

Breath of God, Breath of the Devil

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

In the days of summer, not everyone is conscious of the wind in the north country. Those folks who are are mostly sailors, wind surfers, canoeists. In the days of fall, everyone becomes more aware of the wind. In the mornings, you begin to feel a chill. That chill is coming from Canada. The winds bring it. It gets you thinking. Steady Eddy says it got his Hungry Poet thinking, and this is what HP thought.

When you do hear the Wind
Where is the Wind?

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Is it possible to see the Wind
Ever?

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The Wind leaves tracks,
a path where it passes.
They are mysterious as deep tracks
in snow, deep tracks
put down by something Big.
Sometimes, if we follow them on skis
or snowshoes, those deep tracks,
they just end
in the winter fields.

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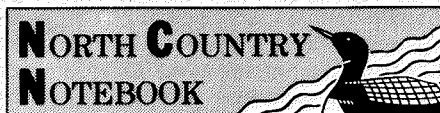
A nun told us once about the Wind.
It was our class Christmas party.
Every Christmas the nuns took their
classes
ice skating on the little bay.
One year, Sister Mary Justa took us
skating.
She had black skates and a black
muffler
Her young face was all red, like a farm
girl's.
Sister Justa told us sometimes the Wind
was "the breath of God."

There was an old priest, Father Burbach, with us.

He kept the fire going in the oil drum.
"Sometimes," Father Burbach said,
"the Wind
can be the breath of the Devil."
He laughed and filled a cup
from his thermos bottle. We thought
coffee,
it really was wine. Hot wine.

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"I remember once," the Old Priest said,
"when I was young as you,
the Wind chasing us down
a Canadian lake. Chasing my father
and me. That Wind felt
like wolves back there. That Wind
rolled
the waters right over our stern
where my father struggled.
Our canoe flew, fled
like a frightened bird from shotguns
in the duck blinds.



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"I wet my pants. I think we
both wet our pants in fear
that we would drown
that we would die right there
that day. I was too scared to pray.
I cried instead. Everything was water.
We were soaked so much by waves
and rain that it was hard to tell
if I had wet my pants or not.
I knew.

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"When we careened
into the quiet bay
where the portage was
the Wind ran howling, raging
past the rocky door.
My blood was pounding
inside my body
like the waves were pounding
outside the rocky door.
My breath was coming in deep,
terrible gasps like a dying deer.
We put our paddles
across our knees
I cried because death was close.
Death was right there
outside the rocky door.
Death was that Wind.
Death was running on that water today.
Death almost ran us over today.
I cried because I was young
I didn't want to die today.
I never thought if my father
was thinking that, too.
He was old. I never saw my old
father cry, ever. We were floating
in still water. My father was wet
all over. It looked like he peed
his pants, too. My old father, an old
seagull,
he was laughing. The canoe was half-
sunk.
He got me laughing, too.
We laughed like loons."

The fog comes on little cat feet, Carl Sandburg said. The Wind, from now on, blows the poetry right out of you. ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Sunday nights at 9:30 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WERN (88.7 FM).