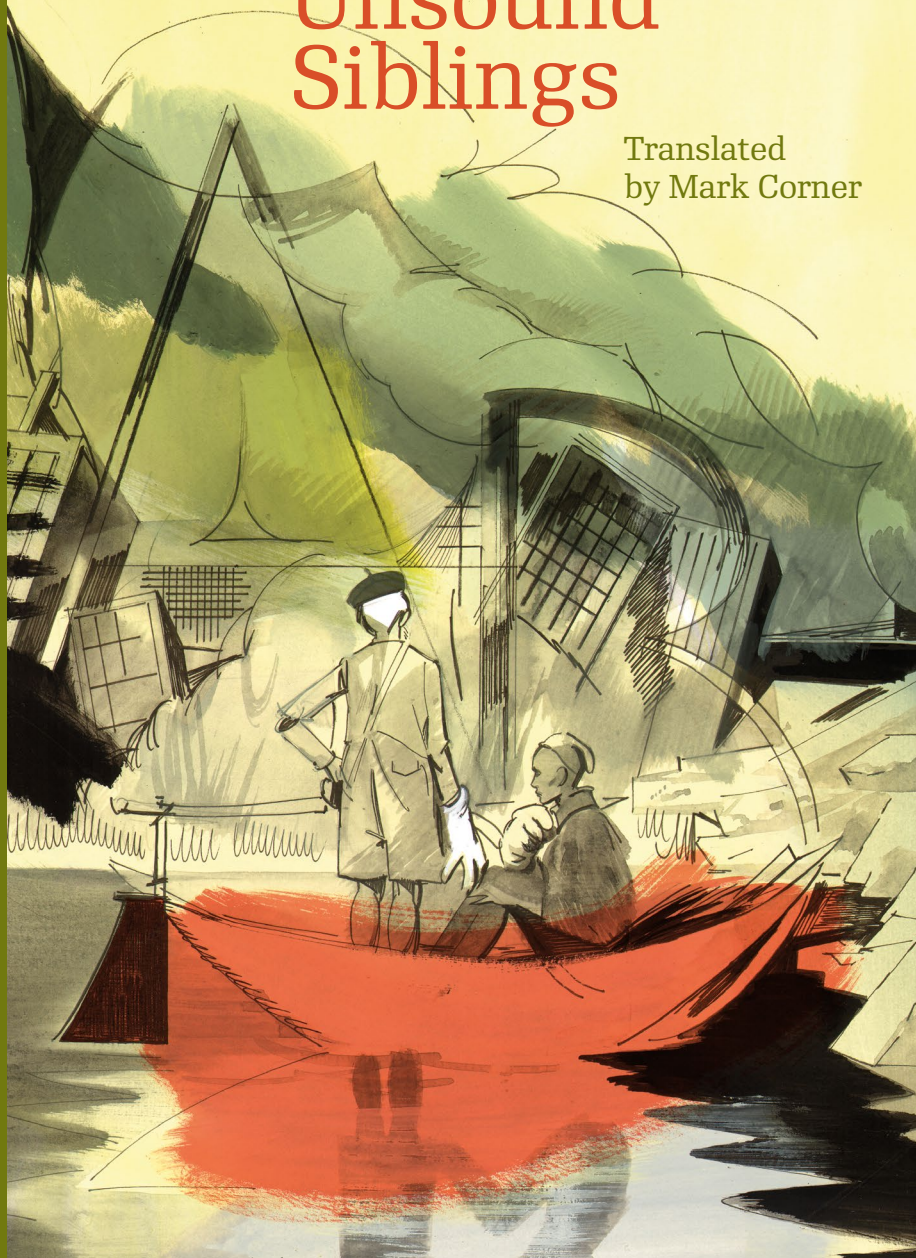


Egon Bondy Unsound Siblings

Translated
by Mark Corner



Unsound Siblings

Egon Bondy

Translated from the Czech by Mark Corner

Afterword by David Vaughan

KAROLINUM PRESS is a publishing department
of Charles University

Ovocný trh 5/560, Prague 1, Czech Republic

www.karolinum.cz

Graphic design based on the original concept by Zdeněk Ziegler

Cover and Typesetting by Karolinum Press

First English edition

Cataloging-in Publication Data is available

from the National Library of the Czech Republic

Text © Zbyněk Fišer – heirs, 2026

Translation and note © Mark Corner, 2026

Afterword © David Vaughan, 2026

Illustration © Jiří Grus, 2026

ISBN 978-80-246-5627-4

ISBN 978-80-246-5645-8 (pdf)

ISBN 978-80-246-5646-5 (epub)



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Karolinum Press

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Czech poet, prose writer, philosopher, and icon of the Czech underground, Zbyněk Fišer—known as Egon Bondy—was born in Prague on January 20, 1930. The son of a Czechoslovak army colonel, Bondy dropped out of high school and embraced a bohemian existence. That same year he joined the communist party, but left after February 1948. He adopted his Jewish pseudonym in protest against the fabricated anti-Semitic trials that took place in Czechoslovakia along with the Soviet bloc overall.

The following years Bondy scraped by without steady employment, resorting to begging and petty theft, even serving a term in prison. It was Bondy's deep interest in philosophy that prompted him to return to school, eventually earning his university degree in 1961. Bondy went on to write a multivolume history of philosophy that was singular in its treatment of Eastern philosophical traditions. From the late 50s until 1967 Bondy worked as a night watchman at the National Museum and in the bibliographic department of the State Library. In 1967, he went on disability retirement. Bondy's engagement with the Czech underground began in the 1970s, when he began collaborating with the Plastic People of the Universe, led by Ivan Martin Jirous, with the band setting some Bondy texts to music.

After the breakup of Czechoslovakia in 1993, Egon Bondy moved to Bratislava, where he lived the rest of his life. He died there in 2007.

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For Sis

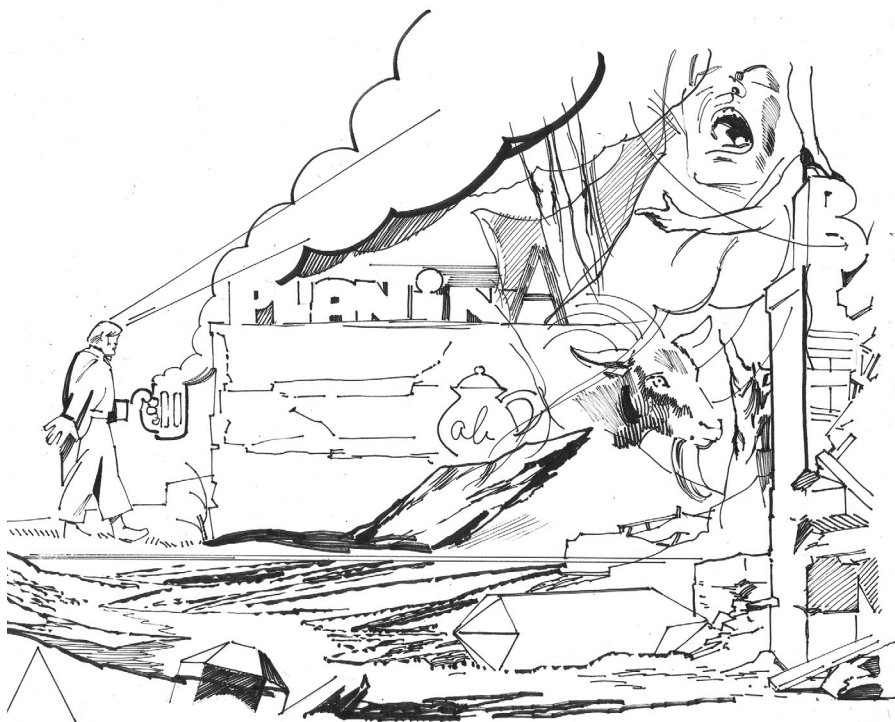


When he reached the top of the hill, a plain spread out before him. Three trees were standing in a field. The road was full of puddles and what was left of melting snow. Dirt stuck in whole clumps to his boots. When he reached the trees, he tripped over a corpse. It was already in an advanced state of decomposition. It was impossible to tell if it was a man or a woman. He dug into it with his foot and mud oozed out. It was the corpse of the world. The weather was ugly, and the sky was dull. After a few miles he reached the pub. He was very hung over. For the last few days, he had been drinking heavily without stopping.

The innkeeper poured him a beer. She was more advanced in size than in years. Her black and shiny hair was permed but tousled. As he settled into a corner, she went into the kitchen behind a glass door. The next moment she could be heard mating with someone. The cupboard shook and dishes and glasses rattled. Words from the man met with her groans. There was a sound of two pairs of feet stamping and scraping on the floor. Outside the window the small village square was empty. Little coloured or crocheted curtains were drawn across all the darkened windows of the tiny houses. Even at noon the rooms must have stayed in the dark. Only a few chimneys showed signs of smoke.

While he walked on, putting distance between himself and the centre of the plain, he thought about the corpse. It had probably been lying there through the winter. It was hard to suppose that no one in the village knew about it. It was right next to the village, lying close to the road. They seemed to have taken its shoes, its hat, and certainly, its watch. At the end of the plain, where the hill began to decline, he stopped. Through the thin line of trees he could see all the way down in the grey but clear air. It seemed to him that the water level was on the way up again. It hadn't moved for several months, with only the tide claiming a few

extra metres of land for a while. Since yesterday, however, it seemed to have risen again during the night. All they could do was wait to see if it would stop again. This was how the whole land had already ended up flooded, though in a strange manner, for the hill on which he was standing was by no means the highest one. But water had flooded even the high mountains, covering them like a cloak that trembled and billowed, but stuck to them with a surprising stability before spilling over again to absorb more of the lowlands. Perhaps this was the last of the land. On the other side there was a city below the hill. That was where he lived. On the outskirts, the water had already flooded some houses. But in any case, they had already been standing empty. He had once stopped in a nearby tavern nestling in a small hollow. It couldn't be ruled out that it was now under water. He decided to go back by another route, having



time on his hands before night came. There were two more villages on this side of the hill below the forest and there would be beer in each of them.

This night was like any other in the way the heavens opened up. He lingered in the last village and the nausea ebbed away a little. It was dark by the time he was walking home across the side of the hill above the water. The path was comfortable and familiar, allowing him to look ahead without thinking and up at the sky, where a film was unfolding whose changes of scene were so inconsequential that there was no point in watching it. A blazing fire spread itself out across a black sky from which the moon and the stars had long since disappeared. From time to time, strange objects appeared against the glow of the fire, human limbs, bodies and heads of some kind flying around, opening their mouths and shouting something, but from far away their voices could not be heard. Sometimes a face would appear out of the flames, one so large that only its chin and mouth and the tip of its nose could be seen, so that it was impossible to say who it might belong to. Then there was the big green bum up there which stayed for months at a time. In the early days, the teenagers found it a source of amusement and waited for it outside until nightfall. But after a while it ceased to amuse them and instead they stayed in front of the TV or went to the pictures. When something new happened to turn up, like the once ever-so-amusing head of a goat, it was the night owls who brought the news from their walks, and the drunks were given something to gawp at for a few days. But before long the novelty always wore off.

Some people said – though they had no reason for saying so and were taken no more seriously than those who tell fortunes or read palms – that something was up there keeping an eye on the spectators below and adjusting the programme according to their reaction. Various tipplers



said that after the pub had shut they saw a large glass of beer all aglow, and another time rum pouring from a bottomless bottle. In any case no one could confirm this or suggest a way of putting it to the test. On the night in question nothing new was on display. He carried on looking at what he had seen for months on his nocturnal ramblings.

The pub in his part of town was still busy. He found out that the water level had only risen a little. A fellow playing cards whom he knew well by sight but not by name, explained that this time it wouldn't stop rising and everything would be over in a few weeks' time. He announced this at least twice a year, every time the water rose an inch. He'd been in and out of the funny farm and his friends knew how to make him the butt of a joke because he fell for everything. But in other ways he was a good man who simply suffered the misfortune of having seven children already, the births virtually an annual event. Now it was slowly beginning to pay off, as his child allowance had risen higher than his wages. You could tell he was content enough, even an object of envy now and again, and in fact they were a little envious of him now. At least they could touch him for funds when they lost at cards. Meanwhile the radio churned out the latest hits.

* * *

He drank two beers without sitting and went home. He lived in a small house which was once a luxury garage and had now been partitioned to form two living rooms. The toilet was outside the front door, making it the first port of call for anyone who wasn't familiar with the house. It was a small contribution to the last word in architectural design.

Inside the room his sister was lying on a couch from which bits of seagrass (or was it sea onion?) padding were sticking out, but whose springs were still firm. His sister - or was it half-sister? Or maybe stepsister? Or half-cousin?

The answer was not clear to either of them, for long ago the designation of siblings who had one father but a different mother had fallen out of use. She was listening to records, reading detective stories and darning socks. Anyone with a stomach-ache should lie down on it, and that's what this sister was doing. Her stomach was aching because they'd had too much to drink the day before.

"Back already? What's it like out there?" she asked, sitting up.

Because of the slippery nature of language, they both addressed each other either by their first names or as "Cuz" and "Sis".

"The weather's foul," he said, "it's going to rain, it might even snow again. But it's not too cold."

He undressed and sat down. Sis poured him tea made of orange leaves, which was the only sort of tea he drank. It was perhaps difficult to get hold of, but that was something they didn't have to think about, having a store of sealed boxes behind the garage. This was a small inheritance from their father, who had brought them from his travels to what then used to be overseas.

The two had always loved each other. Even as teens their heads had never been turned by anyone else. Now they were at the best, if not the wisest, age of thirty. Both mothers had given birth to them in the same year, the same month and on the same day.

Outside it began to sleet. There was no wind, and through a wall of glass they watched a silent and slow pilgrimage of drops and flakes before they drifted into sleep. How happy they were!

The fire crackled in the cast-iron stove.

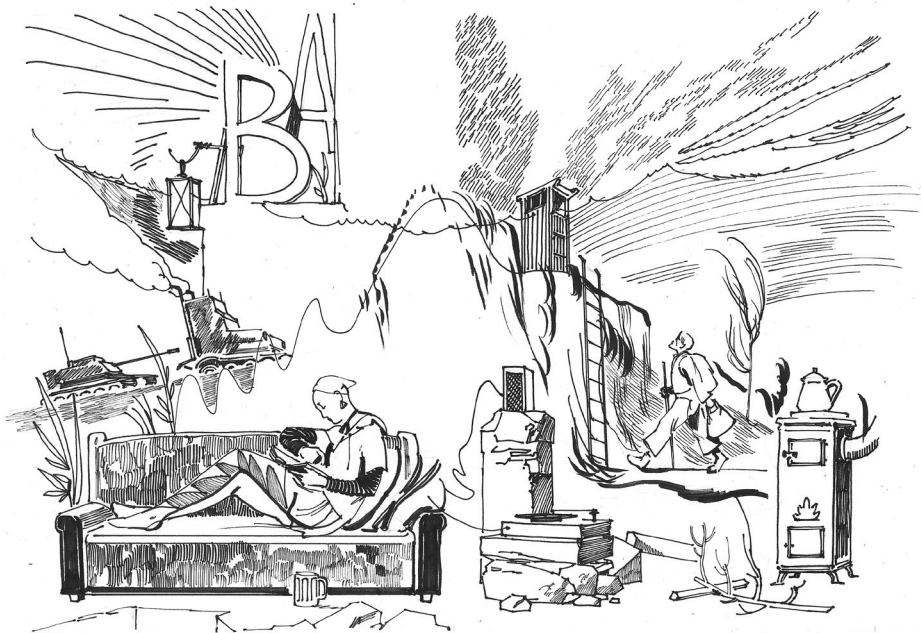
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They were asleep when morning came. In March the dawn already comes early, and people find the sun rising

to accompany them to work. When the sun rises over the rooftops or penetrates the windows of the trams, or when suddenly a beam of light finds its way into their backyards, the workers smile as if a hand has caressed them. Nothing can hold back the beautiful summer season as it approaches, the time of holidays, swimming in the open air, sunbathing and warmth. But the siblings did not salute the dawn because they were not working. Even in winter in these Northern regions, when the sun takes its time about rising, they hardly ever saw the red sky of dawn, but this was never a source of regret to them because they could go on sleeping instead. On this particular day, the brightness of noon was almost upon them before they opened their eyes at the same time. They took pleasure in the sun and the prospect of a long dark season finally coming to an end.

They were both happy from the moment they woke up. They poured hot water to make more orange tea and went to the loo. The pair of them did not have much of an income, but they could just about manage. They received modest benefits because they were deemed unfit for work. At the end of the month, however, they always came up short by a small amount. It was a topic they came back to now.

“One thing that never ceases to fascinate me,” began Cuz, “is the fact that a mere two or three centuries ago we would hardly have been able to survive. Only the most advanced industrial society can also provide the means of subsistence for all those who are not working. But it does so only by making a virtue out of necessity because it is more economically advantageous to provide people like us with charity than to provide us with work. As elements of the production process, we would be more trouble than use, and the result would be inefficiency in society. It is fascinating to think that just a few generations ago we would have had to work, starve to death or else beg and steal. Here we are living at the most advanced stage in the evolution of



society, towards which all generations have worked for a thousand centuries of history. For thousands of generations, unfortunates like us have withered away and died, and only today are we deservedly harvesting the fruits of their suffering. The march of history and the progress confirmed by dialectical reasoning are for me a never-ending source of excitement.”

Sis nodded intently, knowing how much history meant to him. She was familiar with this statement but recognised that to him it wasn't just a matter of repetition.

Enraptured by the sun's caress as soon as they began to cross from the door of their garage to the door of their loo, they swiftly got ready to go out.

Sis put on a dress made from sacking she had discovered and then dyed a new colour. Since the dyeing was

not handled in a very professional manner, the dress was dyed different shades of orange, and she took advantage of this by contouring the dyes with purple Indian ink. Where the ink spread, it made for beautiful transitions that could never have been created naturally. The dress was cut very simply, the tunic only slightly taken in at the waist, the sleeves short and the belt made from a gold electric cable whose original purpose as part of a radio set would never have occurred to anyone. The dress tightened only slightly across her breasts, which were proportionate to the half-sibling's figure, neither small nor uncomfortably large. Reaching well below the knees, the dress was decorated with natural fringes, which were partly left in their original colour of sackcloth. There was no hemming on the small neckline, so the fabric had unravelled slightly, something which gave it an unexpected charm all its own. Underneath the dress, however, Sis put on warm underwear, for A. (i.e. Cuz) was very worried about her catching cold. The thermal underwear, however, had been so modified that it complemented rather than clashed with her top layer, right down to the subtle contrasting colours of the cuffs on her wrists and ankles. Around her neck small shells collected each day from the water's edge made up a necklace. With their delicate chestnut hue the shells were a perfect match for the home-made clothes. A. handed her a scarf, which was bushy enough to match any fox fur, and over it she put on a sealskin coat, another keepsake from her father's voyages at sea – so it was certainly more than half a century old.

She was wearing her mud boots, the third of her three pairs of footwear: winter shoes, summer shoes and mud boots. They were half boots with a folkloric appearance but with tops made from a washable plastic.

It must be said that there was hardly anything to be seen of the clothes that she had so carefully selected, but it made

A. happy when she was beautifully dressed, and besides, one could count on there being a rock by the water where they could bask in the spring sunshine.

Sis tied on a silk scarf, now faded to a pleasantly indeterminate colour, and left at home the fur hat that had served her throughout the winter.

A. dressed in his usual manner.

* * *

When they set out, they didn't make a beeline for the water, for that would have required them to go across town but headed for the hill, which they wanted to cross to reach the other side if they felt up to it. There was mud everywhere after the sleet of the night before, but despite this they left the road behind the city and opted for dirt-tracks that skirted the edges of fields, because they liked having their peace together.

It took more than three hours to reach the brow of the hill and it was already well past noon. They had not yet stopped, for it was still too cold for lying in the sun, and they kept talking all the way. They had an inexhaustible fund of stories to draw upon, even though they had grown up together since they were children. New things were always coming to mind, there was always something to say about what they were thinking, reading or seeing, for even though they might be seeing the same things each day, they never saw them in the same way. Whether it was the things in their home, the look of the city, the features of the landscape, the open sky or the ever-overflowing waters, they saw so much that was new each day that they were scarcely able to make it all known. And every experience which one of them had when on their own - like A. the day before when he had walked across the plain - was so rich that it took a while to put it across in its fullness. When they reached the top of the island, they found a pair of dry

stumps to rest on. When they were children, there used to be woodland here. The sun was shining steadily and slowly beginning its descent towards dusk.

* * *

It was their first spring hike over the hill together. The day before had been A.'s first time taking the hillside route after the winter. In autumn he had still not found anything of note on the path leading to the upper village. After the long winter, they were both curious to see what was new, and A. had originally had it in mind to repeat his journey of the day before so that he could show B. (Sis) what had caught his eye every step of the way – but now they had taken a circuitous route and it was not worth returning to the upper village. A. thought it best to go down from where they were to the water and then walk along the bank to the tram terminus. They would still be able to visit friends or have a good dinner. In the tender forgetfulness of youth, they had taken nothing to eat with them.

They went down to the water just after sunset. There was still some illumination, but red clouds cast a completely red light onto the earth. The water had not spilled over the sand but instead had soaked the ploughed fields. They had forgotten about rising water levels and now had to plough through mud. For several years there had been a well-trodden footpath along the shoreline, but now it was flooded. Walking felt unpleasant. They fell silent.

“Look!” B. said, laying hold of A.'s fur coat. “What's going on over there?”

A. turned round straight away to see what Sis was pointing to. A dark smudge of sorts, perhaps no more than a line, seemed to be looming at the top of the water mountain range which towered high above the island on this side. It was a dark line on the landscape, distinct in its blackness from the blue and white of the breaking waves. Even as a

trick of the light no one had ever seen the waters behaving like that – they both knew this, for there were still enough people with their eyes fixed on the surge, scanning the watery horizon to see whether something might rise to the surface.

It was easy to make out the black line, floating or sliding down the water mountains. When they stopped, it didn't take long for them to realise that this line was coming nearer. And as it approached the trough of the water landscape, finer lines of some kind began to show on the surface of the water. Not so easy to see as the first line, but seemingly travelling in its wake.

At a guess it was very far away – but not being experts in surveying, they had no precise idea how far away the crest of the water mountain was and never gave the matter a thought. And so they continued walking along the water's edge, looking for where the evening frost had already frozen the mud. The hoarfrost clinging to the ground told them where to tread.

"Look!" said B., catching hold of A.'s coat again. "It's following us!"

A. stopped and looked. The black line on the horizon had already taken solid form. It looked like a small boat. And behind it, only slightly rippling the surface, what looked like a convoy made up of a couple of dozen scratches in the water. But there was nothing afloat inside those.

They had been walking a fair distance for half an hour. While they did so the direction in which the thing was travelling had changed. It was now coming right for them at an angle.

"Let's go slowly," said Cuz. "Something interesting's heading for us, in any case."

While they shuffled forward dragging one foot after the other, a boat landed on the shore before they reached the first houses on the outskirts of the city. Behind it, the con-

voy of two dozen scratches was left quivering in the water, each like the ripple left in the wake of a rowing boat steered by a rudder. But these made no attempt to land.

A. sighed. "Our top scientists would say that this is impossible. It would be interesting to know what they would say if it was right before their eyes, but it is possible that they would still not see it."

"Why does the boat keep following us?" remarked B., "It must want something."

"In that case we'll do without dinner to-night," said A., "We'll get into the boat and make it happy with some rocking."

Taking care not to get their boots wet, and carefully supporting each other, they got into the boat, the half-brother, after a short argument, being the first and carrying Sis across the shallows. At this point the boat began to move and moving faster than before headed towards the crest of the water mountains, the convoy of furrows in the water marking the invisible fleet in its wake. It was a little after sunset, and the first electrical discharges of the night could be seen as they flashed in the sky. Any pangs of hunger and thirst the siblings might have felt could be satisfied from the food and drink set out at the bottom of the red boat. The hull was curiously deep in the water, giving them room to lie down comfortably with ribbing that was unexpectedly soft like the best kind of foam rubber. Even so the ship - the boat had expanded so much as to merit this name - clearly demonstrated that she was of a certain age. Every one of these ribs of hers, smoothed by water and permeated by sea salt, could have belonged to some kind of petrified fossil.

They moved swiftly along and it felt as if the water mountains were immediately within reach right next to them. They began to go higher. The slope of the water was so steep in places, and the waves tumbling down from it so great and alarming, that they were afraid they would fall

