

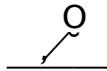
Christopher James

Wisdom

David Mackey walks the downs shoeless. He lives on the downs, so it's not terribly weird for him to go barefoot here. The wind blows. David opens his fleece jacket to make wings and leans into the weather and pretends to fly. He closes his eyes. The risk is he will lean forward too far and fall. He leans. He leans. He flies.

The downs are sparse, and would be boring if it weren't for the feel of the grass against one's feet and the feel of the wind, and the colours, a thousand shades of green and red and yellow and brown, and one can see for miles and there's nobody, and it's wonderful to be so utterly on one's own. There might be bodies buried under the downs, it's so deserted a place, except people they would have to bury the bodies at night, because during the day you can see everything.

David opens his eyes. He's not flying, of course, he was never flying, but he *is* forty-five degrees away from vertical. He looks a little like this:



(It is worth mentioning that the O representing David's head makes it appear much larger than the rest of his body, and this is not the case in reality. Although David does have quite a large head, it's not as large as all that. In reality, too, there's no empty space between David's head and the rest of his body; the two are joined at the neck, as is the case with most people. David's also not as stick-thin as this image makes out; he has a bit of a tummy, and a big bottom. His arms are longer than the image suggests; he has normal length arms. His hands *are* raised though, the image got that right, like he's saying Stop Moving! This is mostly to catch himself if he falls.)

There's little on the downs not rooted deep into the ground, but what little there is gets carried by the wind. Branches, petals, individual blades of grass, pebbles, dirt-clumps, litter. It rushes by David, peppers his face, punctuates the white sky. Despite all evidence to the contrary, it's easy to believe you're king of the world at a moment like this. Think Michael Jackson: Earth Song. David likes Michael Jackson, even if the other children at school say he was a paedophile. He made some of David's favourite songs. David likes to come here, on the downs, without shoes, all alone, on windy days, to sing Michael Jackson songs as loud as he can.

There are smells here, on the downs, but they fly past as quickly as the discarded apple cores and crisp wrappers. The dominant smell is of the salt from the sea, at least a mile away. There is also the smell of earth, of wet grass, and of something that reminds David of the perfume his mother gave his sister when she began her period. The smells are not an overwhelming part of this experience, but they are there.

What would happen if he lifted his bare feet from the ground? Would he stay in the air? His heels rise from the earth, the back tires of the feet, the chips of the heels, the outer arches, the inner arches, the front tires of the feet, the little toe mound, the big toe mound, the second, third and fourth toe mounds, the necks of the toes, until he is on only the very tips of the toes. In reflexology, though David doesn't know this, the toe-tips are connected to the frontal sinuses. David is quietly impressed to get this far. "I'm bad!" he shouts. "I'm bad. Gotta know it! I'm bad!" If he were to try and smell, right now, maybe things would smell different.

He pushes hard against the tips of the toes on his right foot, and slides the toes of the left foot an inch backward. He relaxes the right foot and transfers the pressure against the earth to the left foot. He slides the right foot an inch backward too, in line with its partner. Some kind of moonwalk. Man might walk like this forever.

He will lift the right foot and the left foot together, into the sky. But first he will count down from ten. That will give him enough time to prepare. It's frightening, commencing to fly, it deserves

and needs a countdown. Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Zero.

Minus one.

David lifts his feet from the ground and into the air and he might be flying, but this is a trick, an illusion, David's falling, and it's over in an instant, and now he's nosefirst in the ground. David says ooof.

—O— ooof!

Ooof is not just the sound of all the air leaving David's body very quickly due to the collision between body and ground, but also the sound David imagines the air making. David can't help but say ooof when he lands on the ground, just as he can't help but make a boosh boosh sound when he shadow-boxes.

It's okay. He will lie here a while, and reflect on what he has learnt. He has done this before, and each time he learns a little more, and one day he will get it right.

Christopher James lives, works and writes in Jakarta, Indonesia. He has a strong thirst for alcohol, a firm belief that it's wrong to drink alone and an intense ambivalence towards social gatherings, and is forever trying unsuccessfully to reconcile the three.