

The Flight of Icarus

TRADITIONAL GREEK MYTH

Retold by Sally Benson

This myth is a sequel to the story of Theseus and the Minotaur. It also explains how something came to be. As you read, look for what is explained.

When Theseus escaped from the labyrinth, King Minos flew into a rage with its builder, Daedalus (ded' ə ləs). He ordered the builder shut up in a high tower that faced the lonely sea. In time, with the help of his young son, Icarus (ik' ə rəs), Daedalus managed to escape from the tower, only to find himself a prisoner on the island. Several times he tried by bribery to stow away on one of the vessels sailing from Crete but King Minos kept strict watch. No ships were allowed to sail without being carefully searched.

Daedalus was an ingenious craftsman and was not discouraged by his failures. "Minos may control the land and sea," he said, "but he does not control the air. I will try that way."

He called his son Icarus to him and told the boy to gather up all the feathers he could find on the rocky shore. As thousands of gulls soared over the island, Icarus soon collected a huge pile of feathers. Daedalus then melted some wax and made a skeleton in the shape of a bird's wing. The smallest

feathers he pressed into the soft wax and the large ones he tied on with thread. While his father worked, Icarus played about on the beach happily. He chased the feathers that blew away in the strong wind that swept the island and sometimes took bits of the wax and worked it into strange shapes with his fingers.

It was fun making the wings. The sun shone on the bright feathers, the breezes ruffled them. When they were finished, Daedalus fastened the wings to his shoulders and found himself lifted upwards where he hung poised in the air. Filled with excitement, he made another pair for his son. They were smaller than his own, but strong and beautiful.

Finally, one clear, wind-swept morning, the wings were finished. Daedalus fastened them to Icarus's shoulders and taught him how to fly. He bade him watch the movements of the birds, how they soared and glided overhead. He pointed out the slow, graceful sweep of their wings as they beat the air steadily, without fluttering. Soon the



Violet-Tailed Sylph and Crimson Topaz, 1983, ROBERT LOSTUTTER. Courtesy of Dart Gallery, Chicago.

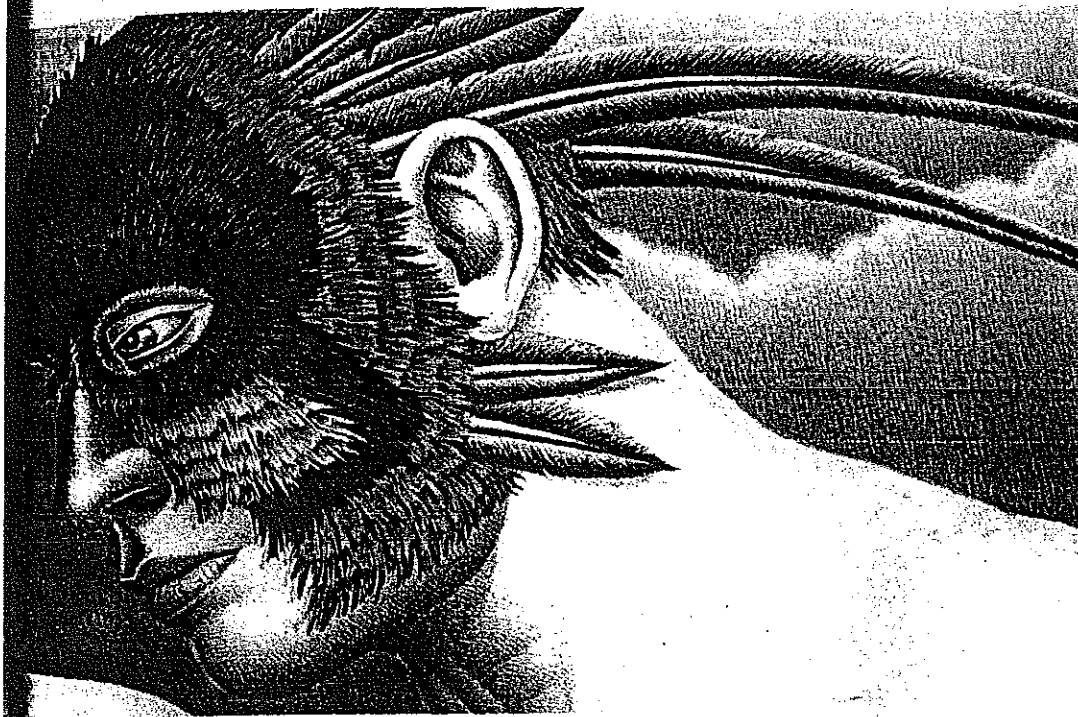
boy Icarus was sure that he, too, could fly and, raising his arms up and down, skirted over the white sand and even out over the waves, letting his feet touch the snowy foam as the water thundered and broke over the sharp rocks.

Daedalus watched him proudly but with misgivings. He called Icarus to his side. Putting his arm round the boy's shoulders, he said, "Icarus, my son, we are about to make our flight. No human being has ever traveled through the air before, and I want you to listen carefully to my instructions. Keep at a moderate height. If you fly too low, the fog and spray will clog your wings. If you fly too high, the heat will melt the

wax that holds them together. Keep near me and you will be safe."

He kissed Icarus and fastened the wings more securely to his son's shoulders. Icarus, stood in the bright sun, the shining wings drooping gracefully from his shoulders. His golden hair was wet with spray and his eyes were bright and dark with excitement. He looked like a lovely bird. Daedalus's eyes filled with tears and turning away he soared into the sky, calling to Icarus to follow. From time to time, he looked back to see that the boy was safe and to note how he managed his wings in his flight.

Icarus, beating his wings in joy, felt the thrill of the cool wind on his face and the



clear air above and below him. He flew higher and higher into the blue sky until he reached the clouds. His father called out in alarm. He tried to follow, but he was heavier and his wings would not carry him. Up and up Icarus soared, through the soft moist clouds and out again toward the glorious sun. He was bewitched by a sense of freedom; he beat his wings frantically so that they would carry him higher and higher to heaven itself.

The blazing sun beat down on the wings and softened the wax. Small feathers fell from the wings and floated softly down, warning Icarus to stay his flight and glide to earth. But the enchanted boy did not notice

them, until the sun became so hot that the largest feathers dropped off and he began to sink. Frantically he fluttered his arms, but no feathers remained to hold the air. He cried out to his father.

Daedalus, crazed by anxiety, called back to him, "Icarus! Icarus, my son, where are you?" At last he saw the feathers floating from the sky and soon his son plunged through the clouds into the sea. Daedalus hurried to save him, but it was too late. He gathered the boy in his arms and flew to land, the tips of his wings dragging in the water from the double burden they bore. Weeping bitterly, he buried his small son and called the land Icaria in his memory.