary one) between the end of triumph and the beginning of failure. Moreover, “fail,” “fly,” and “fall” are all verbs that sound similar. It's an interesting choice that draws our attention to the ways those words become as related *in meaning* as they are *in sound*. Flying (the triumph) is so close to falling (the failure) that it leads me to wonder about the moment flying stops and falling begins; the difference is a matter of life and death.

When I have taught this poem in school, my students often disagree with Gilbert's lines that read, “anything worth doing / is worth doing badly” and their protest is interesting to me. It's of course the opposite of the motivational cliché we often hear: anything worth doing is worth doing *well*. But I think Gilbert is onto something when it comes to love. I know that I have certainly “failed” at relationships—made mistakes, was unkind, listened poorly, was not always truthful—but does this mean it was all for nothing? What about the times I got it right, softened a heart, brought joy, loved and was loved, learned what I could not have otherwise been taught? Maybe it *was* worth doing badly. The beauty of great poems is not that we are provided the answer, but that we are given a question to consider. Poetry may

not ever solve anything, but to my mind a life worth living is one worth examining, even if the answer is that there is no answer.

### ✧ About the poet

Jack Gilbert (February 18, 1925 – November 13, 2012) was an American poet born and raised in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Though he never graduated from high school, legend has it that it was a clerical error that got him accepted into the University of Pittsburgh. He later earned a master's degree from San Francisco State University and shot to fame after the publication of his first book. For much of his life afterwards, he lived in what he called “a self-imposed isolation,” writing poetry and traveling the world. After his death, the New York Times ran a full page article citing him as “a poet who transformed lives.”



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by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,  
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