**Adbhuta, Ananda, Attention, *Not* Apocalypse – On Working on a New Language of the Environment**

(A note on the excerpt below: This is work-in-progress, and it hasn’t been published. I would request all of you to not circulate it outside this group for that reason. I am interested in recording the living history of the relationship between the elements and human emotions through a framework that comes from Bharata’s *Natya Shastra*. In this excerpt I look at air with adbhuta rasa, wonder.)

That the breeze loves me as much as I love the breeze is the first and continuing source of wonder.

I have collected words for air in languages I know and want to know. Hawa, air, wind, foo, aire, breeze … I say the words consciously – to note how my mouth and its insides behave as I pronounce them. It opens – to let air in and out. Every morning I open my window and say the word: wind-ow, it's the space for wind to enter, like it does through my nose and mouth. Furfurey – an onomatopoeic Bangla word for the quality of the air, of the breeze: crispy, gentle but smart. Think of all the sounds for air in the languages you live in. Chances are there might be as many words for different kinds of air in your language as there are for varieties of snow for the Eskimos, as the linguistic mythology goes. Where does this language come from? I would have imagined that accents and difference in pronunciations were peculiar to being on earth, that air would make all accents similar. What generates adbhuta – astonishment – is the vernacular language of air, its changing dialect, the impossibility to circumscribe it to a written script. For the movement of earth and water and fire can be mapped by artists, but it seems impossible to show air. Air is what air does. One sees it in action, its consequence – one can only imagine its prehistory. It is this vernacular dialect of air that Christina Rossetti wants to hold in her poem.

Who has seen the wind?

Neither I nor you:

But when the leaves hang trembling,

The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?

Neither you nor I:

But when the trees bow down their heads,

The wind is passing by.

Notice how a simple inversion of I and you in the second lines of the two stanzas by Christina Rossetti allows for a difference in rhyme that visually calibrates the wind, its speed, density and vigour. Neither I nor you – the wind is passing through. Neither you nor I – The wind is passing by. ‘Through’ and ‘by’, such simple words, and yet in them are held worlds of attention, in one the leaves tremble, the other makes trees bow down their heads. We see both because of the way the poet holds wonder and attention, deep and affectionate attention, in these words and in the arrangement of words. For it is air that determines form – the shape of trees and also of speech, of postures of all living forms. ‘Notice that the stiffest tree is most easily cracked, while the bamboo or willow survives by bending with the wind,*’* said Bruce Lee. In these cracks and bends, and their difference are the vernacular dialects of air.

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My niece, alone for many hours of the day, has found playmates in the window curtains. The windows are tall, reaching from the floor to almost the ceiling. They swell with air that sprints in through the windows – they become people, tall people without hands and feet and a face, their bodies all elongated. My niece runs away from these pillars of air and waits for them to recede. Then she returns to them with a little caution, before abandoning it altogether. She hugs the long cylinders of air, trying to squish them like we do her. And, in a moment, her spirit is overturned – there is disappointment. The magical columns of air transform into curtains again. She loses her playmates, their airy bodies, their unpredictable movements, more acrobatic than a seesaw. The magic of the moment is gone – it is the magic of air, its wonder, inside a balloon, inside an instrument measuring blood pressure, inside our nostrils that keeps us alive.

I see her trying to become air – she wants to have a body of air. Even though she’s so young, she’s understood that air has no feet, that one can walk without feet. I see her replicating the movements of air – she mistakes the air inside her frock, that pleats the cotton temporarily, to be air. The dress swirls, she moves round and round, and then, as if emphasis is necessary, she says, ‘See – I’ve become a fan’. The ceiling fan is moving above us. I look at it and then at my niece – both show no inclination to possess. They look like future descendants in the evolutionary track, of mammals and machines who became air.

Not mammal and machine alone, there are the plants. Have you seen the pollination of seeds of a sal tree? (<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/bH-CQC5tS1E>) Shorea robusta is wind-pollinated – its massive flowering and its even more amplified pollen production might not have been so prominent to the tropical memory and imagination had the pollen release from its seeds not been so explosive. The seeds look like an army of helicopters or ceiling fans released from the tree. They spin and spin, like soldiers of the wind, tickling the air, swirling it, working the air like belly dancers, almost competitive to reach land. Then there are the aerial roots of plants, growing outside their familiar habitats of soil and water, massaging the air, trusting it, reaching out to a place of support through it, its roots like infant fingers. That air is a catalyst, invisible at most times, is a moment of wonder and a reminder – human fantasy is a weak derivative of the elemental world.

Like our emotions, the elements cannot really be divided – most of all, air. That by itself is a source of perennial wonder – what passes through our two nostrils, what we try to hold in our two cupped palms, what we think we can hold inside balloons is an illusion. Air cannot be divided. It is this sense of wonder that makes Emily Dickinson say – ‘Banish Air from Air’, or to divide light if one dared, with the challenge to the human – ‘over your impotence flits steam’.

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Air is ‘vayu’ – ‘vata’, the Sanskrit word for it, means ‘blown’. ‘Prana’, a word common to many Indian languages, means both ‘air’ and ‘breath’ – such is the wondrous nature of air. ‘Vata’, the word for air, also supplies the root for the Hindi and Sanskrit word for atmosphere – ‘vatavaranam’. The first avatar of Vayu is Hanuman, the reason he’s called ‘pavanputra’, son of Pavan or air. Imagining a being of both land and air, fluent in both its languages, produces a monkey god, a wonder in itself, something we might have been had we had our hearts been lighter.

Is the language of birds the language of air? ‘The Hamsa Upanishad says Hamsa is life breath; the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says it is the eternal soul. Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, rides the Hamsa, and in Gandhara art, the Buddha’s fingers and toes are webbed like a hamsa bird to show the control his intellect has over his actions and desire. Similarly, Buraq, the bird-horse composite, is a Sufi “symbol of the human breath by means of which the mystic travels to the world of the spirit and contemplation of the Divine” … an otherworldly “carriage to cover the intellectual distance of understanding Allah’s reality.’ (Meena Arora Nayak, *Adbhut: Marvellous Creatures of Indian Myth and Folklore*, New Delhi: Aleph, 2022, xxix)

Kaka Bhusundi, a crow who visits Rama in all his lifetimes, to watch him play, as infant, toddler and a little boy, travels through time in this manner. Though the crow Bhusundi changes, Rama’s life remains the same. After having witnessed Rama’s life with his brothers and Sita, he flies out of Rama’s mouth – at once, he becomes a little crow in Ayodhya, and Rama an infant. Born as a Sudra in Rama’s birthplace, he had to leave it for Ujjain because of a devastating famine in Ayodhya. It was from there that his life of many births and many forms began – cursed by a Brahmin, he had to live as a snake for many lifetimes until he was liberated of the form. He became a bird. Punished for being a relentless debater, arguing for God in the form of Rama over the formless God, he had to be content with being a crow, and even in this form he could see Rama everywhere, in every form, everywhere in the world.

As if flying and wings were not magical enough, birds, more than all other living beings, speak like humans in our stories. There’s Byangoma and Byangomi, a pair of birds that can predict the future and speak like us; their droppings can cure princes and help a king to regain his sight. And there’s Hiraman – as Shastraganja, who could recite the four Vedas, which explains his name, and who also finds a life in Banabhatta’s Kadambari, where his name is Vaishampayana; there’s another talking parrot in Shukasaptati, who prevents a merchant’s daughter-in-law from taking a lover by telling her a story about infidelity for seventy-two nights. There’s the vulture Jatayu, as large as a mountain, alive for 60,000 years, who sacrifices his life in trying to protect Sita when Ravana abducts her. And there is the peacock, its feathers a thing of wonder, its tail said to be a gift from Indra, the god of thunder and lightning, who told the peacock that its tail will resemble his thousand eyes. When I send rain to the earth, you will dance, he said – which is what the peacock does with the arrival of the monsoons. The peacock has another unexpected relationship with water – deprived of sexual pleasure by biology, its sperm is in its tears, which the peahen drinks to conceive.

Why do political parties have emblems and logos of life and the living on land? Grass, hammer, sickle, hand … But birds and insects? Why do we not see them on flags? Is our political life a suppression of or control of adbhuta rasa, our capacity to wonder? Durga, the young girl in Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s novel *Pather Panchali*, poor, treated badly for her lifelovingness, often ostracized by her relatives, finds that there is something that air has still to give her, even when land has turned miserly. ‘She felt like running around in joy. Seeing that she was alone, she actually spread her arms like a bird spreads its wings and ran around the filed for a while. She wished she could fly; then she would go up, like those birds. Way, way up, into that clear blue sky. The body was such a light thing. If she had feathers on her arms, she was certain she could easily have glided through the air. Then, for the sheer joy of hearing the crunch, she walked up and down on the piles of dry leaves in a corner of the field.’ (232) Bibhutibhushan, whose writing is suffused with his intoxication to the rush of life, seemed to have been greedy for the magic of air. Apu, Durga’s little brother in the same novel, discovers a secret in *Shorbo Dorshon Songroho*, a book he’s stolen to read from his poor father’s esoteric collection. ‘While describing the many qualities of quicksilver, the author said that if one filled vulture eggs with quicksilver and left them in the sun for a few days, then the eggs acquired the ability of letting humans fly. All a human had to do to fly was to hold the egg inside his mouth.’ (240) ‘…When he finally held the eggs in his palms, he felt almost weightless; like an air-filled rubber balloon.’ (243) ‘Would those eggs really make him fly? If yes, then where would he fly to? His mother’s old village? Wherever his father was now? On the other side of the river? Or simply high up, like the hill mynahs – closer to the twinkling stars?’ (244)

What exactly do we seek in flight? Geoff Dyer, writing about D H Lawrence and Nietzsche’s fascination for an imagined bird-life, writes in *Out of Sheer Rage*: ‘Birds in flight, claims the architect Vincenzo Volentieri, are not *between* places, they carry their places with them. We never wonder where they live: they are at home in the sky, in flight. Flight is their way of being in the world. (131)

At certain moments, writes Nietzsche, a person undertaking ‘the dangerous privilege of living *experimentally’* will experience ‘a pale, subtle happiness of light and sunshine, a feeling of bird-like freedom, bird-like altitude, bird-like exuberance, and a third thing in which curiosity is united with a tender contempt’. At his ‘bird-like altitude’ in the Alps Lawrence experiences exactly this sudden, liberating surge that renders an entire life worthwhile because it has led to this moment when you are in the middle of your destiny, ready to accept anything that comes.’

Rabindranath Tagore, imagining his bird-life life, feels something similar: I’ve not left the history of my flight in the sky, but I flew, in that is my joy. (<https://www.tagoreweb.in/Verses/lekhan-78/56-10456>)

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The wonder about the magical powers of air is revealed in the language we use, the idioms and phrases that connect the public lives of our ancestors to our secret lives. Some of these have to do with hierarchy, related to the top-bottom conditioning in our linguistic and cultural lives, owing to air being where it is – up there. And hence the ‘airs and graces’ and ‘having the air of’ ‘putting on the air of’ – of an invisible understanding of the upper class and upper caste as being relatives of air. (The crassest example of such thinking is visible in the topi-dhoti colloquial that is used for two groups or ethnicities of people in Nepal: ‘topi’, meaning hat or cap, for the upper caste, usually Brahmin, and ‘dhoti’, the unstitched garment for the lower half of the body, used for the ‘madhesiya’, a people who had come decades – or perhaps a century – ago from India’s Terai region to work in Nepal’s tea plantations; a manner of denotation that marked the migrants as inferior.) There’s also lightness and uncertainty – ‘float on air’ and ‘up in the air’ respectively. And joy and success – the reason we have the optic of students throwing their graduating hats and other props into the air or why sportspeople raise their hands or pump their fists in the air or people throw money at performers as appreciation. That is why we experience a ‘celebratory air’. That something as insubstantial as air could be appropriated to stand for superiority seems like a bit of magic itself, but it is the character of its transformative potential, of its possibility of generating adbhuta that some other idioms reveal: ‘out of thin air’, ‘pluck out of thin air’, ‘disappeared into thin air’.

It is perhaps for this reason that Shakespeare gives Ariel, the ‘airy spirit’ of his play, *The Tempest*, the power of magic, of transformation, of causing wonder and surprise.

In another continent, in another century, and in another language, a poet imagines this spirit of air as madness: ‘Pagla hawar badol diney, pagol aamar mon jegey othey …’ The mad air in these windy days, my mad mind awakens … Rabindranath’s song about the mad winds of Birbhum continue: beyond the familiar, away from the known paths, the mind (and the wind) runs without reason … What is this outside the familiar that stuns reason if not adbhuta, astonishment? Like peace, we think madness comes to us from without. Unlike peace, which we seek, for madness we seek a cure. We want to be rid of it, as if it were an infection. Like love, which is often its progenitor, we know of its short life, even though that short period seems like an eternity. We ascribe it to those we cannot understand: lovers, poets, artists, the disobedient. Prophets, too, are mad people – who else can walk on water or ask the sea to part to make way for them and their men or allow themselves to be nailed to a piece of wood? What is madness in this case is perhaps a manifestation of wonder, a way of seeing and feeling the world as if it were a thing of magic, the magic changing every moment. Adbhutam rasa is the permission one gives to oneself, without being aware of it of course, that one can be enchanted by this world one finds oneself in. It is a function of surprise, of marveling in the unexpected, or in knowing that every moment is a repository of the unexpected.

Tagore’s dialogue with the wind is endless: why is the wind blowing after the rains, why does it buzz in the veins of my heart?; with your wind in my sails I am willing to drown; Southern winds, wake up, wake up my slumbrous being; the wintry wind on the gooseberry vines is making the leaves dance to its beat; the excited wind has touched the ship of my song, it is moving to that rhythm … In all these songs, innumerable as they are, is the same blood of wonder: what is this madness that is air? That is why the birds, too, are mad, mad because they are outside our regimes of control and domination, because, like the air and like madness, they come to us unbidden and unexpectedly.

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If it was possible to record the taste of air like one can check for acidity on pH paper, the record of North Bengal’s air would resemble a rainbow or a watercolour box. I say ‘taste of air’ by which I also mean its temperature. If – to continue with the trail of hypothesis – there was a particular time when I’d like to use the imagined air paper (let’s call it pA – potential of air, like pH is potential of hydrogen), I’d use it now. In November.

November seems like a secret smuggled in between the loudness of an Indian October, with its rituals and festivals, and the tremulous excitement of December, of the feeling of a holiday, of the season’s greetings as it were. In North Bengal, it comes to us through the air. The body responds like a thermometer, and, with every morning, a new layer of clothing is taken out. A cotton chadar, batik or a hint of Sambalpur, bought from Santiniketan or Puri, is remembered in the first week of November. It is enough for the morning and evening coolness of the air. It is worn more to invoke winter than as protection from the cold, for the cold has still not arrived. It has only sent its first messengers. The dew is one of them, and it begins spending the night and mornings on leaves and grass. The ritual of wiping the brother’s forehead with dewdrops collected on the morning of Bhai Phnota seems like an acknowledgement of its arrival, a hopeful appreciation of its stay over the next few months.

By the second week, the smell of the air has changed. Twigs and leaves – and now plastic – are being burnt on streets and in neighbourhood gatherings. From the terrace, if it is a clear evening, one can see the smoke climb up and disappear. In a month or so, the same smoke will acquire more body and spine – it will become stiffer in the cold air, almost vertebrate-like. It is not the smell alone that tinges the air. It is the chill, subtle but stubborn. One late morning in mid-November the house will suddenly be filled with the smell of naphthalene – the blankets, aestivating for months, will be rushed to verandahs and terraces for sunlight, to fatten up and to lose their smell of naphthalene-sleep. And it will be winter. Sometimes people will say it a few times a day, to ensure that their words are coming true, later, like a truism, or even like a piece of information, as if it were a loved one’s birthday.

The pA paper for determining the taste of air that I have imagined already exists in the minds of its residents. When we drove or cycled past Sukna’s Ila Pal Choudhury Memorial (Tribal) Hindi High School in the summer we stuck out our tongues to taste the approaching mountain air like an ice lolly. Now we close our mouths, and the air slaps our cheeks and forehead like a masseur getting our blood circulation into life. By the time we are in Tindharia, the air is no longer a friend. It’s a thief, trying to sneak through any space that it can find, mostly the ears, and the eyes and mouth. As one climbs higher, the air becomes a person, a guest one would rather avoid meeting. But such is the charm of November, this in-between month, that everything and everyone, even this cold person, feels lovable.

In the Dooars, the air becomes fat. It is like Kumbhakarna now – by early afternoon in this approaching season of short days, it is lying supine over the top of the growing harvest on agricultural fields in this region. The end of a scarecrow’s scarf blows in the cold breeze, a grandmother tries to fight the wind persistently, adjusting the shawl on her head, a goat will look at the weak shadow of leaves shivering in the cold air and wonder whether it should try eating them.

Winter will, of course, be cold, as will be its air. But this is a different drama – one where the prologue to winter seems longer and more delightful than winter itself. Adurey thhanda, affectionate chill, or mishti thhanda, sweet cold – these phrases will annotate conversations, decisions around menus at home and picnics, and clothing. All of these will mark November as a season unto itself – a season of waiting for the real season. Every day the colour of the pA paper will change a little, but it’ll always be unpredictable, for there might be one warm day that will make us forget the soft cold of the days preceding it. In other continents, leaves change colour and fall, giving the season its name. We might have called this season ‘hawa’ – a word common to many languages spoken by the residents of north Bengal.

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Quite often, as I sit on my bed and look out of the bedroom window, I see air. It surprises me – for, like god or ghosts or the human heart, air is not supposed to be seen. It is not that being in Sonipat, this small district town in Haryana, close to Delhi, has given me this special ability to see what I had not been able to see in four decades of my life. It is just that here, for many months of the year, one can see nothing but this air. Everything competes with it for visibility – headlights of automobiles, people and their houses, winter breath, and, of course, the sky. Light, which can sneak in through almost everything, even into dreams, waits at the door of this air, pressing to get in, such that we sense the presence of light as shadow. This disorientation is followed by anger and confusion, of the body as much as the mind, which coagulate into a mix of wonder and disgust so that when I hear a child next door being taught ‘A for apple’ by his mother, I feel the urge to go to the balcony and scream, ‘No, no, A for Air’.

How is one to draw air in place of the red apple? “Hawa hoye gyalo” – vanished into thin air – is an expression in Bangla that takes the transparent body of air as a given. But the air here is no longer transparent. For most of the year, but particularly from October to February, it is the color of snot. I gradually begin to notice that no one calls it ‘air’ anymore, not even its equivalent in the Indian languages. (“Hawa katha ta hawa hoye gyachhey,” a Bengali colleague jokes, “the word ‘air’ has disappeared into air.”) Apocalypse has quietly become its substitute – my students use it from time to time; there’s a sigh in the way they pronounce it. In middleclass and upper middleclass spaces, ‘air’ has been replaced by an acronym. “AQI?” they ask, referring to the health of air as though it were a patient’s thermometer reading. Air Quality Index. Until a few years ago, I’d have laughed at the phrase, like I did at the expression Gross National Happiness; they both felt like things that were unquantifiable.

There are other words, too. When someone hears me cough on the phone, for instance, they ask, “Sonipat?” For these well-meaning and affectionate outsiders, that cough is my GPS, my current location – it is also the new name for air. When I travel elsewhere, Sonipat is the baseline against which I compare all other kinds of air. It is neither real nor metaphor. It is an alarm signal that goes off inside me, inside us.

Air is our lover, it is meant to be affectionate, as the many songs about ‘hawa’ and ‘thandi hawa’, the cooling breeze, in Hindi cinema tell us. But what is meant to keep us alive has turned against us. Instead, here it punishes, tortures, harasses, threatens, and changes the vocabulary of our bodies and our language. Our eyes water from the way it burns; the insides of our throats are walls rubbed by sandpaper. On TV and in newspapers, blame is apportioned in pie-charts: factories, automobiles, buses, construction work, and, of course, the favorite scapegoat – stubble burning, which refers to how farmers in Punjab and Haryana burn stubble in their fields after harvesting their wheat and rice. They do it to save time and labor on uprooting what remains.

Widespread stubble burning can be traced back to the Green Revolution of the 1960s, which introduced a suite of new agricultural techniques to increase cereal crop production. Although these techniques resulted in huge increases in yields that helped to feed people across the country, many researchers now believe they damaged the land by changing the cycles of sowing and harvesting. Autumn, when the region’s air movements are more static and stubborn, became the season of burning. Monitoring and government policies meant to benefit both the farmer and protect the environment over the last few years has led to a decrease in the real estate given to ‘stubble burning’ in the pie charts. But that has not helped.

The air in the Delhi National Capital Region, without citizenship rights and agency, is a result of governmental policies that go back, of course, to this history of the manipulation of land through the incentivized implementation of the Green Revolution, but also to the government’s lack of will, policy, and planning. For it is not just stubble burning that is responsible for air pollution – there are the industries and the private automobiles of Delhi, constituencies that are linked to the government in ways farmers are not. Statistics from 2023, for instance, show that biomass burning contributed only 20 percent to the quality of air. The other contributors were – coal: 12%; dust – 19%; diesel and petrol, at 27%, was the greatest pollutant. Not the farmers, then, but the automobile owners.

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I notice how I can no longer hear sounds that I have known as life – birds, birthday candles, the sound of conch shells blown to mark the end of the day – everything that derives their lives from air.

Inside an N95 anti-pollution mask, a Vogmask, to be specific, I am suffocated by my own smell. The sales assistant had insisted that only this kind of mask is effective at filtering fine particles. I catch myself thinking of ‘batasha’ – the small sweet white dollops offered as prasad to the Hindu gods and goddesses. I do not know how its name came to be, but I have always imagined it to derive from ‘batash’, the Bangla word for air. Inside the desire to name what air tastes like – ‘mishti hawa’, or sweet air, a commonly used phrase in Bangla – is a history of climate and loss that we rarely acknowledge. I miss that air as I try to imagine it from inside the mask. For, despite its many filters, with their many names that make living feel like a chemical equation, I can still smell the smoke.

“How long have you been wearing this?” my husband asks on video call.

I look at my clothes, worried whether they are looking dirty. I even sniff the air – to check whether I am sweaty. “I wore them after my morning shower,” I say, slightly irritated.

“Not your clothes,” he clarifies. “The mask.” I hadn’t thought about that. He, a compulsive researcher, has been reading about the mask’s lifespan.

“I can’t remember,” I say.

I feel sad to discard the mask – my relationship to it is touched by a kind of intimacy. I’ve begun thinking of it as my nose, a spare nose. I break the filter in the mask – it is like the innards of a trash bin. Dust, dust – so fine that only when the particles come together as a collective do they become visible. When I hold it between my fingers, I am touching the poison that would have been in my lungs.

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My family forces me to buy an air purifier. I am asthmatic, after all – allergies land me in hospital. They have not argued with me about my refusal to buy an air-conditioner, but about the air purifier they are insistent. So, I buy one. I fall sick. My husband, who lives in a town with cleaner air, orders one more for me. I begin sleeping with two air purifiers on either side of my bed. They hum all day and night, emitting lights like traffic signals: red, purple, or blue to indicate degrees of danger in the air. When pollution is acute, crossing an AQI of 400, the machine beams red like an ambulance, and it makes the sound of someone struggling to survive – I can almost hear its flailing arms.

I come to think of these machines as my lungs –my spare lungs. Gradually, I am accumulating body parts to fight the air.

A few weeks later, one of the machines gives up. It says ‘FO’.

I call my husband in the morning and report, “The machine’s asked me to Fuck Off!”

“What?!” he says, incredulous.

“Yes,” I say.

“It speaks?”

“No, the message appeared in the space where the sign for the mode is – A or 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 …”

“What exactly did it say?” he asks.

“FO.”

I hear laughter. I am irritated by it. “FO is Filter Out, I think, not Fuck off!”

I fall sick again. My parents, whose meagre monthly pension is about the cost of an air purifier, insist on buying one more for me. They are far away, in Siliguri, a sub-Himalayan town, where they imagine the quality of air to be better. It seems to me that my family has begun thinking of air purifiers as antibiotics. So, I now have three air purifiers in my flat, but I keep falling sick. I have to go out to work after all.

One night – it might be two – I dream that my grandfather, who died years ago, is shouting at my father. “I came here as a refugee from Bangladesh,” he screams. “Did I work so hard, turning my blood into water, so that my eldest son can waste his money on buying air?”

I can’t remember the rest.

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Luce Irigaray enters and leaves my mind: humans have been “using up the air for telling without ever telling of air itself”; this, she says, is because by not “showing” itself, air “allows [itself] to be forgotten”. But Irigaray has not seen this air.

In everything I read, I seem to find descriptions of it. This is, of course, paranoid reading. I underline lines and phrases, I begin misquoting them, unconsciously adding something of my circumstances and apprehension to them. “The day was the color of pigeon shit,” I often tell those I speak to, imagining I am quoting Geoff Dyer from *The Colour of Memory*. When a friend takes me to an exhibition of Company paintings – an Indo-European style made by Indian painters during the colonial period – I begin to look at the blank spaces in canvases yellowed by time.

‘Atmosphere’ is a scientific word for someone like me – as a child in junior school, I drew it like a wrapping paper for the earth. The other elements are far more attention-seeking – fire and water and the earth itself, with all its pollinators and life-producing antics. Air may cause a cyclone or a storm, but it always seemed to return to shabasana, its position of rest.

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On the day we watch the documentary film *All That Breathes*, Rituparna texts me in the morning. “Have you seen the air outside today?” She says her throat hurts from the sand in the air.

When we meet in the evening, Satish, who doesn’t know about the film, asks, “Is it a horror film?”

“It is”; “kind of” – Ritu and I say in response.

*All That Breathes* is about two brothers, Saud and Nadeem, who work towards saving injured kites that have now begun falling from the sky in Delhi. “Throat feels like charcoal,” says someone in the film. I turn to my right – Ritu had said something similar only a little while ago, hadn’t she? She’s sipping warm water, to wash her throat, as it were. I’ve often thought of doing this myself – washing the air with buckets of water from above, as though it were a bedsheet.

All through the movie, there is an echo or serve-and-volley between what we see on screen and what we say outside it. Just as I am complaining about my glasses, how I need to get a new pair because I can’t read subtitles, a bird carries away the glasses of one of the protagonists in the film. The most common of these echoes is when something like this scene from the film happens – “The air’s awful today” “Is the air purifier still working?” “It’s over 700”. All three of us have been watching the film with an eye on the AQI reading of the air purifier in our room: 385. At one point, as I silently praise Shaunak Sen, the film’s director, for noticing the zoological in a way that is rarely done – ants, insects, crustaceans, creatures appearing from and disappearing into the soil, generally in the suburbs of the human eye and the camera. A character is speaking about the quality of Delhi’s air, the subtitle appears: “Science fiction is very unscientific”. This film, were it to be a feature film, would perhaps have looked like science fiction, I tell myself.

“As Delhi’s air changed, so did its metabolism,” we hear one of the brothers say. “Songbirds now sing at a higher pitch … to be heard over the traffic… Every life form adjusts to the city.” He goes on to list the animals that ‘improvise and adapt to the city…Some birds love experimenting – kites use cigarettes as parasite repellant … This is also a form of natural selection.”

There is a kind of unnatural selection going on in the country though – for there are two kinds of emergencies that the people in the film are responding to: one in the sky, as the birds drop from it, and a new government act that is likely to disenfranchise many people from being Indian citizens for lacking ‘proper’ documents - “Imagine a spelling mistake making you refugees.”

The film contrasts a government that shows little desire to clean the air of the capital city but is intent on cleaning out people that the administration calls pollutants. “Infiltrators are like termites in the soil of Bengal,” says Amit Shah, India’s Home Minister.

There are omens everywhere on the screen – we see them, we hear of them. There’s the garbage dump in the National Capital Region, pretending to be a hillock, but whose presence reminds us of something so terrifying that we don’t yet have a word for it. “Once the air purifier’s not at red, we’ll go to swim,” the kite-saving father tells his son. The child is coughing, he has a fever. Meanwhile, “hundreds of birds are falling from the sky. People are going about as if it’s normal.” It is this normalization of the ominous, both in the socio-political and natural world that gives the film – and our lives now – its tint. “Delhi is a gaping wound. We are only tying a Band-Aid on it.” The Indian flag struggles to fly in smoggy Delhi. Everything is sick – every scene is like the siren of an ambulance going off in a silent film. All around us here are the elements, this time turned into antagonists – not just the air which, as I write this, looks like a block of grey stone that is growing, that will swallow me any moment, but also the water: “The water’s smelling again,” says one of the brothers in the film.

I find myself thinking of how Shaunak Sen shows two kinds of climate, political and environmental, in his film when I’m listening to my colleague Jonathan Gil Harris a few weeks later. Gil, as we call him, is giving a talk about Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth*, the “fog and filthy air” with which it begins, his life as OCI (Overseas Citizen of India), a category often under the surveillance of an increasingly xenophobic Indian state, and as also a marathon runner who runs through the streets of Delhi every morning, even when the air is unbreathable. “It is no accident, surely, that the play was written at a time of pandemic disease,” Gil says. “The plague had repeatedly ravaged London in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Its causes were not understood; but it was often associated with miasma, or bad air, which was supposed to invade and infect the human body. The Witches’ evocation of “fog and filthy air” would have induced in the audience a sense of precarious vulnerability to miasma, not least because the play’s opening stage directions – “*Thunder and lightning”* – would almost certainly have required the detonation of squibs, fireworks whose sulfurous stench was derived from pig excrement.” Though there’s not much pig excrement around here, the smell of air, always being burnt, is a permanent resident inside our nose.

“What if I were a bird,” says one of the men in the film, “how boring it is to be a human.” I wonder whether the air here longs to become something else.

Could the air be as impersonal as time? Does it not really care for me, for us, or even for itself? If it is a living thing, as I believe it is, why does it not fight for its own survival? “What if I were a bird,” says one of the men in the film, “how boring it is to be a human”. I wonder whether the air here longs to become something else.

“Hum sab hawa ke biradri hain,” – We are air’s relatives, our fraternity derives from air, air itself is kinship. It’s a revolutionary statement, to see and propose that the living is related through air and not blood – *All* that breathes. It’s as revolutionary as the scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose said – a century ago – that we all eat light: humans eat animals who eat plants who eat light. “Jo jo cheez saas letey hain unme koi fark nahin hain,” – there is no difference among those who breathe. A democracy of all that breathes – so that anyone who breathes can be its citizen, without the need for legal documents.

After Rituparna and Satish leave, I clean my air purifier. The ‘FO’ sign doesn’t change. How do I reset it?