

# Flying Towards the Ground

A Reader on Flying and Falling

Michael Namkung

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## Introduction

This reader is an exploration of the intimate relationship between the human desire for flight and the equally powerful fear of falling. My aim in drawing these texts together is to shine a light on a body of knowledge that is rarely articulated; one that largely resides in our collective subconscious in the subliminal realm of dreams and nightmares.

The project began with an exploration of a particular bodily maneuver that has given me much joy and much physical pain; one that I have performed repetitively for over twenty years. In the lexicon of Ultimate Frisbee, this move is called a *layout*, in which the body ends a full speed run for the disc by launching itself horizontally, becoming parallel with the ground, and falling back to earth; a singular gesture that enacts both flight and the inability to sustain flight.

I asked the contributors of this reader to write something based on their expertise or experience with flying and/or falling. The diversity of themes they address alludes to the breadth of the topic, but also suggests that there is still much to be explored. This reader offers a small window into a field that is deeper and wider than its aperture.

I am thankful for the many individuals who helped me realize this project. I am grateful for the support of my family; the many authors who contributed to this reader; and especially Locust Projects for their dedicated support in helping me to develop this work.

—Michael Namkung



## Recipe for Flight

A base of animal fat—  
Add hemlock,  
And nightshade,  
Wolfsbane and henbane.

(Maybe some bat's blood,  
For potency or poetry.)

You'll lord over lands  
With the birds and the flies,  
Instill fear in the night  
Of things in the sky.

Up, and up,  
Till your moon's silhouette—

The highest you'll get  
Leaves your body for dead.

**Rob Goyanes** is a critic and poet from Miami, Florida. He's currently working on an owner's manual for Asif Farooq's Mig-21, both of which are titled *Balalaika*.

## The Fear of Falling

*All fates are worse than death.*

—Evelyn Waugh

My fear of falling is very real. I hate to get hurt. I hate failing at my objectives even more than that. Falling is sort of the injury to which the inevitable insult is never far behind. But what you don't know (or are unwilling to see), the world will show you. Falling, whether literal or figurative, is inescapable.

I used to fear falling quite a bit. It was such a profound player in my life that I rarely ever even started anything. And had I started, I almost never finished. I believe that memory is vertically integrated. I believe that every time I process an experience I somehow store it with similar experiences. Those experiences are cumulative and shape my fear—however irrational. The more times I fall (more times than I can count), the more I stress over a painful outcome. And, I suppose, if it were my fate to fall the same exact way every time, I would naturally have developed a pathological anxiety about the whole hellish divine retribution cycle that was my punishment for an undoubtedly wicked, wicked life.

But I don't think I have fallen the same way every time. And furthermore, I don't think I will fall the same as before, in any real sense. So, here is where I would like to take a departure from focusing on negative outcomes. I think that my fear of broken limbs (and indeed missing digits), loss of financial stability, a lack of a meaningful personal life, and an absence of relevance are all only slightly less important than me losing my self-respect.

So what am I afraid of? Something worse than falling that I can think of is the idea that I don't fall at all. If I manage to meet and exceed my objectives regularly and without major incident. That, of course, indicates to me that my goals are far too attainable and pedestrian.

Falling is naturally to be feared. One may become incapacitated psychologically or bodily. In addition, one may be prevented by their "injury" from participating in the meaningful tasks of their life. Trauma, in addition to wounding, makes a great teacher. One becomes acutely aware of their fragility, yes, but also their ability to survive. If you are reading this, congratulations on having survived; having learned what you are capable of, you are now best prepared to avoid a fall.



**Asif Farooq** was born in Miami, Florida where he currently resides and works. At present, he is making a functioning Cold War era Soviet fighter entirely out of paper. He has been busy making paper planes since 1985.

## **Fuck it Up**

My mentor, world-renowned devised theatre artist and mime, James Donlon, says a good performance depends on the actor being “comfortable in free fall.” Another beloved teacher, the saintly Jim Edmondson, encourages performers to throw themselves into their work by telling them, “You’re outside darling, play the sky.”

I translate this to my own students a little less...poetically. After many years of teaching actors and directors, always pushing them to go farther, let go of control, take risks and embrace failure, I have distilled my exhortations into a very short mantra: “Fuck it Up.”

“Fuck it Up” is a shockingly effective teaching tool. Students who are driven to get things right, do a good job, earn a good grade, are stunned when I ask them to throw all that out and follow their whimsy. They don’t trust that their impulses will be “good,” so much of my work is pushing them to trust themselves anyway, to jump and to fall. It often takes weeks for them to believe that I won’t laugh or scold them for doing it “wrong.”

The freedom that comes when they truly let themselves trash their own ideas of “good acting” is exhilarating for both the actor and everyone watching. Gone are the forced emotions and badly rehearsed habits. Gone is the actor watching themselves, judging their own skill. In its place, comes the free performer: awkward, possessed, limitless, human, and true. Here is the actor playing the sky. Here is the artist falling freely through the words of the text into the blackout, slightly dazed and very, very happy.



In Apodaca's 2013 Artaud class, the audience joins in with silly string and noisemakers as students perform the Greek tragedy *Alcestis*.

**Jackie Apodaca** has worked as an actor, director, and producer in theatre, film, and media for over twenty years. She is currently an Associate Professor of Acting and Head of Performance at Southern Oregon University.

## **Pursuit of an Impartial Reflection**

My favorite performances artworks are free-floating—immaterial, minimal, and non-referential—so that, if entertained in the mind, one could imagine the art action occurring at any point in history. In 2011 I heard a lecture by the writer and critic Steven Henry Madoff on the role of mirrors in art. The arc he traces is from Dan Graham backwards to the Palace of Versailles. But the screen, he told an eager audience, is also a mirror. About face. I myself was still daydreaming in the other direction, timewise. What could the young man see in his reflection in the water, on a moonlit night, before the looking glass? What do animals see as they lean in for a drink? Does the osprey as it plummets towards the lake think, maybe, for just a second, that another osprey must be diving for another salmon on the reverse side of the surface? Water can be a tricky mirror. Suppose one tried to see all of one's self. Beyond the more obvious obstructions, such as a light play of wind that can chop a perfect reflection into a thousand bouncing parts, there are the invisible conspirators of Time and Gravity, a duo who make all but certain that a real reflection cannot be had before you fall, headfirst, into the water.



*Pursuit of an Impartial Reflection*, 10am, 3/19/15, HD  
video still

**Jeremiah Barber** is a visual and performance artist who studies transcendence through absurdity and humor. He has created pieces for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the Chicago Cultural Center, and has exhibited nationally and internationally including at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, CA, and The LAB in San Francisco. Barber is a recent recipient of the Fleishhacker Foundation's Eureka Fellowship and a grant from the Franklin Furnace Fund.

## Far-Off Lands

*In my own country I am in a far-off land  
I am strong but have no force or power  
I win all yet remain a loser  
at break of day I say goodnight  
when I lie down I have a great fear  
of falling*  
—francois villon

I.

Atlanta.

Shit—I was still only in Atlanta. I had made the first flight from Colorado Springs earlier that morning where I had spent the 4th of July weekend coaching an Ultimate Frisbee team and was now half way home. I must have blacked out for 90 seconds and came to in a stall in the men's room in the dreadful D concourse, wiping foam and spittle from my chin, realizing I was only still in Atlanta as the loudspeaker announced last call for Wilmington, North Carolina. I wouldn't make it. I'd stay in the stall cold sweating with no vomit left to give the toilet. I'd spend the next 5 hours on standby before getting the last flight out that day, 5 hours to recover the nerve to board another plane.

This was in 2012. I hadn't always been overwhelmed by a fear of flying. I always thought of myself as an easy traveler, unbothered by long lines and undaunted by

turbulence. But in 2004 that changed. I was connecting in—Atlanta again, and again returning from an Ultimate Frisbee tournament. This time flying in from Florida. I had been sleeping, exhausted and overstimulated from the tournament, and was deep in sleep before screaming woke me up. Opening my eyes I caught the Atlanta skyline out the window and became disoriented as I confused screaming with excitement—a group of high schoolers or college kids in the back of the plane erupting in joy that they were home. Their emotion sounded nothing like cheering to me, and the angle of the plane and height of the runway in proportion to the skyline out the window had me believe that we were going down and that this was it—this is how it ends. The terror stayed with me; like the deer you didn't hit, the accident that didn't happen.

## II.

*I've got wild staring eyes,  
and I've got a strong urge to fly,  
but I've got nowhere to fly to.*

I was in 8th grade when I first heard those Pink Floyd lyrics and the lines were immediately impressionable. It wasn't exactly that I didn't have anywhere to fly to as much as it was my urge to fly, my desire to get above the tree line, to feel like I was in a far-off land. I grew up in the Myers Park area of Charlotte, North Carolina; an area known for its canopy of oak trees as much as the yuppies living and dying under them. As a pre-teen I

would climb out my sister's bedroom window and lift myself on to the house's main room and sit at the top and think I could step off and take flight and leap and land from the top of one tree to then next and hover fence lines that ran behind houses from one end of the neighborhood to the other; and move from roof to roof and chimney to chimney and perch atop the many churches in the neighborhood. This activity became my dreams. This image predates *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, but the picture is quite the same. Certainly, it has to do with some subconscious need for escape or an idea of not being quite normal; but the dream activity goes back at least that far and still occupies a large part of my dreams though now I think it may have to do with a desire to be in control and the need to want to watch over everyone and all. I still dream I'm floating over the neighborhood and hovering over the alleyways at fence level until rising above the tree lines and landing in one of the nearby linear parkway fields. The falling is never violent or awkward; it's always swift and ballet like; another subconscious struggle to obtain a level of grace.

The fear of flying never outweighed the subconscious preoccupation with wanting to fly and take flight and float over the comfort zone you live in.

### III.

I've never had a fear of falling; but the idea of a fear of falling has redefined itself in terms of falling into someone's arms. Married fifteen years of a twenty year relationship, you suddenly have this empty space under

your arms, space that occupied physical contact, like the perfect puzzle piece; but now is empty and so you come to an elevated understanding or idea of affection and what it is to fill those spaces; and filling those spaces has to do with falling into someone's arms; falling weightlessly and collapsing there and suddenly being cognizant of what it exactly means to feel bliss, however fleeting it may be; and it's more an understanding of what you're willing to give or not give away. Contact—physical contact and affection, is an urge no one can escape or deny for that matter, and that need for falling (into someone's arms) is a simple human reminder that you are indeed mortal. So in a twist, there is a desire for me to suppress that need, that urge, because the world has suddenly been reinvented and when it appears you having nothing to lose, except the ability to feel perhaps, you are to a degree—immortal.

#### IV.

Fear of falling extended: When my 9 year old boy was a toddler, like every parent, I was fearful he was going to fall off of anything, even his own two feet because gravity is a thing you can't defy and it will get you out of nowhere: right off the tricycle, right off the high chair, even right out of bed. However, that fear passes as the motor skills become more and more developed and mature. Though in the cycle of life, those skills will inevitably wane slowly but surely. This past summer while visiting family in Charlotte, NC, I saw my father fall. He's 80. Following him from his kitchen into the carport, the steps tricked him—steps he's descended

thousands upon thousands of times since moving into his current home in the mid-80s, the steps tricked him and he stumbled forward as if he had caught an uppercut and was going down to meet the canvas. Except it wasn't canvas, it was hard concrete. Ever the athlete, he threw it out his left arm slapping his left hand against his car quickly enough to break the force of the fall by getting his right hand under him and bracing his right knee for the impact. Yes, if the car hadn't been there then who knows? A cracked head maybe? But the car was there. This was new to me, suddenly a new fear. This was the man who ran the world's first indoor mile under 4 minutes; the first and only American to simultaneously hold records at 1,500m, mile, 3,000m, 2-mile, and 5,000m, a member of the US 1960 Olympic team; and man whose legend ranks up there with Roger Bannister's. He came up gingerly, mostly undaunted and quick to hush the commotion that now surrounded him in the carport. This was the near the end of July, as of this writing nearly a month ago, and I'm close to two hundred miles away with a newly defined fear of falling and stronger to urge to take a flight.

**James Tully Beatty Jr.** *Resident of Wilmington, North Carolina. Writer; Artist; English Instructor; father to a 9 year old boy.*

## Mom, I want a Pegasus

There is Christopher Reeve and many others who end up in the emergency room in pursuit of what I feel lucky to obtain frequently. "One, Two, Three, Four," I count the strides in my head to get my horse to exactly the correct distance from the jump. "Sit up, shoulders back, support him with my leg, wait for him." We are up, flying, as I feel his front then hind feet clear the top bar. "One, Two, Three..." I count to each jump. Twelve more times I get this rush and at the end, the fastest ride with the least rails down wins. But, even if I don't win, at least I got to fly.



Image courtesy of Alycia Burton. [www.freeridingnz.com](http://www.freeridingnz.com)

**Kari De Leeuw** is a Holistic Veterinarian who practices in San Francisco. She has ridden horses since she was a toddler and now spends her time leading her two young boys around high above the ground.

## The Desire To Fall

*Anyone whose goal is 'something higher' must expect someday to suffer vertigo. What is vertigo? Fear of falling? No, Vertigo is something other than fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves.*

—Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

The older I get, the worse my feelings of vertigo become. When I approach a ledge, like a viewpoint over a cliff or a high balcony, I inch toward it slowly, and I clutch firmly to the railing as hard as I can. I'm drawn to the edge, but I can't stay there for long. I experience a sinking squeezing feeling in my stomach and groin, and my legs feel numb. It's palpable and very uncomfortable, and I feel a slight nausea. I always look over the edge, but very, very carefully, and never for long. I retreat quite quickly, mostly because of the sickly feeling. Milan Kundera called vertigo not so much the fear of falling but the fear of jumping. I can relate to that. Rationally I know that I'm not going to fall. I'm too careful and there's always a railing. It's knowing that I could so easily leap over the railing that frightens me. That's what scares me. The power to sabotage my life feels tangible and real. As a recovering drug addict, I have experience in ruining everything. The fear has increased as I've gotten older. I think that because my life has improved so much I now have much more to lose.

I am in Hollywood partying with some friends at a club, which is funny because I don't really go out and party anymore. We are out in the street in between clubs and we encounter some dangerous men—gangbangers I think. The feeling of fear and danger gets so intense that suddenly I lift off the ground, above it all. I'm hoping that such a miracle in itself impresses people enough that they no longer want to hurt us. Through intense effort and concentration I'm able to somewhat control my flying, at least for brief moments. I turn myself toward our attackers but suddenly I'm descending toward them, unwillingly. They don't care that I can fly, they still want to hurt us, and I'm floating toward them. I try hard to rise back up, out of their reach, but it's not working. It's at this point that I wake up, from the imminent feeling of danger. This is a recurring dream. The details might change but being able to fly, in a floating manner with very limited control, is always the same.

**John Shelton** *lives in Sydney, Australia where he is happily married, enjoys riding his bicycle, keeps up to date on current affairs, and drinks far too much coffee.*

## Notes for Falling

Did you know that if you anticipate a fall and you tense up in expectation it will hurt much more? So practice falling as if you hadn't planned it, but once you realized the ground was no longer under your feet, don't resist. Go with it.

Fall big. Fall often. Bounce back up to fall again.

Tuck your chin and don't let your head hit the ground. Fall halfway on your back and halfway on your side. Let your body hit first then diffuse the blow by slapping your arm on the ground at about a forty-five degrees angle from your body. Whatever you do, don't put your arm out first to catch your body because you might break something in your arm, like your wrist, or jam your shoulder. Make it a whole body experience. Use your breath to ease the blow. Breath out. Kiai (Japanese for a short shout or yell, like a battle cry). The more you practice falling, the more enjoyable it is and the better you are prepared for unexpected throws, trips, and tumbles. Find a falling partner, practice together or practice alone. You may want to start on a soft surface first.

Fall big. Fall often. Bounce back up to fall again.



**Melissa Wyman** is an interdisciplinary artist based out of Palo Alto, California who investigates interpersonal exchanges and alternative means of negotiation. Her experience with falling is informed by twenty years of marital arts including Aikido, Japanese Jiu-Jitsu and, most extensively, Brazilian-Jitsu.

## **Flying Towards the Ground**

### **I. THE STATE OF THE FIELD**

Begin with a thorough examination of the material environment in which flight is intended.

There are two areas of the field proper that require attention: the runway and the landing. Usually, these are contiguous and uniform in their physical characteristics, such as a grassy field or a length of sandy beach. Both runway and landing should be as flat as possible. A runway with holes or other surface irregularities will make maximum velocity difficult—and speed is essential, to be discussed further.

In addition to being flat, the material density of the landing should be carefully considered. Softer surfaces will create a landing that produces less bodily impact, i.e., less pain than will more dense surfaces.

### **II. THE APPROACH**

While counterintuitive, maximum velocity is essential to minimize bodily impact with the ground. When running into a wall, the force of impact is completely absorbed by the wall: the faster you run, the more it will hurt. In the case of flight, however, the opposite is true: the greater the speed, the more available ground surface area for impact dissipation. In other words: run as fast as you can. To achieve maximum velocity, the runway needs to

be of sufficient length. This is simply the amount of approach required to reach full speed.

In running, flight is the period of forward movement when the body is not in contact with the ground. The human flight described here is an extension of the flight phase of running, although with the intended effect of flying with one's body parallel to the ground, as a bird does. The goal is to build up relatively short flights of increasingly longer distances, in rapid succession, and the transference of this momentum into one final flight of the greatest possible length.

### III. THE TRANSITION

Once maximum velocity is attained, you should be a few paces away from the end of the runway. At this point, which is less than half a second from launch, your body becomes aware of which foot will make the final foot strike, and correspondingly, which leg (the opposite) will drive the body on its upward trajectory. A coordinated gesture throughout the entire body is required. At the exact moment in which final foot strike and opposite leg drive occur, the torso falls forward (by relaxing the hip flexors which normally keep the torso upright, allowing gravity to pull the torso down) and thrusting the arms forward along the same trajectory. When the final foot strike has completed and the body has lost ground contact, flight has begun.

#### IV. FLIGHT

While the duration of flight is very short, if you focus properly, your sense of temporality while airborne may stretch and expand into a space in which markers of time lose their meaning. Here, your body is floating, earth-bound rules suspended. Sit back and enjoy your flight. Anchors aweigh.

At the same time, as the human body is not designed for sustained flight, you may quickly become aware that you are falling fast. There is no proper threshold of transition between flying and falling, but more a continuous arc of ascension and descent, a parabolic drawing made in concert between your desire for levity and the persistence of the earth to pull you back to the ground from which you came. Flying and falling are in fact, the self-same act. Momentarily escaping gravity's pull, floating weightlessly though the air, a human bird, the end snaps into sharp focus.

#### V. ON FALLING

Good luck.

And Godspeed.

**Michael Namkung** *is a multi-disciplinary artist residing in Miami, Florida, an Assistant Professor of Drawing at Florida International University, and the instigator of this collection of texts.*



Installation view of *Flying Towards the Ground*, at Locust Projects in Miami, Florida.

## From Fear to Resilience

Falling:  
Loss of control,  
Release to gravity,  
So simple yet so complicated.  
How to get up.  
Healing self,  
Healing pride,  
How not to fall again.  
How to live  
Moving forward.



**Nicole Sorhondo** is a physical therapist in San Francisco with 36 years experience. The past 25 years have been affiliated with the Institute on Aging with her primary interest and focus in working with older adults residing in the community and in supervised settings. The experience of working with older adults with varied life experiences has been instrumental in her continued growth as a physical therapist.

## Gravity

An Alaskan summer sunset is a blend of swirling colors that lasts for three hours, a testament to a shadow's ability to bend light. I had always perceived a sunset as a threshold between two things, a moment signifying transition, but on Kodiak Island the sunsets feel more like a time of day, like morning and afternoon. The sunsets I was used to seeing were always "over there", but here on a cliff overlooking Pasagshak Bay, we were completely enveloped. I sat with friends where we would occasionally pause from our evening picnic, glancing at the surrounding landscape.

Even though I had experienced similar views during my summer on the island, I still craved to be closer to the natural world around. As my friends were deep in their conversations, and the dogs attentively waited for scraps, I separated from the group, just for a moment, to get a better view of the shoreline and the boulders below us. I scrambled around a tree growing precariously at the edge of the cliff and grabbed a rock outcropping next to the tree thinking I could use it as a pivot handle to access the view on the other side. Haphazardly I tested the rock, shaking it with my hands, and satisfied it was sturdy, hung my entire weight to swing across. The rock broke off in my hands and I started to drop to the rocky shore below, like one of the crumbled pieces of stone.

This Alaskan sunset had shifted my reality and the way I perceived time, but now I was being sent to an entirely timeless place. My mind still seemed to react at a normal rate, but everything in the physical world slowed. I now realized how I would die. Without the flashes of my

family and friends, like I had heard about in movies and books, I gave in to death.

I free fell, slightly sideways, for about twenty feet. My body was limp as I dropped until I came in contact with a section of cliff that was not completely sheer. Still sliding and falling, I fought to right myself on the side of the cliff, aiming my feet downward and digging my hands into the sharp, jagged shale as if it were sand. Grasping the rocky surface I sensed some hope. Survival pumped through me as I slowed myself down just enough to pick a line of travel down the cliff face. Having skidded down this section I now saw the edge of another drop-off. Any thought or memory could have entered my mind, but it was a peregrine I used to watch near my house in Santa Cruz. This falcon had mastered the wind and floated from limb to limb on the eucalyptus tree above the boardwalk. I had studied it and always wondered what it was teaching me. Now, at this critical juncture, it was the only thing in my mind. At the next edge I began to feel light and purposefully launched myself down the cliff, now out of contact with the side, embracing life. I felt like the falcon rather than the shale that fell with me.

Right before I hit the ground, my mind went blank. My body needed to override my brain, to take control of a situation my cerebral cortex couldn't handle. When I became aware again I found myself standing in a ten-foot wide patch of pebble strewn sand within a field of large boulders. I examined my body, expecting to find broken bones, though not yet feeling the pain of the impact. My hands dripped with blood, clothes torn and body jarred, but I had no apparent major injuries.

I clambered across the boulders to the shore. The water was calm with tiny lapping waves, more like a mystic lake than a sea. Everything seemed incredibly clear, heightened by the contrasting light and glassy blue of the cold water. I looked up at the sky to thank a god I had not known for twenty years. I dipped my hands into the water giving my blood to the sea, to the natural world that had allowed me another chance at life. From every fingertip stretched streams of blood into the clear water. There was just the ache of the cold making its way into my body as it cleansed my wounds. As I watched my blood mix with the sea, I finally recognized the continuum that exists between everything.

**Damon Adlao** is a Landscape Architect living in Santa Cruz, California. He enjoys spending time with his family exploring the ribbon between the natural and built environments.

