

## Falling

Chris Johnston

I would jump out my bedroom window and fall until I hit. It was only as high as the highest window in a two-floor townhouse. I don't need to say when or where this happened, but the outside world was mostly still and often freezing. All the music and the beautiful mess and the white and the black noise were in my room and in my head.

At night, the window always had the street's light coming through it, and my face would sometimes be pressed against that window like a hooded burglar with the walls closing in and despite the music all the time it became a kind of silence so that even in there sometimes or beside a beautiful sea in the best of my dreams there was no sound, no feeling, a void.

The fall was to be free, and it was pure and very short and thrilling. The moment of letting go was purest and it had no time. I think every fall of any scale is the same, whether a jump or unintentional. All have a downward movement. We cannot go up. There are no wings on us, and myth tells they might melt and drip. All falls have a nothingness, a spiralling rush and a vast unknowing. There is an arc of descent; to the Islamic Sufi mystics, the first fall of humankind is part of the cosmic wayfaring that bought us to existence.

Sometimes I bucked the silence and strapped on the old orange 1980s' Sony Walkman headphones — a thin tin strip and two orange ear-pads — and then pressed 'play' on the clunky old thing at the moment of letting go. It was a kind of auto-erotic game perhaps, the 'play' and 'pause' buttons of my musical learning heightened by danger and by the weird blast of the fall, with something like David Bowie's 'Starman' up loud.

*'... look out your window, I can see his light...'*

Here was a song about falling to earth, or at least the forecast of a being about to fall to earth, but I didn't understand that. I was 15 and unhappy, in a cold and still place. Everything was sensory; nothing was examined, not yet. 'Starman' is a kind of messianic announcement. We know this now. I know this now. It tells of an interruption to the normal radio frequency, and it is told through the *Ziggy Stardust* make-believe. David seemed like a woman to me — the robot of a woman — but I knew enough to know he was really a man. I would hang onto him as I fell, his *waiting in the sky*, his *window* and his *light* and also his *hazy cosmic jive*.

Landing was, well, grounding. You are falling, and then you are where you would always get to, with something firm below you again and weight on the bottom of your feet, with no immediate chance of doing it again and no prospects but to move forward. The cold at night always made for mist from the mouth and nose. Sometimes the grass was already frozen. I always had on a small blue backpack. It belonged to my father.

The fall was beautiful, the landing harsh. Yet my father always talked kindly of landings; they were important to him as a pilot and an airman, and also a numbers man, who kept a calculator at hand well after he had done all his sums.

He built bridges and tunnels and traipsed through wastelands looking for minerals, and he flew aircraft in the dark while other men in other aircraft shot at him. Maps were always one of his favourite things. Lines and terrain by numbers, maps of silts and soils and rock terraces, and also maps of the sky. He was deeply interested in both the earth and the sky, and he had detailed maps for both. The sky he loved more. He was a small man when he was alive, and he said what he loved about the sky was the impossibility; the sky was a calculation that could never really be solved.

He had some cassettes. I don't think he had anything to play them on when he was well. Later, when he was sick, he had an old three-in-one stereo system in his room. By then his room was my old room, the one with the high window to the beyond. I secreted myself there for so many years, losing myself in music that seemed to mean little to him and others, yet I could save myself with it and hurt myself with it, and then heal myself with it once again.

Then he went in his dying days from that room in the old folks' place, and he had pictures of fighter planes from various angles on the walls. They are in my sons' bedrooms now. They flew across his walls and theirs, diving and soaring and twisting their noses to the sun. He told me one of his favourite tricks was to fly fast, and then wobble the wings in a kind of salute, like a wave — throwing caution to the wind and disturbing the air.

He sat in a chair in his room in the old folks' place, breathing alright in the mornings, the oxygen machine whirring and the fighter planes whirring from his walls, in and out of his wartime memory and his old time life. They tried to kill him over the sea 60 years before. During these times he was man flying away from death and entirely in the remorseless hands of the fall. A bullet once pierced the edge of his engine, but the engine didn't explode.

The picture of him in uniform from back in the day has his soft face with a tight, tight smile and misty, quiet eyes. He has a bold insignia on a tilted cap. There were times, he said, when a mob of them would fly out as an advance party during the fight for the Pacific. Some blokes would be shot and he wouldn't be, and he would see the others floating down through the fire and noise and black smoke into the sea. They might come back or be rescued, but they might not — and that fall was immense, floating, maybe burning, towards dangerous water.

Survival from these falls, or any falls like them, would be miraculous. Such miracles seemed to happen more back then: the same year my father was darting through the Pacific skies for New Zealand, an Australian pilot called Joe Herman was blown out of his bomber without a parachute, at night. He was freefalling through debris and he grabbed something out of instinct, and what he grabbed was another airman who was about to pull his ripcord. Both survived.

When the towers fell in New York on September 11 it was war again but of a different kind, and of course many people jumped and many of those clung to debris. The defining image of our times is the 'Falling Man', falling from the north tower on that day, his body prone and descending headfirst, his arms by his side in a gesture of total resignation. It was the graceful death of all our dreams, no fire or terror to be seen, just what was left of a cold, glass money-tower — a mirror from sky to earth.

I know an Australian man, Paul, whose twin brother died that day. His office was on the 91st floor of the south tower. Peter was his name. Paul never expected to see Peter again. He thought his brother's body would have been, in his own words, 'pulverised' by the enormous fall. He assumed he would have become part of the dust storm and his soul would remain there forever. Ninety-one floors. Blown out or jumped, or whatever happened in the lunacy of that moment we can never see.

Paul went from Melbourne to New York six weeks later to visit Ground Zero and see his dead brother's family. The day after he arrived Peter's body was found.

It was partially intact, exhumed by a fireman from rubble 100 metres away. He was identified by an unusual ring their father had given him. Paul tracked down the fireman and went to meet him, and he experienced heavy emotions. He became a lone twin that year; his pair was lost and then found. He could have been another falling man. He could have lost all sense of the real. Now they knew he wasn't entirely destroyed.

They buried Peter, because they were suddenly able to, in a little cemetery in upstate New York, in the shadow of a Mount Peter.

Ninety-one floors.

Paul told me the family took heart at the funeral and in the years beyond from the Bible's Psalm 91: 'He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler,' it says, 'and from the deadly pestilence.'

I have another story, too, from the fall of the towers. A psychoanalyst in New York, Alexander

Stein, lived opposite the World Trade Centre and watched everything unfold. He watched The Fall. He and his wife had to leave their apartment for three months, during which they drifted, uncertain and unhinged.

Stein wrote a piece called 'Music, Mourning and Consolation' for an American psychoanalysis journal in which he described how during these months his world went silent, as if he lived in an 'airless vacuum'. Music, which he loved, was muted; other sounds seemed louder — jets, sirens, his wife's breathing. But he literally could not hear music. Some time later it returned. He first began to hear internally a beloved Bach piece. Then finally his sense of external music came back too, and life was stable again.

When I fell from my small window into the cold, or when back then I fell through the air after jumping from a window — one floor, not 91 — it was a thrill to remove the heritage orange headphones once I hit the ground, and feel the auditory sensations of the real world again. The music captured me and told me to fall, and also drugged the descent. I was cupped and cocooned in sound: I now know my falls were, without doubt, an erotic, sensory game because I wanted to fall and I wanted to make the fall better. This was around the time when other sensory plug-ins were starting to emerge in my life, like skin, and tongue, and smoke, and the pettiest of crimes.

How long must it have taken to fall?

The milli-second is with me still. I think perhaps I also wanted to be hurt — not to die but to be hurt. I know those who self-harm mainly do so because in hurting themselves they don't have to hurt others. I also know that those who fell or jumped from the towers in New York fell for perhaps only 10 seconds. I remember landing and rolling and feeling jags in my back and pains in my elbow and shoulder, and I'd get wet because of the mist and the frozen dew. I also remember the difference between the fall and what came next, which was to run. The run felt real. The fall never did, which was why it was more beautiful.

I would release myself from the vacuum of the headphones to hear traffic and car horns and the hum of a television with only one channel, and I would also hear taps turning on and off. Then I would run and run and run with cassettes of music in that blue backpack of my father's, to switch on and off at will, as I ran to get to a place in the world where I could rise and fall some more.