

## free fall

It should be no surprise when a parachute doesn't open. After all, there are many possible causes and it does happen from time to time. So when the usual sharp tug on the harness at his back did not happen it was not exactly unexpected, though it was certainly not good news. What did surprise him was that he accepted immediately that the parachute had failed, that he was going to continue accelerating downward at some ten metres per second more every second until gravity and air resistance came to an understanding, and that the ground was both far below and not far enough. He even had a flash image of a high school textbook with  $9.8 \text{ m/sec}^2$  shining off the page.

The first reaction was terror. Just moments of numbed terror, though, followed by desperation, a search for ways, however improbable, of thwarting fate. He extended his arms and waved them. Flapped them, in fact. The sensation was interesting, but it didn't make any difference to his apparent rate of descent. He spread his legs and arms out as far as he could; then he reached back and pulled his unopened parachute in front of him, spreading the wildly flapping mass of silk around his arms and chest, as a constantly protesting and mutating flying carpet.

He looked around, away from the approaching ground to the horizon spreading in a circle around him. The scene was as it had always been when he floated down gently and safely in the past. But it had never seemed so gripping, so vivid, in fact so beautiful. For a while he just stared at it, amazed at the immense and changing panorama. He

shifted his angle on the parachute carpet to orient himself towards one or another quadrant of the circle. There was something very satisfying about this; it restored an element of control. He looked away from the horizon to particular features on the ground. They no longer pointed terrifyingly towards him; some of them were fascinating in a way they had never been before. He wanted to see them, as clearly and vividly as possible. He wanted to get closer to them. Now he was not falling but diving, swooping, directing himself freely towards the beautiful and fascinating objects below.