*Tales of the Wind*

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Master of the Winds

*(Chapter 1)*

*Where did that come from?* A barrage of droplets hammers against my face. Small waves lap at the edge of my kayak, spraying water over the foredeck. I’d been paddling in the lee of Ormøyna, but as I round the southern tip, the wind hits as if it’s been let out of a sack. The bow turns and the kayak careens. I wipe water out of my eyes with the back of my hand and let the wind steer the boat as it wishes.

A sudden gust of wind, a measly little kayak. How cruel! The first time the wind was let out, the sack was on the war hero Odysseus’ ship. It was made of cowhide and fastened with a silver cord – a gift from Aeolus, friend of the Greek gods and ruler of the winds. More than ten years had passed since Odysseus left home to fight in the Trojan War. The journey home was slow-going, but he reached Aeolus’ island with twelve ships in his fleet. “For Cronion had made him master of the winds, both to start and stop the ones he wishes,” Homer writes of Aeolus in *The Odyssey*. The winds came flying at Aeolus’ command and settled in his arms like tame birds. He then stuffed the North wind, South wind, and East wind in the leather bag, gave it to Odysseus, and let the West wind carry the ships home to Ithaca.

Was there silver inside? Odysseus’ men had been staring at the sack for nine days. Gold? They’d gotten so close to Ithaca that they could spot people on the shore. But while Odysseus slept, the men loosened the silver cord, and out came the North, South, and East winds in a squall that blew the twelve ships out to sea, almost all the way back to Aeolus’ island. The master of the winds can start and stop the ones he wishes.

To my left, Ormøyna has barely budged. If only someone could turn off the wind! I stick my paddle deep in the water and thrust the kayak forward. When Odysseus’ ships came blowing back, Aeolus’ goodwill had disappeared. The winds stilled and the men were forced to row.

Start, stop. The kayak glides forward before the wind takes hold again. Locked in a struggle with irate gods, it took Odysseus ten years to get back home. Aeolus wasn’t the only one who used the winds against him; so did the king of the gods, Zeus, and the god of the sea, Poseidon. They shredded sails and smashed ships, they let him paddle on the ruins the mast. Wind off, wind on, with forces calibrated for total destruction or cunning manipulation. A game for gods with powers worthy of the Mediterranean.

Start, stop. Start, stop. This is Nordåsvatnet, not the Mediterranean. It isn’t even the weather-battered coasts of Western Norway, just a fjord between downtown Bergen and the airport, a brackish puddle encapsulated by civilization. But the boathouse is a tiny red dot on the other side of a sea of adversity. If only someone could turn off the wind! Tame it and shove it in the bag – Zeus, Aeolus, Superman! How often have I thought this? On ski trips when the snow is pelting against my face? On stormy autumn nights when relentless winds lash at the roof and sleep eludes me? When tent pegs get torn out or the pages of my book flutter so it’s impossible to read? The rustling in my hair, the cold tingling on my arm – even the lightest of breezes carries a restlessness that drives away any and all trace of concentration.

*Turn off the wind!* I shout at the top of my lungs, pausing with my paddle over the water. Nothing. It’s silent on Olympus. Turn off, turn off, turn off, turn off. I paddle in sync with the words, a “turn” as the blade meets the water and a determined “off” as I pull the kayak forward. Turn… off. Turn… off. The rhythm in the strokes helps and I make it into the lee of land. The master of the winds can start and stop the ones he wishes. The kayak glides in toward the dock.

The air is lighter now. I bike home, my pedals spinning, trees sailing past. Then I round a turn, and there it is. *A headwind*. I pick up the pace as a truck swirls dust around me. Something crunches between my molars. Sand from the side of the road, an unmistakable urban flavor… but is that all? The air in front of my face – where was it two weeks ago? Could someone have inhaled it before? On a sidewalk in New York, or maybe Calcutta? In a sheep barn? Suck the air slowly through the nose, release it through the teeth. The wind scours the earth and everything that lives here, drifting torn remnants toward living, gaping trash cans. Uncontrollable. Unavoidable. Open the mouth again, rinse it with the headwind, no one can escape the wind. It presses against me from the side now – where did it *come* from? Who loosened the silver cord, who let out the wind? Where did it all begin?

Madame Thible’s Special Day

Maybe she was an opera singer, maybe she wasn’t, but either way, she did sing “higher” than anyone had ever done before. It’s unclear whether her husband had been a merchant – we know for sure that he produced silk stockings – but the only thing that mattered on this June day in Lyon in 1784 was that he wasn’t a hindrance. Élisabeth Thible had been abandoned just after her wedding, when she was fourteen. Now, she was 27. No one could stop her from ascending in the balloon basket today – not her husband, not the Count de Laurencin, who’d offered her his place, and not even the King of Sweden, who was there to watch. She was dressed as the goddess Minerva. She had a feathered hair accessory and a large hat. She was wearing men’s clothing. Maybe. The depictions of Élisabeth Thible's clothing and demeanor lack coherence, but we do know something for certain: on June 4th, 1784, she sang from a balloon floating high above Lyon, and her account of that day will take us back to the beginning – to the place we need to go to understand everything.

We have to go all the way back to Democritus, who was right where Aristoteles was wrong: everything is built up of atoms, including the air. The majority of everything is actually *nothing*, and atoms and molecules sail through this void. This story could have been about great men of science like Daniel Bernoulli, Leonhard Euler, Jean le Rond d’Alembert, James Joule, Rudolf Clausius, or James Clerk Maxwell, but instead, it will be about Madame Thible and the balloonist Fleurant, but mostly about her, Élisabeth. It will be about everything we know – and which she couldn’t have possibly known – about the air around her.

King Gustav III of Sweden has traveled to Lyon to witness the ascent, and the balloon has been christened the *Gustave*. It was constructed by a Venetian painter – Monsieur Fleurant – with the help of the Count de Laurencin. They were both supposed to have been on board when the *Gustave* was sent up from an amphitheater on the south side of the city, but Laurencin changed his mind and gave the honor to a woman. He describes her as pretty. Young. Brave. Abandoned by a scoundrel who took advantage of a twelve-year-old. (She was, in fact, nearly fifteen, but Laurencin was mistaken) Élisabeth Thible is the object of his admiration, praise, and sympathy, but gets a limited description nonetheless.

It’s early evening and the weather is calm and pleasant. The three of them have been waiting for the king for two hours alongside a crowd that’s been estimated at sixty thousand. Women with hats, parasols, and floor-length dresses sit in rows inside the enclosure. Those who couldn’t gain entry stand outside. Men on horseback have ridden close to the fence to be able to look over it, women are lifted up, and some people have climbed on top of the roof of a carriage. Between tall stanchions inside the amphitheater is the majestic *Gustave.*

Finally, the king arrives. He’s gone over and greeted the two who are about to head up in the air then sits down in a gallery with a view of the amphitheater. It’s ten after six. The first drumroll sounds. The fire is lit in the *Gustave*. The balloon is slowly filled with air that is hotter and lighter than the air outside. Even on a still day like today, there’s agitation in the air – not movements that Élisabeth is able to perceive as she’s waiting for the next drumroll, but a raft of atoms and molecules. In the ostensibly continuous mass of invisible air around the *Gustave*, molecules are buzzing around as they vibrate and rotate. Continuous – ostensibly. Invisible – obviously. And most of the air around the balloon really is *nothing*.

The next drumroll sounds. The ropes on the outside of the 22-meter-tall balloon are fastened to the gondola where Thible and Fleurant are waiting. The third drumroll sounds. The stakes holding the balloon down are removed. The *Gustave* rises from the ground. As the drum rolls the fourth time, it is dragged toward the gallery where the Swedish king is sitting. It’s meant as an honorary gesture, but the balloon drifts menacingly close, and the women around the king ready themselves for a quick exit. The balloon stops. It’s still tied down. The fifth drumroll sounds. The ropes fall and the *Gustave* ascends. It heads straight up without swaying. Faces are turned towards the sky, for no one has ever seen the likes of this. Élisabeth Thible is the first woman to float in a free-floating balloon.

To be fair, she would have preferred to be the first *person*. Poor health over the last four years has hindered her, she later writes in a letter to a friend. It is in this letter that we find Élisabeth’s own words about this special day in her life – a day when she’s already become a pioneer, and, before long, will start to sing. As the *Gustave* ascends, it’s exactly one year since the brothers Joseph and Pierre Montgolfier sent up their first large hot air balloon – the first in France and likely the first in the world. It’s been less than seven months since a man was transported high up into the sky. The era has just begun. She could have shown the way for these men, Élisabeth asserts, and because we know so little about her, we can choose to believe that she’s right. On this day, the order of achievements doesn’t play any role. The *Gustave* carries her up to the heavens. “Such joy, my dear \*\*\*,” Élisabeth writes to her anonymous friend, “when we leave this earth, which aggrieves desire and interest!” Majestic silence. Perfect peace. The earth is easy to forget.

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The Wind War

Nothing seemed particularly threatening about the gray cloth bag floating in the sea. It was November 4th, 1944. War was in full swing in the Pacific Ocean, but the naval patrol located a hundred kilometers off the California coast didn’t think there was any reason for concern. The cloth turned out to be a rubber-coated silk balloon. They pulled it aboard. Underneath it, they found a small wooden box with a barometer and a radio transmitter. Upon closer inspection, they found that the transmitter was made in Tokyo, and there was a small label inside the balloon with almost completely faded, illegible Japanese characters. Could it be a weather balloon? It was sent to a military laboratory, where it was placed on a shelf. Even when the U.S. Coast Guard found a large paper balloon in the waters off of Hawaii ten days later, they did nothing more than make a note of the finding.

At twilight on December 6th, there was an explosion in Wyoming. The workday was over, and three workers had just emerged from the coal mine outside the town of Thermopolis when they heard a sound like a gunshot. Then there was a screeching above their heads followed by an explosion they initially thought might be the ammunition depot in the mine. It wasn’t. A cloud of smoke and dust rose hundreds of meters into the air a little way off. Suddenly, they saw something resembling a parachute dropping from the sky, a dark object hanging underneath. A red light blinked three times before the parachute drifted out of sight. Had a plane crashed? Was this a pilot who’d ejected? The men drove to town to report what they’d witnessed. Together with the sheriff and a few other men, they searched well past midnight. It wasn’t until the next day that they found something: small metal fragments were scattered among charred, cracked rocks on a slope. Not far off, a shepherd who’d also witnessed the explosion found a round, half-meter-wide scorch mark on the mountain. No sign of a plane, and no parachuter.

Five days later, two loggers found a paper balloon in the snow in Montana. Inflated, it would have been ten meters in diameter. Attached to it was a twenty-meter-long fuse and a charge big enough to burn up the balloon. An FBI agent came to collect it. Like the balloon off the coast of California, it had a paper tag with Japanese characters – a factory mark with something that looked like production data. Five days before Christmas, a large paper fragment appeared in Wyoming, and on New Year’s Eve, a farmer found a balloon high up in a tree in Oregon. Just four days later, something unidentifiable exploded in a field in the same state, and that very evening, a balloon crashed among the branches in a snow-covered apple orchard in California. Attached to it were four damaged incendiary bombs.

Throughout January, balloons continued to fall over the western parts of North America, from Arizona in the south to Alaska in the north. Paper balloons, torn paper fragments, fabric cords, steel hooks, and fuses. And worse: bombs. The amount of equipment remaining varied. Military investigators collected the remnants. The whole of the wreckage amounted to several ten-meter-wide paper balloons and a few slightly smaller silk balloons. Under each paper balloon was a ring with four incendiary bombs and an anti-personnel bomb. The sender was Japanese.

A quiet, looming threat of destructive fires in the vast forests along the West Coast – perhaps also of bacteria and disease. Nobody knew the purpose, and the greatest danger lay in the uncertainty. Not a soul could find out about this. Panic had to be prevented, and the Japanese could under no circumstances learn that the balloons were reaching their intended destinations. After a local newspaper in Oregon printed pictures of soldiers searching for the balloons, both *Time* and *Newsweek* had speculated about balloon passengers and parachutists, and the government’s censorship office was forced to intervene. The press was politely requested not to aid the enemy by reporting on new findings. The editorial offices complied.

They were silent until they exploded and could land anywhere, anytime. They came from the west, but no one knew exactly how far they’d flown. The initial theories were that the balloons were launched from Japanese submarines off the coast. The possibility that they could have come from internment and prisoner-of-war camps on U.S. soil was also considered. Because they couldn’t have blown all the way from Japan… could they? The fact that so many balloons had already been found scattered over such an extensive area seemed to eliminate the submarine theory. There were extremely strong westward winds high above the Pacific, something many wartime pilots had experienced. But how long could such a journey last? Could a balloon stay airborne the whole way? In the balloons from the ocean off California and Hawaii as well as the one from the apple orchard, a ballast mechanism was found that activated at six thousand meters above the ground. Little by little, something unknown – something that was now missing – had been released to prevent the balloons from sinking too low.

This *something* contained the answer to where the balloons came from. It turned out that two more balloons had been found. In Alaska.

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In the Air

The sky is white. The ground is white. A black seaplane with orange wings and tail glides through the indistinct corridor in between. It’s August 1933, and a man and a woman are on their way over Greenland. The coast is dotted with villages where Inuit and Danes have settled. Ships dock, those heading to and from Denmark as well as expedition ships like the *Jelling*, their own support ship. But no one has ever been where the orange-winged plane is now. Greenland’s ice has been crossed on foot and ski, but never the air above it. The woman has taken control of the plane while the man opens his hatch.

They have a child at home – their second son, born half a year after his older brother was kidnapped and murdered. The boy will turn one in a few weeks and is being taken care of by his grandmothers and a nanny in a house with dogs and armed guards. His parents will be gone for five months. At home, they disguise themselves when going to restaurants or the theater. Telegrams about important events are sent to family members in code. “Advising accepting terms of contract” – it’s a girl. “Advising purchasing property” – it’s a boy. At home, their life is a constant evasion of press photographers, autograph hunters, and threatening letters. But not here, in a two-seat cockpit over the Greenland ice sheet.

“Anne, you’ll have the sky – the sky!” Anne Morrow’s mother had said when her daughter got engaged to Charles Lindbergh in 1929. “Lucky Lindy” had become world-famous two years earlier when he made the first solo transatlantic crossing in a plane. From New York to Paris in just under 34 hours. Now, he would spend almost half a year flying around the North Atlantic, not to set records, but to explore commercial routes for the airline Pan Am. He’d chosen his wife as co-pilot and radio operator. He taught her to fly himself. They took off from Long Island a month ago and are halfway through what Pan Am has called The Viking Trail: Newfoundland - Greenland - Iceland - Europe, the opposite path of the Vikings. They’re seeking an air route to Europe; the atmosphere has opened up, and people can pack light to travel far. Pan Am already has routes between the U.S. and South America, and together with European airlines, they’re searching for a viable route across the Atlantic. In the future, planes will cross the Greenland ice many times a day, but for now, a single black seaplane buzzes through the clouds and snow. The *Tingmissartoq*, shadowless in the diffuse light, two people held aloft by orange wings.

Anne is sitting in the seat behind her husband in the divided cockpit, just as she’s done countless times between American airports and just as she did on an expedition from Alaska to China two years earlier. She’s a pilot, a radio operator, and America’s first certified female glider pilot. In her diary, she writes that flying gives her the sensation of achieving the impossible. She also writes about the impossibility of filling a man’s place in the airplane and in Charles’ world, a world where weak links cannot exist and where she would never be able to survive without his assistance. She can now no longer recall any other world. Anne has gotten the sky, but one can fall from that sky. The cargo hold has a sled and two pairs of crampons.

Charles has pushed his hatch backward. Where the dark silhouettes of mountains along the west coast were once on the horizon behind them, everything is now white. They’ve flown a hundred kilometers over the ice, and from here, it stretches for five hundred, a thousand, or even further, depending on the direction. Amber-tinted glasses help them distinguish crevasses in the snow, but otherwise, there’s nothing to be seen. It’s a dazzling without depth or solidity, Anne writes, like clouds or fog under a glaring sun. As if they were inside a gigantic, white bowl.

Through the open hatch, Charles extends his arm toward an attachment on the plane’s exterior. He secures a tube that’s an inch wide and long enough to extend two feet beyond the edge of the cockpit. At the top of the tube is a cylindrical aluminum cartridge, and inside the cartridge is a glass plate covered with Vaseline. When the tube is attached and the cartridge screwed in place, he can pull the plate down and out of the cylinder, leaving the glass exposed to the airflow. He developed the instrument himself and called it the “Sky Hook” – as if it could hook onto the sky, or the sky onto it. The instrument makers finished just in time for the departure; he didn’t even have the chance to test whether it worked in flight before they left. If there’s anything out there in Anne’s substance-less whiteness, the hope is that it will adhere to the Vaseline. An imprint of the summer air over Greenland.

The *Tingmissartoq*’s wings slice through the air like a typhoon, and all the sky has to attach to are a few square centimeters of glass. It will be sample number fourteen. Charles has deployed the “Sky Hook” at regular intervals along the entire route from Maine and northward. He’s collaborating with plant pathologist Fred C. Meier at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, where, for more than a decade, aircraft have been used to record fungal spores that spread plant diseases from farm to farm. But so far, no one has looked for spores far out over the ocean or over something like the Greenland ice – a surface where no plants grow. If any spores were to be found here, they *must* have drifted here with the wind. If something attaches to the glass plate, it will show how the air flows.

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Blue Moon

*(Final Chapter)*

A beech leaf spins across the grass in Christie Park. It whirls around the corner of the dam house, dances around a wrought-iron railing, lands on the asphalt, and rises again, traveling past parked cars and closed doors. Foliage is torn off of trees. A plethora of gold and brown leaves from maples, beeches, and birches spin around each other and a car rounding the bend, heading down Gimleveien in a swarm that is both gentle and dry. In just a few hours, the last few days of rain seem to have been forgotten after the wind has had its way with the autumn foliage, and a crackling like faint castanets fills the ear. It’s Halloween night, and there’s a blue moon and madness in the air.

Leaves roll across the sidewalk like wheels. It’s absurd to be outside but absurd not to be. There’s a low-pressure system west of Scotland. A gale or a storm is coming, and the air is quivering. There are no vampires struggling up the hills in Landås, no monsters and no rattling skeletons. No kids shouting “Trick or treat!” The wind must have chased the crowds inside – tonight, when everyone should be watching it, a night when the air is filled with saints and dead souls. The mountainside looms tall and dark over the rows of houses, and you can see the TV tower above it. *Ulriksmasten*. It’s blue tonight, cold and pale, colored by powerful floodlights. I set off on the gravel road behind the last houses. Even though it’s a lit trail, the lamp posts are few and far between. The brush at the bottom of the road casts long shadows through streaks of yellow light. The spruce trees are tightly packed on the upper side. It’s a darkness that’s *more* than just darkness, and I start walking faster without really knowing what I’m trying to reach.

The path turns to the right and it’s dark at the base of the stone stairs. The stairs lead upward through the hollow in the mountainside. From here, there are 1333 steps to the top. I find my headlamp in my backpack but don’t turn it on quite yet. The stone blocks stand out from the murky background – brighter. After a few dozen steps, my night vision is better and the trees are fewer.

The air is dry and warm, the steps steep, and my breathing is getting more labored. Half a liter in, half a liter out, 13,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 molecules buzzing, whirling, and disappearing amongst the atmosphere’s 110,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. The air carries the past with it, because everything intermingles. Even us. Half a liter in, half a liter out. In each half liter, there is an atom or a molecule from any breath from any person who’s ever lived – if not now, then in the time it takes for the air around the world to mix. One year or two and they’re everywhere. We breathe in the air of humans of the past. We *are* the humans of the past.

The wind contains a turgidity only pink sunsets can surpass, but who can help that gales make us ubiquitous? That between grains of sand from the Sahara and water molecules from the Caribbean, we find remnants of ourselves? That the air teems with the life of the present and the past and that we breathe in our own history? Half a liter in, half a liter out – it’s Halloween and a blue moon. Creatures from all times sail through the air. A human is just as old as themself, but no older than a minute or a month. We are 13.7 billion years old and drifting around the world. Fleeting beings. The most enduring thing a person can imagine – oneself – is continuously being replaced.

Arms, thighs, kidneys, pancreas and chin. Eyelids and kneecaps. There’s hardly anything left of the bodies we were born with. The cells on the surface of our intestines last for four to five days, and after three weeks, our taste buds are almost all new. Even in the brain, new nerve cells are being formed daily. Tooth enamel is the closest a human can come to eternity, the last thing to break down after we’re dead. Half a liter in, half a liter out – that’s six to eight liters per minute, with oxygen molecules that aren’t immediately exhaled. They attach to red blood cells, race through blood vessels, migrate to other cells, hurry on, and exit as carbon dioxide. It all happens incredibly quickly. We barely have time to define these oxygen atoms as “ourselves”, but for a few seconds or minutes, they aren’t anywhere else. And then – aren’t they *us*, in a way? Over the course of a year, 250 kilograms of oxygen pass through a human this way. The ever-circulating human body receives oxygen atoms that have been in the atmosphere for three billion years, and hydrogen atoms that originated shortly after the Big Bang. We eat them, drink them, and breathe them in before we hurry on, as young and old as the universe, half a liter in and half a liter out, and the tower still shines blue-white high above.

The full moon peeks through gaps in the drifting clouds. It’s the second moon this month – a blue moon. The pale glow illuminates the stairs upwards, a barren stone path in the terrain. A carpet of worn-out branches and roots covers the right side, remnants that must have been discarded when the stairs were built a few years ago. Thin juniper branches, stripped of bark and white against the dark ground, look like they’re reaching their bony hands toward the earth. They pull themselves up the mountainside as if they too are heading for the top, as if that’s where everyone is going tonight. To the top of the stairs, to the top of the mountain. To the air up there. The wind is coming from the south – stronger now – blowing against the slope. It makes it easier to walk and difficult to stand still, but I stop nonetheless. Amidst the rustling of clothes and the rushing of the trees down in the valley, deep howls cut through the air. The tower is singing.

The wind presses me against the stairs and I jog until I’m standing in front of the final, steep section. Clouds drift in front of the moon, encircling it with a diffuse corona. Blurry red rings are followed by a tinge of green and blue, then indigo further out. From the top, a harsh, yellow-white light shines from a spotlight in the cable car house to the left of the tower, as if from a tunnel or the entrance to a mine. The cable car is closed for renovations. I’m close enough to see all of the satellite dishes attached to the tower – round, white surfaces reflecting the moonlight and fading out the blueish color. The howling continues insistently. Then the blue fades. The tower turns pink before the light shifts again. Green, blue, red, pink, purple, yellow, green, white, orange, red, purple blue… It’s not a vivid rainbow, rather pale hues blending into each other as if someone up there was controlling a world of cold light. Something clatters in the wind. It’s time to go all the way up.

I push off the stones and cling to the railing on the outside of the stairs. Toward the mountain – that’s where it’s leading: over and upward. A shower of atoms sweeps in from the sea, just as they’ve spun around the Earth for billions of years. Two weeks ago, they might have been in the United States, and the year before that in Australia. There are grains of sand in the air, maybe seeds, and it’s a sure bet that someone’s breathed it in before. Half a liter in, half a liter out, for everyone who’s ever lived. Democritus’ atoms propel me forward as I stumble onto the flat area at the top of the stairs.

The howling reverberates through the mountain, lingering over dry rocks and withered grass. A deep, hollow bass. Galileo Galilei is here, the man who weighed the air, as is Torricelli with his barometer. They sweep in from the valley – if not atoms from the men themselves then at least from the air they breathed. The next wave brings Robert Boyle, Blaise Pascal, and the whole Bjerknes family. Edmond Halley rushes over a stone bench and William Ferrel twirls in the pale pink light around the tower. Even those who’ve been forgotten are here, for if souls leave the Earth, their breath remains in the atmosphere. Isaac Newton whistles amongst tufts of grass while Robert Hooke shakes a post. None of them stops. They are propelled to move on and yet are perpetually replenished, never ceasing to flow toward a mountain where a TV tower howls in the dark. There’s a whistling from metal scrap on the ground – small, sharp toots as if someone were blowing into a bottle. It’s Léon Foucault. The balloon heroine Madame Thible is here as well as I start making my way down the stairs with arms outstretched. The headwind lifts me in a way that makes me feel like I could fly off the mountainside, away from Élisabeth’s wretched globe. Instead, it hurls me against the rocky slope. Grains of sand strike the hood of my jacket with small pops. They multiply; it must be drops and not just sand, because now the rain is coming. Water from the wind, the wind of the world. I straighten up and run downhill, accompanied by a howl I recognize as my own voice – a sort of song.