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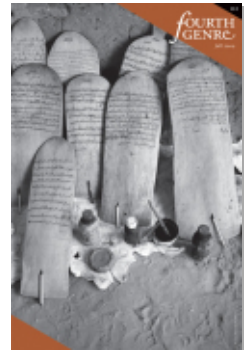
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Elements of the Wind

DONNA STEINER

I am not a fan of those who say, “There are two types of people: those who love cell phones, and those who hate cell phones.” Another example: “There are two kinds of people: those who will only drink bottled water, and those who think bottled water is a waste.” The variations are endless, although endlessly similar, and I find this inclination to divide humanity into two clear-cut groups limiting, naive, absurd. So perhaps I am saying that there are two types of people: those who divide other people into simplistic groups, and those who do not. And perhaps there are two further types of people: those who admire this sort of breakdown, and those who do not. I can see, I suppose, the attraction of this remedial math. Simplicity is seductive, clarity is seductive. I am, on occasion, seduced by each. Even so, such superficial division seems, in the end, dismissible.

That being said, I think it may be possible to say there are two types of people: those who love wind, and those who hate it.

Being firmly ensconced in the former group, enduringly in love with wind, it came as a shock to me, fairly deeply into my adulthood, to learn that not everyone shared this affection.

“I hate wind.” These words were uttered by an acquaintance as we cruised at a leisurely pace on her pontoon boat along the Seneca River in central New York. It was a merely breezy—not windy—spring afternoon, a weekday, and aside from the occasional heron or gull, the river was not crowded. Her words weren’t spat with hostility exactly, but were said with considerable crankiness under the assumption, I think, that her passengers implicitly agreed with her. This was the first time I had ever heard anyone acknowledge a quarrel

with the wind; given the number of ludicrous or controversial statements I've heard over a lifetime, this mild oath shouldn't have shocked me. But it did.

"You *hate wind*?" I asked, overemphasizing both verb and noun. I objected to the extremism of "hate," and was incredulous about "wind." I could see, perhaps, being annoyed by wind or finding it disagreeable. But hating it? This was a curiosity. Curiosity invokes in me a relentless desire to understand; it is not a particularly attractive quality, at times—it can quickly turn to pestering, nagging, perhaps even harassment—but usually serves its purpose. In this instance, however, my inquisitiveness went nowhere. The pontoon driver wasn't, apparently, inclined toward elaboration. My sputtered "You hate wind?" was shut down with a simple, unequivocal "Yes."

Although I was not able to discern the root cause of what appeared to me an irrational dislike of something wonderful, this encounter armed me with a kind of measuring stick for future encounters. I am, it must be admitted, an occasional tester of people—in particular, of potential friends. Again, not an attractive quality. But I will discretely quiz acquaintances on their reading habits, for instance, or what kinds of movies they like, or what landscape feels most like home for them. I might ask if they enjoy avocados or olives (sadly, many say no to olives; I've had to stop using them as a barometer for friendship) or determine what their relationship is to money. There aren't necessarily right and wrong answers to my questions, but an abiding affection for, say, liverwurst or tongue, or a response of "I'm not really a movie person" could be problematic. A vehement dislike of wind, similarly, turns my Question Meter up high, and I am likely to dig as deeply as permitted into the Why of it.

Usually, I've found, it's an aversion to extremes: almost nobody minds a breeze. A woman who claimed to hate wind admitted that she only hated when it messed up her hair (not a friend); another told a thoughtful story about her childhood, when she'd been afraid of the dark and particularly afraid of the scratching sound a tree made outside her bedroom window when the wind battered its branches (friend). Some claim that wind agitates them, much as a stormy, darkly brooding day can unnerve me; we are attuned to the vagaries of weather, many of us, although tuned differently. Wind exhilarates me, but it causes others to feel edgy, disturbed, worried. We are as changeable as the skies.

In 1805 a British admiral and hydrographer, sensing a need, fashioned a chart that came to be called the Beaufort Wind Scale. Although others (including

Daniel Defoe) contributed to the process of creating this scale, the fascinating Sir Francis Beaufort (he'd later undertake a search to find a naturalist who'd be willing to sail onboard the *Beagle*, ultimately recommending Charles Darwin) designed the scale, which was dependent on close observation and the almost sacred value of such observation. I use the word “sacred” although the efforts of Beaufort, Darwin, and others were done in the name of science. We tend to separate these realms, but for me the two seem twinned or, at the very least, like close cousins. The Beaufort Wind Scale’s first official use was onboard the *Beagle* (one could argue in itself a kind of sacred voyage in the name of science), and although many versions are available in books and online, it’s worth reproducing one modern incarnation here. Note its elegance and economy.

CURRENT INTERNATIONAL DEFINITIONS ON SEA AND ON
LAND FOR THE BEAUFORT SCALE

FORCE	KNOTS	BRIEF NAME	FOR USE AT SEA	FOR USE ON LAND
0	< 1	Calm	Sea like a mirror	Smoke rises verti- cally
1	1–3	Light air	Ripples with the appearance of scales are formed, but without foam crests	Direction of wind shown by smoke drift but not by wind vanes
2	4–6	Light breeze	Small wavelets, still short but more pronounced. Crests have a glassy appear- ance and do not break.	Wind felt on face, leaves rustle, ordinary wind vanes moved by wind
3	7–10	Gentle breeze	Large wavelets. Crests begin to break. Foam of glassy appearance. Perhaps scat- tered white horses.	Leaves and small twigs in constant mo- tion, wind extends light flags.
4	11–16	Moderate breeze	Small waves, becoming longer, fairly frequent white horses.	Wind raises dust and loose paper, small branches move.
5	17–21	Fresh breeze	Moderate waves, taking a more pro- nounced form, many white horses are formed. Chance of some spray.	Small trees in leaf start to sway, crested wavelets on inland waters.

6	22–27	Strong breeze	Large waves begin to form, the white foam crests are more extensive everywhere. Probably some spray.	Large branches in motion, whistling in telegraph wires, umbrellas used with difficulty.
7	28–33	Near gale	Sea heaps up and white foam from breaking waves begins to be blown in streaks along the direction of the wind.	Whole trees in motion, inconvenient to walk against the wind.
8	34–40	Gale . . .	Moderately high waves of greater length; edges of crests begin to break into spin-drift. The foam is blown in well-marked streaks along the direction of the wind.	Twigs break from trees, difficult to walk.
9	41–47	Strong gale	High waves. Dense streaks of foam along the direction of the wind. Crests of waves begin to topple, tumble and roll over. Spray may affect visibility.	Slight structural damage occurs, chimney pots and slates removed.
10	48–55	Storm	Very high waves with long overhanging crests. The resulting foam in great patches is blown in dense white streaks along the direction of the wind. On the whole, the surface of the sea takes on a white appearance. The “tumbling” of the sea becomes heavy and shock-like. Visibility affected.	Trees uprooted, considerable structural damage occurs.
11	56–63	Violent storm	Exceptionally high waves (small and medium sized ships might be lost for a time behind the waves). The sea is completely covered with long white patches of foam lying along the direction of the wind. Everywhere, the edges of the waves are blown into froth. Visibility affected.	Widespread damage.
12	64	Hurricane	The air is filled with foam and spray. Sea completely white with driving spray, visibility very seriously affected.	Widespread damage.

<http://weather.mailasail.com/Franks-Weather/Beaufort-Variations#today>

Other versions of the modern wind scale are supplemented with photographs or illustrations. One includes a sort of film strip of a small house with a flagpole in the yard. The flag in the earliest pictures is limp; later it begins to flutter and ripple, and eventually whips straight out. The house, meanwhile, remains fairly stable until the higher numbers on the scale are reached, whereupon the shutters blow off and, finally, the house is blasted from its foundation. The graphics lack the poetry of the written descriptions,

but they underscore the point: wind, in addition to being a wondrous force of nature, can wreak havoc. As victims of tornadoes, hurricanes, even common windstorms know all too well, wind, at its frightening extremes, can destroy property, landscapes, and lives. The Beaufort Scale categorizes and concretizes what was once a subjective, almost abstract phenomenon: the movement of air.

Imagine the magnitude of the accomplishment: naming the wind.

Abroholos, barat, barber, bayamo, borasco, boreas, brickfielder, brisote, Chinook, chubasco, churada, coromell, Diablo, elephanta, ghibli, gregale, haboob, leste, levanter, leveche, maestro, mistral, ostria, pali, pampero, papagayo, shamal, sirocco, squamish, suestado, tramontana, vardar, williwaw, zephyr. Worldwide, others have put name to the wind.

There are two kinds of people. Those who savor the names of the wind like tasting rare fruit on the tongue, and those who skipped the italicized words above once they got the gist of the paragraph.

The word *wind* originally rhymed with *mind*. Somewhere in the eighteenth century the pronunciation shifted, possibly in deference to the adjective form, *windy*.

One of the few good rhymes for wind: *sinned*.

Kestrels, a type of falcon, are also called windhovers, although they're not the only bird that appears able to hover in the air. Gulls do it, too, and it's not unusual locally, near the shores of Lake Ontario, to see other birds caught against the wind, hovering. I'm not sure why—perhaps a nod to their apparent defiance of the wind—but I've read that kestrels were once called windfuckers.

Individuals who reside in cities quickly learn to tune out background noise: sirens, tires on asphalt, horns, the banter of a street vendor. In the country, or at least in my little part of the country, the noise that is tuned out is wind. That's not to say it's always ignored or, for that matter, always audible. But I live among trees, many hundreds of trees, and when air currents disturb thousands of leaves, then the sound of sweeping or sighing or rustling or rushing is prevalent. It sounds, sometimes, like the wash of a lake's small waves upon the shore; it sounds, at times, like the approach of a vehicle, or the roar of the sea. The sounds of the wind are multileveled, overlapping,

arrhythmic, but coherent. If I had a better ear, I might be able to isolate its components the way one might recognize the oboe or the cello or the flute line of a symphony. Sometimes I spend the whole day trying to classify elements of the wind; other days I barely notice it.

ANEMOI: Greek wind gods.

ASIAQ: Eskimo weather goddess.

EHECATL: Aztec god of the wind.

FA'ATIU: Samoan wind god.

FENG BO: Chinese earl of the winds.

FENG PHO-PHO: Goddess of the winds, China.

FUJIN: Japanese wind god.

HAYA-JI: God of the whirlwind, Japan.

KAMI-KAZE: Japanese god of wind and storm.

OONAWIEH UNGGI: Cherokee spirit of the winds.

RAJA ANGIN: Malayan king of the winds.

SHU (SU): Egyptian god of wind and atmosphere.

STRIBOG: Weather god and grandfather of the winds, ancient Slavic.

VAHAGN: Armenian god of wind and weather.

VAYA: Wind god, India.

VENTOLINES: Spanish spirits of the little winds.

YAPONCHA: Hopi god of the winds.

YONDUNG HALMONI: Wind goddess, ancient Korea.

When it can't be named, ascribe it to the gods.

There are aspects to the wind that aren't audible but are visible—and those images evoke or imply sound. I can't hear the grasses rustle, even standing amidst them, but I observe their graceful movements and therefore imagine a whisper. The vines of the bleeding heart silently bob and bounce; I imagine an amusing *boing*. Miles above my head, the cumulus and stratus clouds drift like tectonic plates across the sky, evoking, perhaps, a mechanized shifting. Closer to earth, two thick branches of a cherry tree rub against each other, and the sound must rightly be called a squeak. Other trees creak, and on occasion a broad maple leaf is dislodged by a flurry of breezes and lands on the wooden steps with a papery tap. The squeak and creak and tap are audible—real

sounds—but no more real, I’d argue, than the undulations of the grasses or the slow glide of the clouds.

Locally, just a few miles inland from the great lake where the wind blows ferociously at times, many homeowners (and farmers) plant *windbreaks*, lines of trees that often effectively prevent gales from battering one’s *windows*. The winds can be so fierce that in places the trees grow at a slant, tilted perpetually toward the ground. In winter, when two temperatures are given during the weather forecast—the usual temperature in Fahrenheit degrees, and the adjusted temperature that factors in the *wind chill*—the waves of Lake Ontario freeze in place. For as far as the eye can see, the lake looks as if a magician has cast a spell and stopped it in its tracks, and we wait, sometimes for months, for the command that will unfreeze it. Wind can transform a static landscape into movement; it can, conversely, join forces with the cold and alter a landscape in motion to one that is, almost literally, a still life.

The beautiful word *ventilate* originally described a process of cleaning grain by tossing it upward from a basket (called a *fan*), allowing the wind to blow away the lighter chaff. In the 1600s, *ventilate* was recorded as meaning “to supply a room with fresh air.” The word *fan* was eventually applied to the hand-held device created for moving air in order to cool the body; the phrase “to fan out” meant to spread out as though mimicking the unfolding of a hand-held fan.

Over time, our understanding of words evolves, expands. Sometimes I imagine that words themselves are alive, undergoing respiration, expanding and contracting, as though breathing. Words, for me, possess qualities of the air, seem as kinetic as wind.

We say that “the wind has died,” which implies, metaphorically, that it was alive. Wind has an animate quality: it moves and causes other things to move. When a series of gusts ruffles the demeanor of a field of grain, it can appear ensouled, or muscular, the field embodied or enlivened by the wind. Walking on the seashore during heavy gales makes the skin feel assaulted, as though with intent—the airborne sand gives the impression that the wind is laden with armies of tiny pinlike weapons. I remember living along the banks of a river; during a rainstorm I could hear the thunder roll the length of it, a series of rumbles that seemed to have weight, as though the sound itself tumbled

like a giant along the riverbanks. Sometimes wind is like that, approaching from a distance but with something resembling mass—the cliché when describing such a moment, as when a tornado or hurricane arrives, is that it sounds like a freight train. What could be more unlikely than describing something invisible—air—as something so solid, so formidable? It would be like comparing being kissed to being hit by a crane.

I use that last metaphor—kiss/crane—partly as homage to my grandparents. I never knew them as a couple; my grandfather died at 34 after being struck by a crane on the docks of New Jersey, where he worked as a longshoreman. It was St. Patrick's Day, and I've always wondered if the stevedores were drinking, or drunk; I've always wondered if they could have retrieved him from the Hudson River more quickly if it had been another day, any other day. The blow from the crane didn't directly kill him, just knocked him bodily into the river, where he drowned. My mother, 14 at the time, remembers hearing the doorbell ring late at night, the voices of policemen . . . and her suddenly widowed mother never being quite the same. Like many who die young, or too young, my grandfather was mythologized. In the few handed-down stories I've heard, it sounds like he was the kindest father, most giving husband, most handsome and hardworking man who ever lived. In his photographs he looks like a movie star.

His death had nothing to do with wind, as far as I know. But maybe there are two kinds of people. Those who like their stories tidy, with a once-upon-a-time and a happily-ever-after, and in between a series of nicely demarcated scenes that rise when they need rise, climax when a climax is called for, and neatly resolve. And then there are the others, who are willing to follow a current, to feel it move discretely through a tangle of branches, to sense a gust of meaning shudder in the brush, to feel the ghostly fingers of the air lift their hair off their necks and leave a shiver up their spines—those who have felt, in all its unlikelihood, the impact of a kiss that leveled your soul like a freight train busting the night open in a small town, on a night of winds, a night of thrilling, elegiac winds.