


The Names of Wind

 According to the Western Abenaki of New England, the winds of their world were generated by a giant eagle that lived on a craggy peak and flapped its wings continuously. Various nomadic tribes of central Asia had a comparable myth. They believed that the wind originated from a vast hole in a mountain somewhere to the west. And the Inuit of Alaska thought that the winds issued forth from an opening in the sky.

Here in the West, we believe that the wind is generated by the mother of all earthly things, our own star Sun. According to our legend, the sun beats down on the equatorial tropics, heating the air, which subsequently rises high into the stratosphere, creating a vacuum all along the equator. Because of the physical phenomenon known as the Coriolis effect, air from both the north and the south rushes in to fill the space, thereby creating, because of the rotation of the earth, the ever-reliable trade winds.

This basic system is much complicated by landforms such as deserts and mountain ranges, which churn and blend the moving airs, creating a variety of local winds. Some of these such as the foehn are warm dry winds that flow down the lee side of the mountains. Some, such as the sirocco, are bred in deserts and drawn northward by low-pressure areas. Many of these local winds are notorious for their strength as well as their effect on the human psyche, and most of them are named, a fact that has added to the rich tapestry of languages.

For a while, when I was younger, I lived in one of the epicenters of these local wind systems—the island of Corsica, which is tucked up in the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean and for this reason is subject to powerful winds from both the European continent and North Africa. It is probably not coincidental that the first place Odysseus fetched up after his sailors mistakenly released the four winds that set him on his twenty-year course of wanderings was likely Corsica.

Nine winds plague the island. In winter the chilling mistral comes scything down the Rhône Valley, lifting tiles from roofs and screaming across the Gulf of Genoa to Corsica, where it is sometimes joined, or followed, by a companion wind called the tramontana, which blasts in off the cold plains of the Po. The



sirocco charges up from the Sahara, carrying desert sands and hammering at the island as many as a hundred days a year. The grecale brings rain from the Apennines every winter. The levante storms in from the east. The ponente from the west. The mezzogiorno at midday and the terrana blows in at dusk, reaching its crescendo at midnight. And finally, there is the libecciu, the sickle of the northwest coast, where I lived. It crosses the Mediterranean and comes cutting in from Gibraltar, slamming itself against Cap Corse and beating the sea to a froth.

The winds of Corsica are an annoyance, but, except perhaps for the cold, bright, headache-inducing mistral, they do not seem to affect the islanders' frame of mind. Farther to the east, that is not the case. The meltemi, which is associated with bad tempers, screams out of the Balkans and strikes at the Isles of Greece. The traditional hot suffocating simoon breeds in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula, carrying the dust and sand of the Sahara and causing shortness of breath and fretfulness; and to the west, in Niger, the dusty harmattan is believed to agitate local cattle. People in Austria and southern Germany say they can feel the onset of the mountain wind known as the foehn, which brings on a general lethargy, headaches, irritability, and may even be associated with thrombosis. And there is a northerly wind in Spain, the matababras, that supposedly kills goats.

Here in North America, we do not lack our own ill winds. In southern California, the fire-breeding Santa Ana brings on asthma and hay fever and carries thick clouds of smoke and ash from its associated fires. In Texas, the clear sky-blue northers often signify an ominous change in the weather, and the famous warming wind of the eastern Rockies, known as the Chinook, or snow eater, can melt a foot of snow in a matter of hours, bring on migraines, and may even have an effect on crime rates.

Fortunately, here in fickle-weathered New England, we only have two winds to fear—the rainy southeasters and the dreaded northeasters—which give rise to high winds and heavy rains, or snow or sleet or freezing rain, and sink ships, erode beaches, and bring on an internal chill that even tea and a warm fireplace cannot seem to banish.

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