



2016

## Wind, Water, Wall-Woman

Trinh T. Minh-Ha

*University of California at Berkeley*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://encompass.eku.edu/tcj>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Minh-Ha, Trinh T. (2016) "Wind, Water, Wall-Woman," *The Chautauqua Journal*: Vol. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <http://encompass.eku.edu/tcj/vol1/iss1/15>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Chautauqua Journal by an authorized administrator of Encompass. For more information, please contact [Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu](mailto:Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu).

TRINH T. MINH-HA

WIND, WATER, WALL-WOMAN

(Excerpts from *I-Blue*, a book in progress)<sup>1</sup>

*The Wind*

Once in a while, surreptitiously the Cry irrupts, bursting into light, giving life to what has gone dead and killing what is thought to be living. Whether it be scream, squeal or wail, the cut breeds form, which silence absorbs.

All sea outside inside. Immense, the ebb and flow; that interface between air, earth, water; or, spirit, breath and body. Immeasurable, boundlessly boundful, nonhuman within a human frame.

Froth, wind, the incessant rise and fall. How far can one dive, knowing not how to tread deep waters? Shore dwellers and swimmers putting their lives to the test in seawater have learnt to see an individual wave, isolating its pattern and components, whose complexities writing has eloquently preserved. To read and write a wave, it's difficult, it's feasible. But to listen to one, and one only? In so intense a din, nothing comes through without resonance. Only with ears shut wide does the sound of the single wave separated from the ones immediately preceding and following it manifest itself soundlessly. Majestically and spectrally, the vision of the singular fold and flow unwinds in slow motion as in a silent film. Yet, a wave is in itself a multiplicity. Tiny bits of water circling onto themselves, sweeping and swelling to indefinite sizes magically choreographed by the hand of the wind. All-activity, each waving appears as unique individual and disappears as no-individual in the silence of the communal ocean. One after the other they are seen dying, whitening to the cadence of winds and tides. Again and again the foam spreads while the lone break, the individuated shatter, goes unheard.

---

<sup>1</sup> © Trinh Minh-ha/Moongift Films. Excerpts from *I-Blue*, a book in progress. Not to be quoted, reproduced, and/or circulated without approval of the author.

The rise is in the dying. When language recedes, words return looking strangely at writing and at she who writes.

Wind writing on sea skin. Sea tongues and unsolicited voices drift in and are driven out. When everything seems to decay and the remains are swept away, the wind rises again. Only it knows the waves, whence they come, where they are heading. One either follows, swims against their flow at one's own risk, or else floats empty. Undulating adrift. Tossed about in nothingness. Writ in the language of flotsam. The wind disturbs, sickens, harms, but also enlivens and endows writing circumstantially with an end and a purpose. A predominance of water and wind is known to produce a bitter medicinal taste. For divers who have taken the sea as their abode, the kiss of the waves tastes—not sweet nor even salty, but—fresh and bitter. At least, it is so remarked by those who happily offer their flesh to the erotic flogging of the sea on windy days. Wind, in the science of healing, solicits deep listening, as it is one of the essential constituents of the body and one of the basic causes of the entire spectrum of diseases. Not quite visible, perhaps, but wind movements and effects can be acutely seen, heard and smelled. Illnesses of the body, so the science warns, are no other than imbalances of the wind. Physicians diagnose them by reading or listening to the pulse, which seems to beat normally, but when pressure is applied to it, it symptomatically becomes empty like a balloon on the surface of water. The patient suffering from such a disease is said to suffer from delirium and unlocalised pain, marked by restlessness, insomnia, screaming, laughing, and senseless talk.

Overuse of body, speech and mind on an empty stomach, overexposure to breezes and draughts invites leakage and uncontrolled flows there where everything looks sane and rational. Delirium pervades the social field and is always at work in Day reality. The Tibetan medical system treats disordered wind by suggesting a diet that has soft and warm powers, therapy in which hot and oily fomentation is applied on “wind” points, and repose in a warm and dark place with a desired friend. Healing requires warmth-inducing

behavior as well as maintenance of the stomach's heat, if this bodily field is to be kept fertile. Warm and dark go together in creativity—the act of love (or lovemaking for those whose dying to the self leads to no hoarding of power). There are many ways to go warm, and hot refers here neither to the temperature nor to the spicy taste of the food, although these may be linked. Wise eating, wise food speaks to the qualities of digestion and the powers arising from it. Perhaps the mouth is the organ of thinking. The mouth at the intersection of eye and ear, or else the nose at the intersection of tongue and hand. All depends on the *di*-gestive and *trans*-forming process. There where it is located—at the hips and waist—physicians characterize the wind in its development as “lightness and mobility manifested by the mind when, out of ignorance, it desires and becomes attached to attractive objects.”<sup>2</sup> A careful assemblage of apparent contradictions—*lightness, desire, mobility and attachment*—may lead to a halt or to the threshold of the word. Eros and logos, the malady grows with dispersion in acquisition (whether mental or material), and the inability to unmoor oneself or to free-flow bears many names, for these physicians of ancient ways have identified no less than sixty-three types of cold or wind diseases.

### *The Wave*

The world is all sound, which makes the ground of silence dangerously suicidal. No doubt, the wind says it best when it comes to nothingness. The sight of a wave, a solitary wave leaping high in a white meadow with no ocean in view, is nothing strange. Senseless talk? In the realm of fore sound, hearing needs absorption. Isolation often means release from hierarchical and customary subordination. It is either equated with dissociation in destruction or exalted as the quintessence of the creative source. But the pearls here are all fakes, for defiance is still dependence and genuine silence does not

---

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Pema Dorjee, with Elizabeth Richards, “Cures and Concepts of Tibetan Medicine,” *Tibetan Medicine* (A publication by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives), Series No. 2, 1981, 44.

necessarily come from elimination, exclusion or isolation. Tamed and dispossessed of its nightmarish power is the image of a tsunami—caught in its gigantic size on rice paper, on celluloid, or on colorful postcards—in the act of swallowing a miniscule boat, of soaring up above humble rooftops, of chasing mortals in their flight, and of blasting away whole villages. *One* of a kind against the commoners, or else, *One* on its own, unattached to the leveling waters of the world. The extra-ordinary in the *singular*, or simply, man at the mercy of nature's forces. What claims exceptionalness paradoxically turns out to be exceptionable. What becomes eagerly popularized would have to depend on the whims of the wind. Is the display of individual threat nothing but a need for a feeling of power? Or is it a wish to discharge what is assumed to be power? Perhaps, rather than waiting for the image to regain its real effect in dreams, one should simply accept the reality of encounters with wonder and let one's eyes meet, with neither fear nor rejection, the sight of a wave taking a stroll by itself, detached from its peers and consorts.

*Alone* is just as general as *Bread*, so a writer (Maurice Blanchot) notes, who finds rather comical the dilemma of a distress that writes well and moans: "I am alone." It is in a solitary condition, in deliriums and convulsions that new ideas and great men have, for some time now, conventionally thought to be born. Aloneness under the guise of solitude is easily tossed around in the narrow world of exceptions, and a grain of madness is commonly joined to originality when it comes to establishing innovators' credentials. Mystification chooses when to soak its geniuses *almost* wet in the shadows of insanity and when to flood them with the dry beam of super-clarity. He who writes (masterly) on madness, raves and stutters (admirably) *like* a madman, is often also he who confides, not quite to himself, but to the much-needed reader, that he is alone. The *lie*, whether partial or whole, depends on whether this not-quite solitude writes "well" across I, or whether it writes "in mediocrity" within an I, in which case it does not even *ring true*, unable as it is, to bear witness to its artifices.

Truth longs for the lie to disappear; it is, *in appearance*, the most enduring lie.

There's no one "mad" without others "sane." Nor is there a victim of loneliness without a lucid witness. Laughable and miserable, this delusion called desolation needs the Other's presence in order to take on meaning. No wonder, then, that one of the methods used in Japan to work with psychotic and neurotic subjects is to allow the person to be left alone and to live in isolation for three to six weeks, with all needs provided for, but with no doctors of any kind around. Half-mad; nearly; almost, but not quite. Alone, never alone, itself a multiplicity in language. Reading the "best" writings on madness and solitude often means engaging in a multiply haunted activity of *re-lire* (*re-lier*) and *dé-lire* (*dé-lier*)—of delirious re-reading and un-reading, or of indeterminate re-attaching and detaching. The more exact the words resorted to in order to cry out the loneliness, the greater the contradiction. The moment one puts it in writing one is already outside it, caught in the sanity of word arrangement and the collective babble of language.

No-mad solitude leaves the mind musing. What is it that makes the pain lie to itself? Often a reaction against normalcy with its rational institutions and mind-doctors, a work that capitalizes on madness tends also to capitalize on the anomaly of everyday reality. Banality and anonymity are no longer the order, but the disorder of the day. In a reverse economy of madness, one stops being insane when the world fully regains its sanity. Writing finds a way out (with poignancy and grace), by shifting the focus to *the madness of the day*: that queer, accurate encounter between the *every* day and the *other* night, in which the clarity of normal light exudes intractable insaneness. The darkest place is always right underneath the lamp, says a Chinese proverb. Blinded, one is driven to a revelation, not of the hidden, but of the obvious, the all-too-visible. Once the light is turned around and established dualities lose their pertinence, the need for solitude and madness can *detach* itself from its reactive anti-socialness (those who *dare* to be mad). The singular insanity being made manifest inside, the unseen madness of the world becomes disturbingly visible.

Silence is many-voiced.

Full lips in the morning mist. To such a single-to-myriad movement born in stillness, those hearing the traces of sea foam on warm sand with no thought clinging to their heart would go mad with joy. But in a room full of bawling winds and waters where landscape imitates mindscape, self-made knots can be so tortuous as to make it impossible to give ear to such a silent multiplicity. Listening to voices in the whirlwind, one sometimes only hears the barking of a not-so-solitary voice spewing forth venom, trying overtly to chastise those with whom it comes into contact, while covertly demanding from them unconditional love. Building its own decor in the unfolding drama of life, the voice also devises for itself the sole protagonist's role, being actor and reactor, observer observed, and victim of the times in which it lives. A time, it is thought, of *windsurfing*, when reacting to, riding with and adapting the motion of that gigantic wave are more appropriate than creating one—even a small one among others—to alter the course of events.

Catch the third wave, let the fourth go, for a new wave, and another again, has already begun to wash away all traces on the shore. Nobody listens today because nobody cares or knows how to, so goes the lament. The anguish and the craving to make a mark on one's contemporaries bleed out in the tone of the work, which blindly registers the individual's states of bitterness. A voice in the dark? No, a voice among voices in the whirlwind. A singular mark in the heart of globalization. Internal or external, the struggle is carried on in writing between T-terms: Time (The Times) or Tone? Neither or both, perhaps, for despite its familiar music across histories and cultures, every story of the wound is told as a unique story from one victim to another. In the archives of thoughts, deeds, and art, numerous were the individualities that tried to make a dent in the structure of the day, but were drowned out. It would be doing them injustice to think they failed because they weren't loud enough, when truly they were so enamored with their own thinking as to shut themselves up in their own noises.

*When love goes dying and fascism finds its way back up...*

Fall and rise. Rise toward the fall. There where L disappears, F is said to reappear in full glory. The amorous movement draws in and out in solitude. Traces left by the one are properly wiped out by the other, for the sake of sanity and sanitation. A line detached from a previous context of insanity continues here and now to speak out of the blue. Fissured and already non-original, it is meant to return and travel. No doubt a false move, a mad fever of emotional heights and subjectification has been driving love to its entombment. And since loners pining away for attachment to their own images are born as much from misery as from mastery, the forces of repression and of oppression continue to thrive under the cover of passion and separatism. The flame passes on, leaving behind graphics of the firewood consumed. Ever present is the threat of being muffled from the outset as a voice emerges and events are set into words. The sounds fervently emitted can be skillfully dulled or deadened through a comprehensive system, not necessarily of censorship, but of anticreative appropriation, expropriation, and mutilation in simulation. For some then, the time when love dies and fascism rises is dreadfully specific. . . The blame needs a traceable face within a named ethnicity. In the land of the free, suddenly, thousands disappear overnight, deported or detained without charge, for reasons of homeland security.

Again, the way of the wind emerges as pivotal to all relations of movement and repose. Its sounding power can make wonders happen, but only when the time and context are ripe: at dawn or sunset, when thresholds of colors imperceptibly slide into one another; or else, on a moonlit night when the mind clears and the body walks noiselessly. At the twilight of language, immediate change through cleansing and purifying is an illusion; only the intense affirmation of repetition in difference exposes death's and the World Order's conceit.



### Wind Power

As an answer to Huang-di's question, "Why is it that the same illness having the same origin and manifesting itself at the same time can present itself in different clinical forms? Has the sky created wind to punish man?" Shaoyu remarked: "the wind does not take anyone as its target, but man, by his carelessness, let himself be caught by the wind."

### *The Wall*

Endless attempts are made to drive Home away and to ban the Return. Yet everyone is said to carry a roof on the back and a room inside oneself. It is by one's ear that one is asked to prove this fact for, if one listens intensely—as did Kafka—when someone walks fast, say during nighttime, what one hears is "the rattling of a mirror not quite firmly fastened to the wall."<sup>3</sup> With the fragility of the reflective device comes the threat of alterity and multiplicity that lurks during quiet times behind the agony of clattering sounds caused by external movements. Bodies in collision, bodies shuffled away in haste, footsteps resounding in the empty night. Who are you, appearing in front of me? Seeking, shouting to the dark; then, walking behind, sitting by my side, lying across my path, breaking or laughing when I am mending and crying. What? ... You mean that sound? So loud, I can't hear. No one can. And yet there it is, soundlessly present as stories and emotions rise from nowhere's depths to the surface. It's the silence of the voiceless thousands crowded within the building's walls, waiting in pitch dark to be lifted up to the sky, far from home. No, no light allowed in the ink of the night, for fear that bullets may have eyes, leaving their writing on the wall. What? ... It says they dare step out of their shores and while fleeing, forget to weep, even soundlessly. Lips. Voices of exiles, refugees and emigrants recede in the distance and return loudly in waves nearby. Secrets buried deep in the opacity of matter may suddenly and uncontrollably speak, rising uninvited to the impassive surface of the wall.

---

<sup>3</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks* (Cambridge, Mass.: Exact Change, 1991), 1.

Shhhhhhhh! Stop talking, or else.

Mouth lies. What terrifies is not always the act per se so much as its overblown projection: the numerous thoughts that wildly arise from one's own fears and insecurities—the evident, rather than the unknown. What one finds oneself so afraid of is the very stench of truth emanating from oneself: one's own elusive enemy. When terror awakens, the wall out of bounds loses its opacity. It lets one see what is not meant to be seen. From the outside in, the brick wall. From the inside out, the skin wall. (Or is it the other way around?) Both have innumerable ears and eyes, wide open or wide shut as circumstance requires. The ultra-thin film separating the two sides of one's intimate wall—the communal inner-outer sounding board—constantly threatens to disappear, leaving one *raw*. Sometimes, walls can become turning points. They stand out at once as screens and as doorways—the *impasse* (what materially prevents visibility) and the *passage* to an elsewhere (what lies on the other side of its material visibility).

A boundary event, the wall-no-wall draws into focus one's relationship to visibility and invisibility. It is a (non)corporeal reality whose opacity and bi-dimensionality are paradoxically indicative of an infinite non-place. The Great Wall of immortality; the wall of life built on innumerable deaths. Both door and doorway are nowhere to be seen. One goes on knocking in the dark but no One is there to answer. How utterly vain it is to try to break in there where one is already inside. How many have flung themselves into the abyss of the wall hoping for a breakthrough? The mystery is that of no secret. All is there, and one is said to be a sorry traveler in this noisy world if one knows not how to return to the stillness of the sea within oneself.

Once the flow is let out, it falls silent....

When one enters the world of words with more in sight than the skill of joining sentences, the art of making verses, the ability to shape meanings, the goal to impart a message, or the quest for new concepts and ideas, one is bound to founder from shore to

shore, to experience instances of all white in the midst of radiant life, and to take a dive into the infinite realms of twilight gray....

Imperfectly hemmed with white, words swell and recede at their own pace. Some cling and stick to one's skin, others float in the room between floor and ceiling. Liquid as they all are, they evaporate and dry up. But sometimes, just as they seem to fade into white, they return wet again in a solitary sneeze. Something not being said is speaking silently, which demands and endures waiting. At the call of dusk, anger goes dying with the return of nightlight. Facing the wall in emptiness then has little to do with being walled in by emptiness. The gap between the two grows wider as *one* instant of true love, no matter how brief and fragile, is enough to inaugurate a taste for the infinite. Each syllable used to translate It, each sound breaking into light carries its wonders into the smallest details of daily life. There, amidst the sea, a woman stands. A single "w" holding up the sky while diving into the wreck of the infamous Wall. That non-place against which images, sounds and thoughts arise and vanish. A living surface-membrane; a target for the eye and a visual rupture; an earthwork, blind and blinding in its immovable and impenetrable (im)material appearance; a song of texture in its own right.

### *The Silence of the Sea*

A drop yearns to find its way to the Ocean. Freed, water returns to water, again and again breaking through the individual container. Love urges her to enter the cold sea and fill herself to the brim with the chill of Freshness. Her body quivers with every wave movement. Who writes all that strange poetry of the senses? Woman and water give and receive in mutual resistance and surrender. There, soaking wet, she gulps down liquid and moon, drinking in the fresh, the salty, the bitter. In the ripple of the light, a sign, then a question now and then surfaces on the night page. Can a drop stay still in the Ocean? Yet despite the forceful beating and tossing of the waves, she stands still. Struggle and fall, she does, as she weeps and laughs her way up again, dripping in the iciness and standing

still. The Great woman Barrier. Her boundaries are her very access. Carrying the sea inside, she moves with the receding and the returning, letting the time of coming and going find its own rhythm. Letting the sea be deceptively defined by the horizon's flat line; letting the wind sweep wild through her liquid field; letting this body open a path that is no path in the briny water and walk its way back to the shore.

Now facing seaward, silent at the edge of land and water, she and the sea. The selfsame sea that calls everything unto Her is now gazing back at her gaze. Mystery arises as living starts asking questions about itself. The ever-changing surface of the sea inquires about its own unfathomable depths. And the answer? *Silence*: solid, empty, watchful and awake. The Answer closes in around the Question so as to preserve the latter, keeping it open, bottomless. In the encounter of woman and sea—so small and so vast, the infinite multiplicity of the singular—three worlds mingle on the page: the *ones* of desire, form and non-form.

*Mute thunder*. The sand delights to feel her bare feet. Time stands still. From the quietness, attention effortlessly arises. She is all ear, listening wide with no memory. Not a single sound in the night. There, unseen, silence appears. Unmistakable, unavoidable, saying nothing, wanting nothing, judging no one, bearing no grudge, it awaits, lurking, spreading, filling in every form, and catching one unawares—in the lips, in a stranger's eyes, in the heart of a gesture, in the very word used to name it. Unblinking, the world stares back at the empty surface of the mirror wall. The larger has suddenly entered the small; the ocean has slipped into the drop. Inside meets outside in the familiar everyday. The body, losing its boundary, slowly looks round and around, the way the earth turns on itself.

With the unexpected irruption of vastness, the feeling of having gone over the edge expands ever wider and yet, everything in the surrounding is in the same place. Words, rocks, stones, sand, shellfishes, seaweed, froth and foam: more vibrant than ever, each form fully alive and constantly in movement—in their places. Something big and

uncontainable has gotten into the room without warning. But the moon is still the same moon. Quietly, in small single steps, she reverts to her daily activities and pretends nothing has happened. Time returns to its usual pulsation...

Uncannily non-scalar, from end to end, ...I start walking.