Musee des Beaux Arts (Museum of Fine Arts)

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.

– W. H. Auden, 1940

Answer these questions on a separate sheet of paper. Be sure to use complete sentences as you answer every part of the following:

1. Auden opens the poem with an inversion. Instead of saying, “The old Masters were never wrong about suffering,” he says, “About suffering they were never wrong, the old Masters...” What is significant about this launch to the poem? How does the inversion change the line’s impact?

2. This poem is free verse, meaning it does not use consistent meter patterns, rhyme, or any other noticeable formula. Auden does, though, occasionally rhyme some of his lines. Identify at least three of Auden’s rhyming pairs of words and explain why you think he chose to join those specific lines.

3. In the last stanza, Auden specifically refers to the Breughel painting. He says that “everything turns away” from the disaster. List three people/things in the painting that have turned their backs on the drowning teenager.

4. What is the theme of the poem?

5. Do you think the people in the scene heard/noticed Icarus falling from the sky or do you think they were all so absorbed in their own busy lives that they didn’t notice at all? Does one way or the other change Auden’s theme?

6. Both Breughel and Auden seem to be suggesting that people notice, but are indifferent to the suffering of others. Do you agree with this idea or not? Give two concrete examples from your life or studies to support your stance.