

UNPREPARED PROSE

The extract that follows comes from a novel. Examine how the writer conveys the experience of falling and the ways in which this experience is expanded and reflected upon. How effective do you find this description?

As I am writing this story it will be evident that I survived, and I cannot hope to convey what the experience was like, how long it was, how terrible, how hopeless: a primal experience of a total loss of hope. Falling, what the child fears, what the man dreads, is itself the image of death, of the defencelessness of the body, of its frailty and mortality, its absolute subjection to alien causes. Even in a harmless fall in the road there is a little moment of horror when the faller realizes that he cannot help himself; he has been taken over by a relentless mechanism and must continue with it to the end and be subject to the consequences. 'There is nothing more I can do.' How long, how infinitely expansible, a second is when it contains this thought, which is an effigy of death. A complete fall into the void, something which I had often imagined! on aeroplanes, of course the most terrible thing of all. Hands, feet, muscles, all the familiar protective mechanisms of the body are suddenly useless. The enmity of matter is unleashed against the frail breakable crushable animal form always perhaps an alien in this hard mineral gravitational scene.

It was as if each part of the body experienced its separate despair. My back and waist felt the dreadful imprint of the hands which with great sudden violence and indubitable intent propelled me over the edge. My hands reached out in vain for something to clasp. My feet, still touching the rock with which they were parting company, jerked in a weak useless spasm, a last ghostly attempt to retain balance. Then they were jerking in empty space and I was falling head downward, as if my head and shoulders were made of lead. At the same time I felt, or thought as a kind of final thought, the fragility of my head and even knew that my hands were now trying to protect it. My trunk twisted sickeningly, trying in vain to make sense of its position. I actually saw, in the diffused midsummer darkness-light, the creamy curling waves just below me, and the particular spiral of their movement in the confined space. Then I was in the water whose intense cold surprised me with a separate shock, and I made the instinctive swimmer's movement of trying to right myself; but my body was aware that no swimming could take place in that vortex. I felt as if my neck was breaking as I looked up to see a dome of dark faintly translucent green, the wave above me. I was choking and swallowing water, absorbed in the one task of getting another breath. At the same time I was able to think: this is the end. I fought, my whole body fought, now flailing senselessly in a maelstrom of powers which seemed about to dismember me. Then my head struck violently against the smooth rock and I lost consciousness.

from *The Sea, The Sea* Iris Murdoch (b. 1919)