

Wind is a Place

Landscape as a metaphor for hope arouses admiration for Washington state, with its endless western horizon, ascendant mountains, and evergreen trees. Yet just to the east of all this optimism lies a land prone and downcast. A sand-covered plateau of basalt, as flat and featureless as a scar. Maps use the terms scablands and sagebrush-steppe to describe the area of about 2,000 square miles that sustains summer temperatures over 100 degrees for weeks at a time. Scablands, as if the place might heal someday and cast off its rough crust. Steppe, like the endless, empty expanse in Russia which, along with endless sky and endless hardship, bred endless, depressing novels by sensitive artists suffering in the deprivation.

Such is the inland isolation of the Columbia Basin, separated from Seattle by a mountain range and a mindset. Wet Side, Dry Side. Green Side, Brown Side. West of the tree-smothered Cascades, serrated against the sky at 10,000 feet or more, all is fertile and lush. To the east lies this dry, hot underworld. Milton would appreciate the distinction.

At least there is a river. The Columbia, born in Canada, spends the middle third of its journey coursing through the basin before turning due west toward the ocean. Even a powerful river can take only so much.

In the end, no river or mountain can claim this landscape; no swath of forest can define it. In the end, only an apparition can fill the emptiness. Wind.

To find rest and peace in the basin is to accept the vagaries of wind. This land of little shade and no soft grass, its rocky soil populated by rattlesnakes, cannot offer even stillness as a consolation. If the place was a sea, sailors would worship the gods that lived there. No sail would go unfilled. Not for long. The arid sky is restless.

At its most benign, the air offers a breeze. Gray-green leaves at the tops

of 70-foot cottonwoods along the Old Inland Empire Highway flutter from stiff branches. Ripples rise on the Columbia's surface, turning a placid mirror into frosted glass. A wisp of a cloud, if there is one at all, sweeps along the bright blue sky and diffuses like the last breath of smoke from a dying cigarette.

So rare, a breeze in this landscape. Too meek to appear often in such starkness. Sagebrush will not bow before it. Hawks and gulls cannot rise and soar on it. Flatlands and sweeping foothills under a high, hot sky offer no shelter for such a sensitive expression of the weather. More likely, what at first seems to be a breeze is not nature's tender whisper, but the leading edge of a blustering, eye-squinting, hair-thrashing blow that might last for ten minutes or ten days.

Relentless. That's the basin wind. On and on it comes, depressingly insistent, rising and swelling, a malarial plague stubbornly refusing to subside for long. The wind wears on a person the way it wears on the landscape. Fragile emotions shift with the sand, anger rises in whitecaps roiling across the Columbia, frustration builds in high branches bent with no respite until, even when peace comes, they are hunched in the prevailing direction of the wind.

Our contrivances for deflecting the weather are of no use. There are no umbrellas for wind. Caps blow off, coats fly open, and the windbreaker is a flimsy joke pasted as tightly to a wind-bent body as cellophane wrapped taut around a peanut butter sandwich. From sunglasses to picnic shelters, wind sweeps over and around and under any object in its path. Wind is a nimble fish in water, able to find and explore the tiniest crevice; it is a wandering shark, roaming anywhere it pleases, shifting directions at will.

Wind becomes a postulate of everyday life. Otherwise, frustration would reign over patience. Leave the frisbee in the closet. Forget about tennis and golf. Bring a bag of rocks if a picnic is planned because something will be needed to weigh down paper plates and napkins and bags of chips. Going fishing? Do not curse or whine. Just accept that it's a no-bobber day, and that the extra lead weight needed to cast even half as far as on a still day will exact the price of a snag when you attempt to retrieve it. Limp, wrinkled line won't stay taut, yet the tip of your pole vibrates, mocking a fish's tug, and incessant flowing ripples on the water's surface weave hypnotically into the unwary consciousness. Perceptions narrow as much in wind as they do on a pitch-black night, maybe more. Sounds

languish and scatter in the drone of a steady wind. Sight becomes restricted to a letter-box view of the ground ten feet ahead.

Best just to make the best, huddled like an unwelcome refugee, or get out of the elements. Or improvise. Just about anything that can be launched into a good gust will take to flight, however brief or awkward. Cardboard boxes. Sheets of plywood. Garbage can lids become frisbees. Once, an intolerable day-long wind ruined an outing of my Boy Scout troop to Jump Off Joe Butte, a thousand-foot rise used for television relay towers. Frustrated yet adaptable, we tethered the smallest of our bunch to a tarp and heaved him out over the sagebrush. He flew 20 feet, Frankenstein's condor, and crashed hard. Laughing, we extracted him from the wreckage and found him wide-eyed at the wonder of flight.

Of all that rises and flies in the wind, nothing is as prolific as dust. Sand. Grit. Particles of rain-starved earth attach to wind with magnetic conviction and go forth as the wind wills. Dust in the house, in the car, in your hair, in your eyes—these are everyday annoyances. At times, the wind exercises a very great will. When the horizon darkens into a furious brown nebula, annoyances fade with the blocked-out light. By that time, tons of sand have already risen into the sky, whipped up by winds that have swept up through Oregon, across the Columbia and into the Horse Heaven Hills. On its way in, the blinding storm may shut down Highway 395 heading south. That's about the only measure that can be taken. All that's left is to watch and wonder how long the dust storm will last.

One such storm struck in November 1992, the week of Thanksgiving. In unrelenting wind, flying sand colored the air so brown people used headlights to drive through town during the day. Gusts stung our faces with billions of sharp granules. Waves of sand hurled against concrete buildings sounded like the simmer of a beach exposed by a pulsing ocean. The basin's inhabitants become a population of Bedouins in such conditions, shielding their faces and eyes when trekking outside, entering a dwelling with an escort of sandy gust while offering a blessing for the sanctuary they have reached. The end of such a storm constitutes an otherworldly experience, like a battlefield gone silent. Warily, people venture into the eerie glow of dusk as the wind finally dies with dust still thick in the air,

diffusing light from the horizon. Fences, filters of the moveable landscape, lean under a plaster cast of litter and tumbleweeds. The silence brings uneasiness of the kind that comes over a person in a motel room bed after ten hours of steady driving as the numbed mind refuses to let go of a world that has been in perpetual motion.

Wind in the basin doesn't belong to any particular season. Rather, the seasons belong to it. Even at times of extremes, the wind asserts predominance. Winter wind is worthy of name and reputation. When the Siberian Express rolls south out of Canada, plateau lands lay open like a long, straight stretch of track. The front blasts through on a nonstop run, a blur of numbing, steely cold. All anyone can do is try to stay out of the way. Those who do go out must not be deceived by the brown landscape. The absence of snow doesn't rule out bitter cold. Better to stand on the front porch for a few moments to gauge what outerwear will be needed rather than peek out the picture window, under-dress and risk extremities turning gun-barrel blue. Besides, snow is not a given at any point in a Columbia Basin winter. Each year comes the question of whether this one will be a white or a brown Christmas, and the wind has a lot to do with the outcome. For even if the snow comes, two inches or ten inches, the amount doesn't matter. One Chinook wind will make it vanish.

Predicting wind in the basin is no feat of distinction. Even the stealthy Chinook can be anticipated. But not always. The Chinook, named for a tribe that lived and fished on the lower Columbia, arises out of nowhere, a disconcerting draft that fills the air as if the crypt door to a dead summer has creaked open. Temperatures rise ten, twenty degrees, or more nearly as fast as the mercury can rise in outdoor thermometers. In ghostly fashion, the Chinook often arrives at night to howl through bare branches on its brief haunt. How many times, after a night of uneasy, wind-swept sleep, did I arise to see the winter landscape transformed into a brown, damp mush. Snow was always welcome because it brought beauty and softness to the brown, barren stretches of desert. I could squint and imagine the wintry quilt that cloaked the Cascades and wrapped around the shoulders of Mt. Rainier.

Yet it is in those very Cascades that the Chinook is born, at first benign under blankets of mild Pacific air. The air cools as it rises, reaches the dew point,

and drenches the mountains with rain and snow. The act of condensation adds even more heat. By the time the air reaches the eastern slopes, it is dry and warm. Like an invisible swipe by the hand of the Creator it careens down the mountainside, heating up at more than five degrees per 1,000 feet. Trees and fences genuflect before the leading edge of gusts that hit 100 miles per hour.

This phenomenal wind is not limited to Washington. Around the world it earns its own name—Santa Ana, Sirocco, Chamsin, Karaburan, Sky Sweeper—conjuring exotic images of swirling sand and dancing flames.

No place for dreams, the basin. There the Chinook dispels illusion and exposes the harsh truth of dormancy and dark decay. It is a friend of the restless landscape. Somehow, over the years, it became my favorite wind. It is a wind of honesty.