

SUMANA ROY

WOVEN AIR

THAT THE BREEZE loves me as much as I love the breeze is the first and continuing source of wonder.

I have collected words for air in languages I know and want to know. Hawa, air, wind, foo, aire, breeze . . . I say the words consciously—to note how my mouth and its insides behave as I pronounce them. It opens, to let air in and out. Every morning I open my window and say the word “wind-ow.” It’s the space for wind to enter, as it does through my nose and mouth. Furfurey—an onomatopoeic Bangla word for the quality of the air, of the breeze: crisp, gentle but smart. I would have imagined air would make all accents similar, that accents and differences in pronunciations were peculiar to a life on land. What generates wonder is the vernacular language of air, its changing dialect, the impossibility of circumscribing it to a written script. The movement of earth and water and fire can be mapped, yet it seems impossible to show air. Air is what air does. One sees it in action, its consequence—one can only imagine its prehistory.

It is this vernacular dialect of air that Christina Rossetti wants to hold in her poem:

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you:
But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.

Notice how a simple inversion of “I” and “you” in the second lines of the two stanzas by Christina Rossetti allows for a difference in rhyme that visually calibrates the wind, its speed, density, and vigor. Neither I nor you—the wind is passing through. Neither you nor I—The wind is passing by. “Through” and “by,” such simple words, and yet in them are held worlds of attention; in one the leaves tremble, the other makes trees bow down their heads. We see both because of the way the poet holds wonder

and attention, deep and affectionate attention, in these words and in the arrangement of words. For it is air that determines form—the shape of trees and also of speech, of postures of all living forms. “Notice that the stiffest tree is most easily cracked, while the bamboo or willow survives by bending with the wind,” said Bruce Lee. In these cracks and bends, their differences are the vernacular dialects of air.

MY NIECE, alone for many hours of the day, has found playmates in the window curtains. The windows are tall, reaching from the floor to almost the ceiling. They swell with air that sprints in through the windows; they become people, tall people without hands and feet and a face, their bodies all elongated. My niece runs away from these pillars of air and waits for them to recede. Then she returns to them with a little caution, before abandoning them altogether. She hugs the long cylinders of air, trying to squish them like we do her. And, in a moment, her spirit is overturned—there is disappointment. The magical columns of air transform into curtains again. She loses her playmates, their airy bodies, their unpredictable movements, more acrobatic than a seesaw. The magic of the moment is gone: it is the magic of air, its wonder, inside a balloon, inside an instrument measuring blood pressure, inside our nostrils that keeps us alive.

I see her trying to become air; she wants to have a body of air. Even though she’s so young, she’s understood that air has no feet, that one can walk without feet. I see her replicating the movements of air; she takes the air inside her frock, that pleats the cotton temporarily, to be air itself. The dress swirls, she moves round and round, and then, as if emphasis is necessary, she says, “See—I’ve become a fan.” The ceiling fan is moving above us. I look at it and then at my niece; both show no inclination to possess. They look like future descendants in the evolutionary track, of mammals and machines who became air.

Not mammal and machine alone, there are also plants. Have you seen the pollination of seeds of a sal tree? *Shorea robusta* is wind pollinated; its massive flowering—and its even more amplified pollen production—might not have had such prominence in the tropical memory and imagination had the pollen release from its seeds not been so explosive. The seeds look like an army of helicopters or ceiling fans released from the tree. They spin and spin, like soldiers of the wind, tickling the air, swirling it, working the air like belly dancers, competitive about reaching land. Then there are the aerial roots of plants, growing outside their familiar

habitats of soil and water, massaging the air, trusting it, reaching out to a place of support through it, its roots like infant fingers. That air is a catalyst, invisible at most times, a moment of wonder and a reminder: human fantasy is a weak derivative of the elemental world.

Like our emotions, the elements cannot really be divided, most of all, air. That by itself is a source of perennial wonder: what passes through our two nostrils, what we try to hold in our two cupped palms, what we think we can hold inside balloons is an illusion. Air cannot be divided. It is perhaps this sense of helpless wonder that makes Emily Dickinson say, “Banish Air from Air,” or to divide light if one dared, with the challenge to the human—“over your impotence / Flits Steam.”

IN BANGLA and Hindi, air is “vayu”; “vata,” the Sanskrit word for it, means “blown.” “Prana,” a word common to many Indian languages, means both “air” and “breath”—such is the wondrous nature of air. Vata, the word for air, also supplies the root for the Hindi and Sanskrit word for atmosphere, “vatavaranam.” The first avatar of the deity Vayu is Hanuman; for this reason he’s called “pavanputra,” son of Pavan or air. Imagining a being of both land and air, fluent in both its languages, produces a monkey god, a wonder in itself, something we too might have been had our hearts been lighter.

What exactly do we seek in flight? In *Out of Sheer Rage*, Geoff Dyer writes about D. H. Lawrence’s and Nietzsche’s fascination for an imagined bird life:

Birds in flight, claims the architect Vincenzo Volentieri, are not *between* places, they carry their places with them. We never wonder where they live: they are at home in the sky, in flight. Flight is their way of being in the world. At certain moments, writes Nietzsche, a person undertaking “the dangerous privilege of living *experimentally*” will experience “a pale, subtle happiness of light and sunshine, a feeling of bird-like freedom, bird-like altitude, bird-like exuberance, and a third thing in which curiosity is united with a tender contempt.” At his “bird-like altitude” in the Alps Lawrence experiences exactly this sudden, liberating surge that renders an entire life worthwhile because it has led to this moment when you are in the middle of your destiny, ready to accept anything that comes.

Rabindranath Tagore, imagining his bird-like life, feels something similar: “I’ve not left the history of my flight in the sky, but I flew, in that is my joy.”

OUR COLLECTIVE WONDER about the magical powers of air is revealed in the language we use, the idioms and phrases that connect the public lives of our ancestors to our secret lives. Some of these have to do with hierarchy, related to the top-bottom conditioning in our linguistic and cultural lives, owing to air being where it is—up there. Hence the expressions “airs and graces,” “having the air of,” and “putting on airs”—an invisible assertion that the upper class and upper caste are the relatives of air. (The crassest example of such thinking is visible in the topi-dhoti colloquial used for two groups or ethnicities of people in Nepal: “topi,” meaning hat or cap, for the upper caste, usually Brahmin, and “dhoti,” the unstitched garment for the lower half of the body. Used for the madhesiya, a people who had come decades—or perhaps a century—ago from India’s Terai region to work in Nepal’s tea plantations, the denotation marked the migrants as inferior.) There’s also lightness and uncertainty—“floating on air” and “up in the air” respectively. Not to mention joy and success: the reason students throw their hats and other props into the air at graduation, or why sportspeople raise their hands or pump their fists in the air, or the way people throw money at performers as appreciation. That is why we experience a “celebratory air.” That something as insubstantial as air could be appropriated to stand for superiority seems a bit of magic itself, but it is the character of its transformative potential, of its possibility of generating wonder, that other idioms reveal: “out of thin air,” “pluck out of thin air,” “disappeared into thin air.”

It is perhaps for this reason that Shakespeare gives Ariel, the “airy spirit” of his *The Tempest*, the power of magic, of transformation, of causing wonder and surprise.

In another continent, in another century, and in another language, a poet imagines this spirit of air as madness: “Pagla hawar badol diney, pagol aamar mon jegey othey . . .” The mad air in these windy days, my mad mind awakens . . . Rabindranath’s song about the mad winds of Birbhum continue: beyond the familiar, away from the known paths, the mind (and the wind) runs without reason. Like peace, we think madness comes to us from without. Unlike peace, which we seek, for madness we seek a cure. We want to be rid of it, as if it were an infection. Like love, which is often its progenitor, we know of its short life, even though that short period seems as necessary and powerful as an eternity. We ascribe it to those we cannot understand: lovers, poets, artists, the disobedient. Prophets, too, are mad people: Who else can walk on water, or ask the sea to part to make way for them, or allow themselves to be nailed to a piece of wood?

Tagore's dialogue with the wind is endless: Why is the wind blowing after the rains, why does it buzz in the veins of my heart?; with your wind in my sails I am willing to drown; Southern winds, wake up, wake up my slumbrous being; the wintry wind on the gooseberry vines is making the leaves dance to its beat; the excited wind has touched the ship of my song, it is moving to that rhythm . . . In all these songs, innumerable as they are, is the same blood of wonder: What is this madness that is air? That is why the birds, too, are mad, mad because they are outside our regimes of control and domination, because, like the air and like madness, they come to us unbidden and unexpectedly.

THERE ARE NO statues of air. We create statues of those we want to memorialize: people or animals, objects or moments. But air? Whoever has wanted to memorialize the crisp air of a beautiful day? I see Tibetan prayer flags moving in the wind. I say "move" though I probably mean other verbs: shying away from it, quarrelling with it, occasionally agreeing with it, and when nothing works, biting it, spitting at it, lashing at it, scolding it, then surrendering to it. A flag can do all of these, but it can't be indifferent. At this high altitude it seems the flag has found its god in the wind. Even as a temporary shorthand for God, this will do. For God too is a shorthand for wonder, for *adbhuta*.

When a child asks why the poor flag must be treated so harshly by the wind, his grandmother, a woman whose bun is fighting the curiosity of the wind, explains patiently. It's not harshness, it's impatience to know better, she says, the wind wants to hug, and having such a thin and transparent skin, its only body, it feels that all the knowledge it seeks and needs will come from this as well. It is only trying to get to know the flag, she says. And your silver hair, the little boy teases.

I carry myself from here. For a moment my eyes move to my nails, as if they were someone else's. They look yellowish—whether it is the residue of illness or a recent meal I cannot say. I am still too exhausted to probe. But I am still able to notice how the yellow that my eyes are discovering—as if it were a new color, a new planet, or new species—is waking up a part of me that has been lethargic for far too long. I suspect it might be the sense of wonder that pushes us from moment to moment, a gradient in our being that makes us who we are, but, as I said, I am still too weak in body to pursue the thought. From the car window I see a child gathering something. When I ask him what it is that he's collecting, he says, "Clouds." I wonder whether I mishear him or

whether it's a Nepali word that I don't know. I let it go. He smiles—his young teeth are stained. Turmeric, always staining, whether smiles or shit, always a thing of wonder. I remember my grandmother in her village, without electricity, sitting hunched over a lamp, stamping the wedding cards of her daughters with turmeric paste and then vermilion. Illiterate, this was, following centuries of ritual, her signature.

The variegated leaves by the wet roadside, spotted yellow, seem related to the little boy's stained teeth. There are histories of feeding in both. I realize that I've almost reached the middle of my journey for the day. And, in the way that thoughts come, without decipherable reason, I think of yellow, almost in the middle of a rainbow. Is *adbhuta*, whose color *Bharatmuni* had designated as yellow, an experience of the middle? What follows it?

For the moment, there's a yellow tarpaulin, protecting things from getting wet, so that the wonder of their form can be preserved. A few kilometers later, I notice the yellow frills of a *shamiana* in a wedding pandal. And then the yellow helmets of construction workers, with yellow cement bags nearby. Not too far away is the yellowing of life inside all of us; I know, I was there, close by, not too long ago.

But now it is summer in the plains: *shonajhuri*, *radhachura*, the many yellow creepers that walk on the soil and climb up on stems and poles occasionally, and, of course, the sunflower, moving, like a compass, to the direction of sunlight, but also whimsical, like I imagine all yellow is, aware that it is all momentary, both life and death.

I have heard that there is a plant in the Amazon forests that moves in search of light. I try not to think about it when I close my eyes at night, just in case the yellow of day stains my rest; for whatever it is, yellow is not the color of rest but of waking and awakening: the turmeric mixed with milk for health, or rubbed into skin with sandalwood for luminous skin, or the yellow of the monk's robes, another manner of nourishment, of illumination. Yellow bursts and explodes and leaks into my eyes even as I shut them. Mangoes—their various yellows, reiterating the sweetness of the color, but not just the fruit. Its leaves, fed to cows in the village of Mirzapur, the urine of the animals heated and pressed into balls, gave the world the color "Indian yellow"—the secret of many European canvases, including Van Gogh's, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Bharatmuni was right: yellow is the only color that can stain even the air.

SINCE WE CANNOT become air, we try to create things that approximate air. Not just the creatures of air, its natural residents, such as insects and birds, but air itself: its transparency and translucence, its lightness, its invisibility, and its ability to make things move.

We want to wear air, as the bird does in its wings and feathers, as our hair holds the wind. And so muslin. The poet Agha Shahid Ali calls muslin “woven air,” recalling how his mother’s six-yard heirloom sari was so light that it could be pulled through a ring, as if only air was being pulled through it.

Those transparent Dacca gauzes
known as woven air, running
water, evening dew.

That art and that history are now both lost, the fabric of the sari cut and turned into hankies. A poem called “The Dacca Gauzes” is about this loss, this loss of history, of nations being torn into pieces like hankies from a sari. But it is also—at least for me—a remembrance of a time, a moment, when one could wear air, as we find in the grandmother’s reminiscence:

One morning, she says, the air
was dew-starched: she pulled
it absently through her ring.

Though its name comes from Iraq’s Mosul, where the first muslin is said to have been manufactured, it was in Dacca—hence the name of Agha Shahid Ali’s poem—that the finest fabrics were produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is because the “phuti karpas,” a species of cotton plant that yielded the best muslin, grew only along a stretch of the river Meghna, not far from Dacca. A plain weave, it was spun only in the morning and evening, where the weavers, mostly young women, worked with bowls of water around them. It was almost as if they were bribing the air to keep it moist so that some of its characteristics could be induced and imported from the air to the cloth—and hence its distinct airiness. I’m not the only one to notice this, of course. Before me, a little more than a hundred years ago, the Wright brothers turned to muslin to make the covering for the wings of their first powered aircraft. “Woven air.”

We want to become air by wearing air but also by eating air—not necessarily like Shakespeare says in *Hamlet* (“I eat the air, promise-crammed.

You cannot feed capons so”) nor like Sylvia Plath’s *Lady Lazarus* rising with her red hair and saying that “I eat men like air.” “Eating air” has many versions in Indian languages: “hawa khawa” in Bangla, “hawa khana” in Hindi. It means taking a stroll, doing nothing, loitering, either or all of these. The *adbhuta*, the surprise, in such an imaginative phrase is that it is etched on the nearly impossible: How can one eat air after all? And yet it is on this seeming impossibility that the sense of wonder is based: the delight and elasticity that comes from doing nothing is as invisible as eating air, its consequences, such as the immediate feeling of looseness and airiness, derive from air as well. The implication of the uselessness in that formulation is also indicative of the magic of doing nothing, being useless and non-intentional—as useless as air, an affectionate joke.

BUT THE HUMAN urge to eat air is not only metaphorical. It manifests in culinary techniques and experiments: to make souffles airy, to store air inside bread and cakes, to make rotis that are filled with air, rotis that have the name “phulka,” deriving from “phulna,” to fill with air, to make luchi and puri with air-filled bellies, phuchkas whose stomachs we eat with filling and air. And then there’s candy floss, through which we try to re-create the sweetness of a spring day: sugar woven into air so lightly that it breaks before it can be bitten, as if giving us a moral about trying to tame air, about how it breaks even when we can’t see it breaking. The pink sugar on our face, like the air that always rests on it and moves against it—how we would look and feel if air would stick to our face, or if we became one with air.

We want to wear air and eat air, and, because we cannot infuse time with airiness, we want to live in air. Take *Hawa Mahal*, for instance, its name literally meaning a palace of air. Built in the last year of the eighteenth century in Jaipur, the building has 953 *jharokhas*, the projecting stone windows that mark Rajasthani architecture. Modeled on the *Khetri Mahal*, also known as the Wind Palace, built a little less than three decades before it, the palace building resembles a honeycomb. What lives in it is not honey but the sweetness of air, which made it possible for Maharaja Sawai Pratap Singh, who got it built, and his people to live in it through the extreme summer heat. The *jali*—latticed screen—made of pink and red sandstone reminds me of the many ways in which humans have tried to trap air; whether pockets of air inside bread or air leaking out of a balloon, all manners of air, obedient and disobedient, generate surprise.

The food and the clothes and the buildings do not suffice. The urge to become air, its wonder and unexpectedness, is what fills us with love, just as air fills a balloon or the wind a curtain. Why else would poets from across cultures have made the experience of love a relative of the window? Rumi, in fact, emphasizes that love should be a window and not a door, linking the window to love and the door to language; Thomas Hardy's "We Sat at the Window" is another example; in Robert Frost's "Wind and Window Flower," she's "a window flower / And he a winter breeze"; and that is why the window must be broken to let in air—and love, both ancient—in *Wuthering Heights*.

Though "window" derives from the Old Norse "vindr," wind, and "auga," eye, it is the surprise of air that I hear in its sound. Window. Wind-oh!

"FROM THE EARTH'S surface upward there are said to be seven strata of air, each containing seven types of flow: flow ahead (prabaha), flow back (abaha), flow up (udbaha), flow with (sambaha), flow against (bibaha), flow apart (paribaha), and flow together (parabaha)."¹ Clinton B. Seely, who wrote these lines about Jibanananda Das's poem "Niran-kush," translates its title as "Inevitable."

I am revisiting this poem from a room in our house in Siliguri. It is a very hot day; it feels as if the sun has starched the day into a kind of immobile stiffness, so that we are forced to move as if an invisible part of us is paralyzed. The blades of the ceiling fan are moving but not the air; there is no air, which, when cut by friction, would bring relief to our bodies. The fan is making the sound of a tired engine, trying to coax some sweetness from the air in the room. I imagine it to be a washer-woman's hands, wringing water out of cloth, or fingers squeezing out the pulpy juice from a mango. But there is no air to distill—only an armor of heat that feels as heavy as its opposite, a large slab of ice. Outside the window is a tree that is as old as my marriage; it was planted by the town's municipal corporation a few days before the wedding. Its leaves are moving, gently, interrupted, then returning to perambulatory swaying; it is as if it's chewing air. That there can be grace even in chewing I had probably first noticed in the slow rhythmic movement of a cow's jaws, but this is a different kind of chewing—not for food, for leisure. Where is the air, between the fan blades or on your skin? When we were children, we were asked this question a few times; it had the syntax of a riddle. That sense of the riddle hasn't left me: I look at the ceiling fan,

hoping to see air, even though I shudder to imagine what the result might have been had air been a warm-blooded mammal.

I return to the tree when I pause between stanzas, for the winds are howling in them:

According to trade-wind tales, one day at century's end
An insurrection arose here, on the hip of the indigo sea.
One day, to the delight of those trade winds,
In all directions, palm trees—cloudy booze—brothels—arsenic—
kerosene
Gaze out upon the indigo desert of the sea and resist the whole day
long.

The whole day long from afar, through sunshine, through debauch-
ery, those nine and forty
Winds blow smoke away—dispersing winds, winds from the north,
Which leave chill the whitewashed cabins in that coconut grove.

The term “trade wind” emerged in the fourteenth century, coined by Portuguese sailors who were coming to rely on the direction of wind to guide their boating vessels to and from the shore. Jibanananda Das, in this poem, captures the history of wind movements as if they were the history of the mind, or a found poem. That is why when we ask about the “abohawa”—“how’s the hawa, air?”—we are actually asking about the many winds that make us, those that trade, raid, and aid.

NOTE

1Jibanananda Das, *The Scent of Sunlight: Poems by Jibanananda Das*, transl. Clinton B. Seely (Kolkata: Parabaas, 2019), 114.