The story of Icarus, which you will explore in this unit, has been a powerful one for artists, writers, and musicians throughout the ages. Even today, it continues to exert its pull on our imaginations. Share with a partner anything you already know about Icarus. Who was he? What did he do? Have you read any stories about him?

Read the poem “Before the Fall.” It was written in a summer poetry-writing session for teenagers in England. Read it first without any additional explanation. Write your questions and thoughts in the Response Notes column.

**Before the Fall** by Harriet Archer

“He sets his mind at work upon unknown arts, and changes the laws of nature.” —Ovid

The passage out of Crete is closed to all, *the coast swoops*

Except those with the ability to leave
The heavy bonds of land, the draw of sea.

*shrinking to a slice of yellow*

With feathers, wax and string, ambition,
And Athene’s guidance, is constructed,
Grafted onto shoulders, moulded weightlessness.

*which swells and subsides as the spray, haze and feathers sparkle, bird high—*

Although to flee with artificial wings,
Minoan punishment for Sicilian freedom,
Is as yet unattempted—

*i could sink my fingers into the sky*

—though to fly
As if we had been shaped by gods to raze

*just as my toes touch the water*

The emptiness between the heavens and earth . . .
in flight, limbs are empty—
eyes dissolve in brightness, lemon light
clouds dive and roar, raw heat stings
and the air around him sings
(leaping with shining water
racing, chasing the sun)

Icarus can fly—why does he need wings?

**TRACKING DOWN THE MYTH**
The myth of Icarus is so widespread that it seems to pop up everywhere—in stories, in poems, in paintings, in dance, in comic books, in movies. The first thing you will do in this investigation is to look at the story that is the basis for Harriet Archer’s poem.

The earliest known version of the myth is in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, although there are earlier references to it. They are found on vases and wall carvings that predate Ovid, who was born in 43 BCE. All writers since Ovid have based their versions on his. After Ovid, the best-known version is the well-known account of the fall of Icarus, told by Thomas Bulfinch in the nineteenth century. This is the basic story found in Bulfinch’s collection of myths, *The Age of Fable.*

Before you read the story of Icarus as told by Thomas Bulfinch, recall what you and your partner shared about the myth prior to reading “Before the Fall.” After you read each paragraph of the story, jot a little note to remind yourself of what happened. When you read your notes all together, you should be able to retell the story.

**The Basic Story** told by Thomas Bulfinch

Icarus was imprisoned with his father Daedalus in a tower on Crete by the king Minos. Daedalus, who was known for his creativity and inventions, figured out how to escape from the tower. He knew he could not leave the island by sea, as the king kept strict watch on all the vessels, and permitted none to sail without being carefully searched. “Minos may control the land and sea,” said Daedalus, “but not the regions of the air. I will try that way.” So he set to work to fabricate wings for himself and his young son Icarus. He put feathers together beginning with the smallest and adding larger, so as to form an increasing surface. The larger ones he secured with thread and the smaller with wax, and gave the whole a gentle curvature like the wings of a bird. Icarus, the boy, stood and looked on, sometimes running to gather up
the feathers which the wind had blown away, and then handling the wax and working it over with his fingers, by his play impeding his father in his labors.

When at last the work was done, Daedalus the artist, waving his wings, found himself buoyed upward and hung suspended, poising himself on the updraft of air. He next fitted wings on his son’s arms and shoulders in the same manner, and taught him how to fly, as a bird tempts her young ones from the lofty nest into the air. When all was prepared for flight, he said, “Icarus, my son, I charge you to keep at a moderate height, for if you fly too low the dampness will clog your wings, and plunge you into the ocean. And if you fly too high, the heat will melt them. Keep near me and you will be safe.” While he gave him these instructions and fitted the wings to his shoulders, the face of the father was wet with tears, and his hands trembled. He hugged the boy, not knowing that it was for the last time. Then rising on his wings he flew off, encouraging Icarus to follow, and looked back from his own flight to see how his son managed his wings. As they flew, the plowman in the field stopped his work to gaze, and the shepherd leaned on his staff and watched them, astonished at the sight, and thinking they were gods who could thus fly like the birds through the air.

They passed small islands on the left and a larger one on the right, then the boy, exulting in his joyous flight, began to leave the guidance of his father and soar upward as if to reach heaven. The nearness of the blazing sun softened the wax which held the feathers together, and they began to fall off. He fluttered with his arms, but no feathers remained to hold the air. While his mouth uttered cries to his father, he plummeted; and the sound was submerged in the blue waters of the sea. His father cried, “Icarus, Icarus, where are you?” At last he saw the feathers floating on the water, and bitterly lamenting his own skill that had fashioned the wings, he buried the body. The sea was thenceforth called the Icarian Sea in honor of his name. And Daedalus called the land where he was buried Icaria in memory of his child. Daedalus himself arrived safely in Sicily, where he built a temple to Apollo, and hung up his wings, an offering to the god.
• Review your lists with a partner to see whether you can figure out the meanings of these words. Write down your “working definitions” (what you think they might mean). If there are still words on your list without definitions, look them up in the dictionary. Then write the definitions of those words.

• Reread the story. Add any new ideas or questions you have as a result of your second reading of the story.

• Reread the poem “Before the Fall” on pages 102–103. In light of the story you just read, what additional insights do you have into the poem?

• What are some possible meanings of the question in the last line of the poem: “Icarus can fly—why does he need wings?”

• What stories from your own experience remind you of the Icarus story? Explain why. Cite an example from the text.

Based on this introduction to the myth of Icarus, why do you think so many writers make a connection to this story?