

“Falling Man”
Max Beckmann

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1

What made a man topple in one
of Max Beckmann's last paintings
cannot now be remembered or described.
We could speculate –
he slipped. Something pushed him.
He was on the edge for years.
He was all of us, don't even try.

If we had asked what was going on in days before,
he might have replied, Nothing, as children say
mournfully, once they've started school.
Or perhaps, I tried to leap beyond the fires
to save myself. Soaring into infinity,
some think, or a foretaste of the future,
but we see a man deep dive to his demise.
Buildings on both sides roar
from within, curtains, plants,
shivering flames, gulping
every inch of what was a room.
Smoke roils thickly around his plunging feet.
Beckmann could make smoke be clouds,
be thoughts, the weight of tangled dream.
These large sturdy feet might almost be
striking a dance pose. But they are upside down.
Consider everywhere they walked, and the man's
large capable hands, but what use?
A black wheel hovers to the left, he doesn't grab it,
Beckmann's wife called it a balcony
from a strange angle,
but our man is past steering or pausing.
Airplanes, boats,
hopeful means of travel,
float in the background, sky
merging with sea.

Once our man went places and returned.
He walked as a human –
no need for speed.
One plunge and all that's left are
flashing streams of thought --
in a moment to be gone?
But are they gone?

2

“Stop,” she said. My mother would not
let me read aloud the final chapter of her
Beckmann biography because she knew
what happened in it. After all he had witnessed,
suffered, to move to St. Louis,
two happy years in a calm studio, an art school,
inspiring lives... her paintings look
like his. He called her his most “simpatico” student.
She didn't know the word. To me this seems
the greatest gift one might ever receive.
But she tells me only when she is dying.

People fell in German, Spanish, Arabic,
all over the world people fell, in the wars,
in the dark alley she'd grown up in, before art
encircled and held her so she didn't hit the ground.
Soaking in *something not yourself* was the way free,
expanding the mind, letting art be your compass,
your glide.

My mother could not bear to feel her
dearest teacher step out for a morning walk
across Central Park and fall.
His wife Quappi wrote
he was “freed of the horrors
and beauties of life on earth.”
Swoops of oil remain.
Complete as anthems. Mysterious as days.

3

Your child dies and
you plummet off the roof too.
You will keep falling through
hours, months, anniversaries,
the unexpected thunder tilt of any moment
where he’s suddenly
standing in the door.

How precious, the door.

Or – his voice plunges
into your ongoing sorrow –
what he would have said.

These little plaid pants. They traveled far
and weren’t new when he got them.
Where do they go?

What was going on inside
you couldn’t know.
Who was steering the wheel.
As a child, his future
loomed, gleaming, gracious,
long and bright as the sky behind
everyone upright, bigger than you were.
He would outlive all you shared.

But this will not be.
Find comfort in the Falling Man
whose face we can’t see,
the mystery we’re stuck with,
the thick arms so much
like his own. We want to stand
beneath the Falling Man
and catch him. Out walking,
we feel boys walking alongside us,
girls too, and ancestors, and the man with the brush,
Max.

Speak to the flaming silence,
the endless regret, but remember things
which do not plummet –
memory, color, love.
I should remember more than I do.
I might have noticed more than I did.
Beckmann’s turquoise slash of fabric,
Beckmann’s blue.