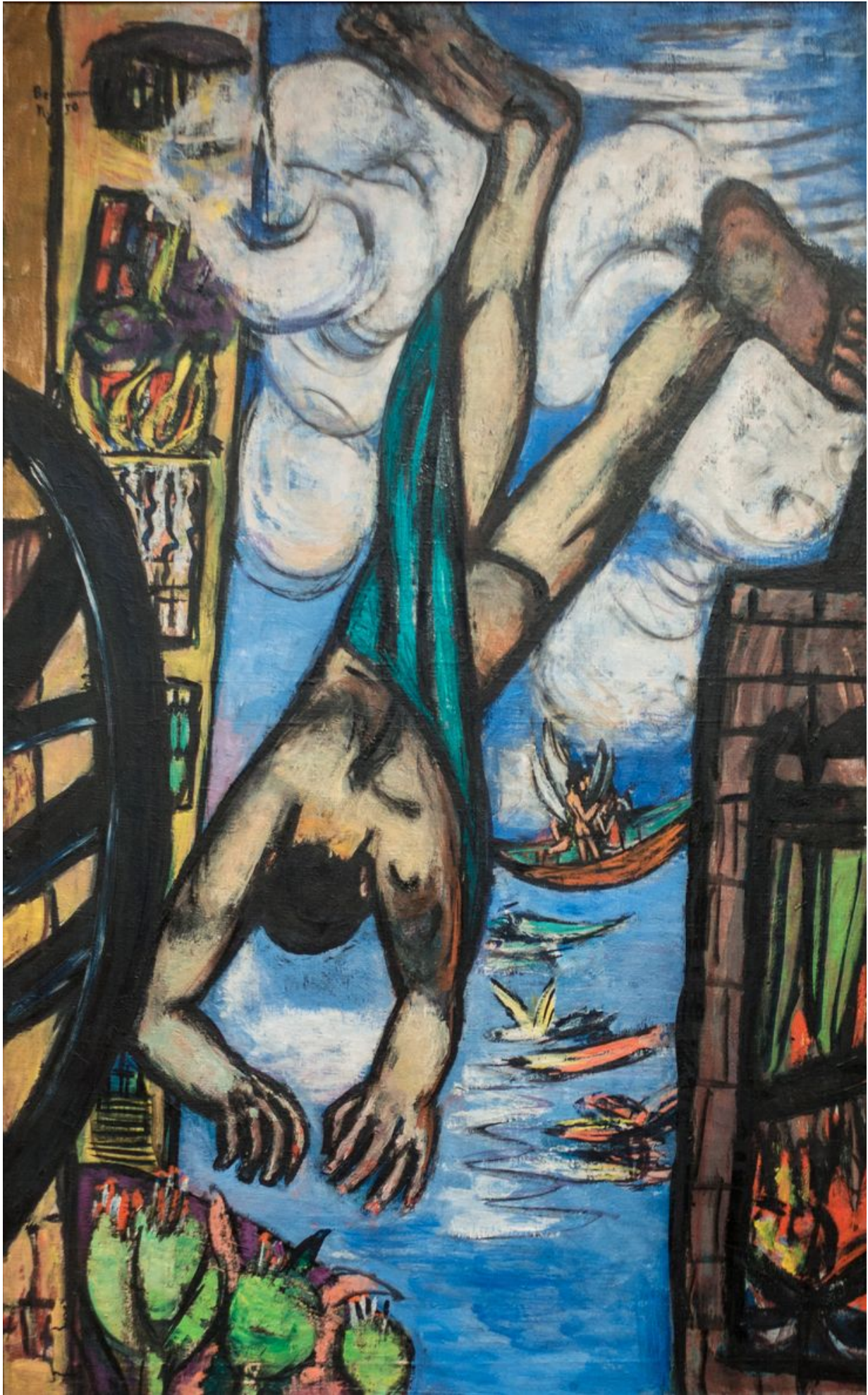


Pigs in Space



Falling Man, Max Beckmann, 1950

“Pigs... in... space!”

It's one of my earliest and fondest memories. I am three or maybe four years old and my brother is eleven or twelve. He holds me in the air and yells, repeating the opening sentence of a Muppets Show sketch that at that time would still air in reruns on TV. “Pigs... in... space!” he repeats one more time, as he lifts me through the air. And I laugh and laugh.

My brother. He died a few months ago. He wasn't old, at least not what we would consider old these days. He was 50. I'm 42. That eight-year difference, that seemed so immense when we were children, was narrowed down to almost nothing in middle age and then to literally nothing in death. And yet for a long time it mattered. To say that he was my greatest idol during my younger years would be a huge understatement. He was my mentor, my model, my teacher. Everything I learned at that time, from music to books to girls to drugs, to good and bad things, I owe to him. He was the firstborn, so it was natural that he would be the trailblazer and I would just follow through the path he had opened for me.

In some ways that made my life easier, and, in others, harder. He was successful in everything, or almost everything that he tried, and I seemed only to find failure, and this despite the fact that things were supposed to be less daunting for someone who was just following from behind.

There was something about him. It was not just luck; he had a charming, easygoing way that made everyone, or almost everyone, like him. And then they would go out of their way to help him out.

He became everything he wanted. First a surfer, then a photographer, then a well-paid executive at an important financial company, then he left everything to create his own business—and he excelled at that, too. I wanted to be first an

astronaut and then a writer and then a filmmaker; I became a lowly employee in an insurance company, and that was it, for almost my whole life.

I never complained. I understood my role from early on. That's just the way it is: there are some people for whom everything is easy, and people for whom everything is hard.

"I coulda been a contender", as my brother would whisper mockingly to me with his best Brando voice. Yes, because the "pigs in space" joke was just the first instance of what, over the years, would become a much larger repertoire. One habit he had, but just with me, was repeating quotes of movies, mostly out of context, just to make me laugh. He didn't do it so much with others, maybe because they didn't find it as funny, or because they wouldn't, as I would, recognize all of them. They were not all famous; at the beginning it was mostly just loose catchphrases from cartoons and sitcoms that we watched together, then moving eventually to famous Hollywood movies and then, when those became too predictable, to more obscure quotes from foreign films.

We were close when young, at least until just after graduating from college. As he became more successful, our contact was naturally reduced. But he was never aloof or snobbish.

Whenever he was in town, we would take me for a drink, or he would invite me over with his family, and if I hesitated, he would say, "I'll make you an offer you can't refuse", or maybe, "Do you feel lucky, punk?"

Yet we never regained the closeness of childhood and teenage years. Perhaps because we ended up frequenting very different milieus, and you cannot avoid absorbing at least a bit of your environment; or perhaps because we grew apart and really didn't have all that much in common to talk about anymore. When we talked about our present lives, it was as if we were

both on the defensive. I feared that I had disappointed him and so I wanted to avoid certain topics; he, on the other hand, didn't want to hear any confession about past grievances or petty worries, he just wanted to hear me say "everything is fine" or to talk about the "good old times". And as a consequence that was what most of our dialogue consisted of at those dinners: the vague recollection of memories of past times. "Do you remember that time when grandma..." "Do you remember that other time when dad..." But I suppose in the end we both felt that there was a certain artificiality in our relation, and it was not without relief that we said good night to each other and left, each to his own place.

One day his luck started to run out. There were some accusations, some papers that were discovered in his possession. Not that he had done anything necessarily illegal, but perhaps a few transactions that could be considered an ethical breach of well-known rules. Lawyers and other vultures got involved. He lost his business and was sued for millions. Then a costly divorce took the rest of the money away.

Still he kept cheerful, but life became harder. He was no longer a young successful businessman, but a burned-out middle-aged man, having to start everything again from scratch. He started to drink, not for mere pleasure as in his younger years, but for consolation and forgetfulness. He lost his radiant youthful look, which he had kept well into his forties. But just as things seemed hopeless, he got a new job as a manager at a chemical plant. It was not bad, except for the constant smell of sulfur and other noxious gases. Still, he worked there for years, saving money and hoping to eventually clear his name and get back to greener fields. Then, when everything seemed to be again on the rise, the disease came.

He's at the hospital. He's been there for a few days after the last intervention. The doctors say that the disease is incurable, but for now it has receded and there is not telling when it will strike again. In other words, the situation is hopeless, but not desperate. For all anyone knows, he may still have many years of life ahead of him. They sound cheerful, but I don't know how sincere they are. I ask about the rumours that his work at the chemical company could be the main culprit. I explain that there were no previous cases of similar diseases in my family, and that two other people who worked there have died before their time. They are evasive: "We cannot really know..." "It is very difficult to establish a unique root cause in those cases ... " And so on and so forth.

I go into the room. My brother salutes me with his best Bugs Bunny impersonation: "What's up, doc?" He is chewing on a carrot and offers me some. "This is all I can eat these days", he explains. "Raw veggies and soup. It's not too bad. Not too good, but not too bad either."

He sounds pretty cheerful for someone who has a terminal illness, so I avoid talking about it at first. We play chess, we talk about movies and books. He makes jokes about the doctors and nurses. It is as if we now had regained the closeness of childhood, only having inverted roles, and now he is the one who needs to be guided and nurtured.

All in all, despite the context, it ends up being a pretty relaxed afternoon. But it cannot go on forever, and as the last rays of sunlight disappear, I slowly get up.

"I have to go. I can come back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," he says, quoting Hamlet, no, wait, Macbeth. "Or if not the day after. Don't worry, I will be here."

"The doctors said it's in remission," I say, finally breaching the unavoidable subject.

"Yes, that's what they would say."

"Well, but it is, isn't it?"

"Retreating in some places, advancing in others, but in the end not moving a lot. It's like trench warfare in 1914. The body is France and the cancer is Germany, or maybe the opposite, I am not sure. Who were the bad guys that time? I guess the Germans. It's always the Germans."

"The doctor has a German name."

"It figures."

"You seem fine to me. I swear, I cannot see anything wrong right now."

He smiles faintly, then holds my hand, guides it towards the back of his head and makes me touch a little lump, barely perceptible to the eye, but certainly to the touch. It is coarse and hard as a piece of coal.

"Say hello to my little friend," he says. Scarface, the remake.

It is now a few months later. I avoid talking to the doctors; they are not so cheerful this time, and neither am I. Everything is silent as I enter the room, as if in an empty Cathedral. I look towards the cross at the top of the bed. *Oh mi Jesu, dimitte nobis debita nostra, libera nos ab igne Inferni*. My brother looks at me as I approach and then suddenly he raises his arm in a theatrical gesture:

"Rosebud!", he whispers, contorting his face in a hideous death-mask. He's always the same, until the very end. Then he laughs, or rather, it is half a laugh and half a cough, and for a minute I am afraid he will collapse right there at my feet. He looks so much thinner now.

"It's not funny," I say.

"Of course it is. Did you bring the whisky?"

"Whisky?"

"I asked you last time. Whisky and cigarettes."

"You know you don't smoke."

"It's never too late to start, isn't what they say? I'm pretty sure it's not going to kill me at this point."

"Well, I'm sorry, I... I didn't think you were serious."

"Don't worry, I wasn't."

He keeps looking at me with that smile, and I don't really know what to say. Or rather, I know what I want to say, but I don't know how to say it. It's so painful to watch him there lying, so alone.

"I want to tell you something. You know, when the trouble started. The papers they found out, you know, about the financial operations ... "

"Oh man, forget that," he interrupts me. "I really don't want to talk about that anymore. All that is gone. Water under the bridge."

"Yeah, but... It's something important."

"Tell me tomorrow then."

I look at him and suddenly everything seems strange, like a dream inside a dream, like those times you wake up and find out that you're still dreaming. I feel a lump in my throat. I can't swallow. I can't breath.

"I'm afraid you won't make it to tomorrow," I say, and the tears now flow freely from my eyes.

"I find your lack of faith disturbing", he says.

I don't know what were his last words. Maybe he didn't have any. The doctor said that he died in his sleep that same night.

At the funeral, I mumbled a few words, then his widow talked, then a friend made a wonderful speech, then the priest played his part, then it was done. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. My secret will die with me.

I did it all, of course. I was the person who indirectly revealed the papers that brought ruin to my brother. I didn't do it by myself. I wouldn't have the courage, even if I wanted it. I was pressured and cheated by false friends who promised me unspoken benefits, and I fell under their spell. My role was small and rather innocent on the face of it. I just pointed them towards a potentially incriminating source, and they did the rest. I didn't know all the consequences, but I knew that there were revelations that could potentially hit him hard. As in fact they did.

Why did I do it? Envy? Bitterness? Loneliness? I don't know, really. I never wanted to hurt him, just to cut him down to size, I guess. If I could not reach his heights, perhaps I could bring him nearer to me by lowering him down a bit, just a bit. And perhaps then we would be again really close just as we were when we were kids.

How many times I wished he had found me out. How many times I wished he had kissed me and whispered in my ear, "*I know it was you, Fredo!*" But he never did. I don't think he even ever suspected my small but decisive role in his misfortunes. I am not sure if it was because he thought that my honesty was beyond reproach, or because he didn't think me smart enough for such a move, or simply because there were some things that were so far from his mental universe that he could not even

consider possible. He would frown if anyone would hint at family members having had any part in it. Even when I tried to tell him, the very few times I tried, just like that day at the hospital, either my words would falter or he would rapidly change the subject, because he would not want to hear anything related to that. For him that was the past, and it was dead and gone, and he didn't really care one way or another.

But now it is him who is dead and gone, and I don't know whom can I turn to.

Because, before, at least there was a possibility of redemption, of forgiveness; but now, who will hear the confession of my guilt?

And so I am now at the top of this building, the same building where he worked years ago. I look down and I can see the whole city shining like a Christmas tree. I wonder what my last words could be.

"Top of the world, brother," is the first one I think, slightly changing a classic scene in a gangster movie. No, too dramatic. And besides, repeating movie catchphrases was his thing, not mine. I might as well go out in silence, just as I lived.

I look below. This is the time. I sigh. I jump.

"Pigs in space!" I hear it then, faintly in the distance, and it is as if I am hearing my brother's voice as I flutter through the air as the astronaut that I never was. "Pigs ... in ... space!" I hear it again, this time very clearly, and sure enough it's my brother's voice, he's eleven and I am three years old.

And I laugh and laugh.