

# Wind

By Algernon Blackwood

It is a curious reflection, though of course an obvious one, that wind in itself is—silent and that only from the friction against objects set in its path comes the multiform music instantly associated with its name. The fact, too, that so potent a force should be both silent and invisible readily explains its common use as a simile, and a beautiful one, for Spirit. Like flame, that other exquisite simile of spirit, how clean it licks, how mysteriously it moves, how swiftly it penetrates! And so subtly linked are they that the one almost seems to produce the other—the swift hot winds that beat about a conflagration; the tongues of fire that follow a fanning draught—“the wind that blew the stars to flame!” True inspiration seems certainly born of this marriage of wind and fire. How singular have you ever thought?—would be the impressions of a man to whom the motion of air, as wind, was unknown, when first he witnessed the phenomenon of a twenty-knot breeze. Imagine a people that knew not wind—how they would tremble to see the tree-tops bend; to hear the roar, the whispers, the sweet singing of all Nature about them for the first time; to know the sounds and movements of the myriad objects that but for wind would be silent and motionless from one year’s end to another! To me, it has always seemed that such a revelation might be far more wonderful than the first torrent of light that beats upon the eyes of a man who has been blind.

And so one comes to a further suggestive reflection: that objects all possess their own particular sound or voice that the winds love to set free; their essential note—that specific set of vibrations lying buried in their form—of which, as some curious doctrines of the old magic assert, their forms, indeed, are the visible expression. In this region—pondering the relation between sound and shape—the imagination may wander till it grows dizzy, for it leads very soon to the still more wonderful world where sound and colour spin their puzzling web, and the spiritual phenomena of music cry for further explanation. But, for the moment, let only the sound of wind be in our ears; for in wind, I think, there is a sweetness and a variety of music that no instruments invented by men have yet succeeded in approaching so far as sheer thrill and beauty are concerned.

Each lover of Nature knows, of course, the special voice of wind that most appeals to him—the sighing of pines, the shouting of oaks, the murmur of grasses, the whirring over a bare hillside, or the whistling about the corners of the streets—the variety is endless; and there can be no great interest in obtruding one’s own predilection. Only, to know this music thoroughly, to catch all the overtones and undertones that make it so wonderful, and to absorb its essential thrill and power, you must listen, not for minutes, but for hours. If you want to learn the secrets of the things themselves, betrayed in the varying response they give back to the winds that sweep or caress them, lie leisurely for hours at a time and—listen.

How, from the high desolation of mountain peaks it blows out—terror, yet from the sea of bearded grain calls with soft whispering sounds such as children use for their tales of mystery; from old buildings—the melancholy of all dead human passion, yet from the rigging of ships the abandon of wild and passionate adventure: wind, clapping its mighty hands among the flapping sails, or running with weary little feet among the ruined towers of broken habitations; sighing with long, gentle music over English lawns, or rushing, full of dreams, across vast prairies overseas; kissing a garden into music, or blundering blind-eyed through dark London squares; racing

with thoughts of ice down precipices and dropping, as through spaces of sleep, into little corners of oblivion in waste lands of loneliness and desolation, or sighing with almost human melody through the keyhole and down the farmhouse chimney.

From the curtained softness of the summer sky these viewless winds sift silently into the heart to wake yearnings infinite. From some high attic window, perhaps, where you stand and watch, listen to that wind of sighs that rises, almost articulate with the pains and sorrows, the half-caught joys, too, from that crowded human world beneath the sea of roofs and tiles. Winds of desire, winds of hope, winds of fear and love. Ah! winds of all the spirit's life and moods . . . and, finally, the wind of Death! And wind down a wet and deserted London street, shouting its whistling song, its song of the triumphant desolation that has cleared the way for it of human obstruction—how it sings the music of magnificent poverty, of heavy luxury, and then of the loneliness bred by both! And you see some solitary figure battling forwards, and hear that curious whistling it makes over the dripping umbrella. . . . Ah! how *that* wind summons pictures of courage in isolation, and of singing in a wilderness!" The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, yet canst not tell whence it cometh nor whither it goeth" . . . for wind is, indeed, of the nature of spirit, and its music, crowded with suggestion, as sometimes, too, with memory and association, is, in the true sense, magical.

"Where is thy soul? Thou liest i' the wind and rain," says the poetess to the "Beloved Dead"; and in another passage the Sound of wind brings back for her the phantom face of the departed "But who shall drive a mournful face from the sad winds about my door?" Shelley, more than any other, perhaps, loved wind and wind-voices, and has the most marvellous and subtle descriptions of it in his work. Though he so often speaks of the "viewless wind," one cannot help thinking that in his imagination lay some mental picture of wind—in the terms of sight. He *saw* the wind. For him it had colour as well as shape. He saw bright sylphs—spirits of air—which "star the winds with points of coloured light, as they rain through them," and "wind-enchanted shapes of wandering mist" that for his inner vision were "snow-white and swift as wind nursed among lilies near a brimming stream." And, alone among poets so far as I know, he had that delightful conception of solid, smooth surfaces of wind upon which it is possible to run and dance and sleep. His verse is alive with spirits "trampling the wind"; "trampling the slant winds on high with golden-sandalled feet"; or climbing the hills of wind that run up into the highest peaks of heaven. The "Witch of Atlas" not only rode "singing through the shoreless air," but also "ran upon the platforms of the wind, and laughed to hear the fireballs roar behind." And it is the Chorus in *Prometheus Unbound* that so exquisitely weaves the dance on the floor of the breeze."

But for less gifted mortals there are certain effects of wind that seem to me to approach uncommonly close to actual sight, or at least to a point where one may imagine what wind ought to look like. Watch the gusts of a northwest wind as they fall in rapid succession upon a standing field of high barley, beating the surface into long curved shadows that bring to mind Shelley's "kindling within the strings of the waved air, Æolian modulations." One can see the velvet touch of those soft, vast paws, and the immense stretch of the invisible footsteps that press the long stalks down and as suddenly sweep away and set them free again. And with the changing angle of the myriad yellow heads, the colour also changes, till gradually there swims upon the mind the impression of some huge and shadowy image that flies above the field—some personal deity of wind, some djin of air. One almost sees the spirit of the wind. . . .

It is fascinating, too, to stand opposite a slope of wooded mountains, near enough to distinguish the individual swing of each separate tree, yet far enough to note how the forest as a whole blows all one way—the way of the wind. Also—to hear the chord of sound as a whole, yet

mark the different notes that pour out of the various trees composing it. In some such way— one wonders, perhaps!—the Spirit of God moves over the surface of men's minds, each swinging apparently its own individual way, yet when seen in proper perspective, all moving the one way—to *Him*. And the voices of all these separate little stray winds—who shall describe them? Creep with me now out of the house among these Jura vineyards, and come up into the pine forests that encircle the village. Put your ear against that bosom of the soft dark woods where the wind is born—and listen! Find the words if you can—!