

Into the Wind  
April 2019

We arrived at my parents' house late in the unsettled night. The high waves pounded the ocean beach, just the other side of a stretch of houses and then the high dunes. Blowing sand drifted the asphalt road. Christmas lights swayed dangerously. The garage door cranked up slowly, my father's silhouette off to the side. "In here," he bellowed, gestured.

John gathered the boys, and I gathered a brown grocery bag of precious items, gifts our sons had made for us, for my parents for Christmas. I reached up to secure the fluttering papers and ornaments our youngest son had made at pre-school, so dear in their mix of imperfection and unchecked creativity. I was not quick enough. The wind's greedy arms reached into the bag and snatched them. I screamed, began running, but the cumbersome bag, the uneven ground hindered my speed. Like little shards of light, the treasures bounced and ricocheted into the darkness. I knew that in the morrow's daylight, I would never find them. I wept.

I don't remember ever uttering a kind word about the wind. We lived in Pennsylvania for a time, when our sons were young. At picnics, someone might say, "A breeze is coming up," arms would casually reach to secure the paper plates, corners of the tablecloth. The breeze was soft, courteous, lasting for perhaps thirty seconds. If it lifted anything, it courteously dropped the item back into place or tossed it only a few feet. In the humidity-heavy summer months, we talked of climbing onto the roof to catch a bit of a breeze. Sometimes in late afternoon, from the stillness, from the industrious buzz of insects, from the thick-leaf trees, would come a breeze. Cleansing, refreshing, like a glass of iced tea. I didn't miss the wind.

Wind is not mannerly. It is often depicted as howling. Hurtling on in search of—what? A companion? A special place? An end to its wanderings? It is an intruder into the moments of calm that I seek.

In maps of old, the wind is depicted as a tousle-haired, ballooned-cheeked demon, fiercely exhaling, capsizing ships and drowning sailors. That is a partial depiction. Where I live, the wind blows, but it also sucks. Our summers are short. Thus, they are dear, and those of us who love to garden waste no time, as soon as we learn the final freezing date, to begin tilling and composting, sowing and planting, coddling and cajoling our seedlings toward bloom and fruit. We build little windbreaks, move and turn the pots, cover the beds. We water. We pray. And then the wind comes, sucking what little moisture is in the air, sucking the moisture from the garden soil, sucking the plants dry. In spite of the gardener's tenacity, the wind never gives up.

Here in Wyoming, the wind has a sinister side. It agitates. It traps. A few months into the characteristically long winters, cabin fever seeps into our souls, and we long to be outside. Not just the out-of-doors, though, but one that nurtures inner peace and calm. We accept the cold, we accept the snow, but the wind is what chains us—we go no further than to stare out the window and pine for the tranquil porch, where a book's pages do not blow, where dust does not whip into our eyes. I have seen the wind knock a jar of pickle relish from the picnic table. It is unrelenting, playing havoc with any task involving delicacy or precision. It wears us down. It has been blamed for suicide.

The wind can be life threatening in winter, battling with Mother Nature's benevolence. Weeks ago we suffered our first spring blizzard. The wind transformed the falling snow into razor-sharp arrows and created deep drifts into which human and animal could easily sink. My husband and I hobbled and toppled our way through the corral. Icicles, like dreadlocks, clung to the older horses' sides, our gelding's head bent, the mare shivering. I towel-dried them as best I could, and John wrestled on the blankets which would warm and dry the mare and gelding. Our eight-month-old filly, though, lacking the maturity and trust to accept a blanket that is draped and buckled, that can shift its weight, would not be covered. Our hope was that she and the ten other foals would follow their instincts to stay safe and warm.

Plastered in snow—a sign, thank heavens, of ample insulation—the babies could not be told apart. Our foal was every foal, their distinct playful personalities abandoned. They did not frolic toward us for rubs and pats and scratches. Mother Nature had turned on a switch: Their faces serious, their steps cautious, these foals were focusing solely on survival. We did not approach them. Instead, John threw them more hay.

I am frightened by the phrases "Wind Chill" and "High Wind Warning." I know that it takes only 40- miles-per-hour wind gusts to knock over an empty semi on the highway, not much more to fell a full one. I feel that I am constantly in the constant wind, and I shriek to it, "Stop!" It sometimes does, on its own time. And then, I'm caught off guard by the vast atmospheric void that occurs.

I know that the wind will return. Some days, instead of anger, I offer only a sigh and a shrug. In this part of the country, we make jokes about the wind, like the one about the awning salesman. We have learned to shout over gusts, grab wind-snatched items with quick-draw speed. We insist that the wind builds character. If pressed, I will admit to what is good about the wind: Our dogs love it, it makes playful shapes of trees and boulders, and as it whispers through the Ponderosa pine boughs, a hymn is written. I confess that the wind is a part of me, and I have learned that my anger toward a force so great, so inexorable, so insistent, so engrained does nothing but ruin the goodness of the day.

A book that I dearly love is A. B. Guthrie Jr.'s novel, *The Big Sky*. My students in Buffalo, Wyoming loved it too. They called it *their* book. During one class discussion, a student insisted on reading aloud this passage:

*"Boone stood with his legs apart, braced against the wind. Here on the high hump of the world the wind rushed at him from every which way. It was as if winds from all over came together here, winds from the east and winds from the west and winds from north and south, all chasing wild up the canyons and meeting and matching their strength and making him catch for breath no matter how he faced. They made a sound that wasn't a whine or a howl but just the sound of movement—a rushing, torn, lonely sound.*

*The wind got to a man...filled him full; it blew into him through his eyes and nose and mouth and drove through his skin; it streamed into him through his ears and rushed around inside his head."*

The student stopped, was quiet for a moment, and then said, pride in his voice, "Wow, Guthrie really got it right, didn't he?" Yes, he certainly did.