

# The Myth of Respiration

## Levitation in 10 Acts

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Figure 1 Mloko Festival : Performing acrobatics on a rope from bobo masts. 1998.309.2939

**Photographer:** Ursula Violet Graham Bower **Date of Photo:** March 1948

## ACT I

‘Master, what can you see?’

‘I see where the flatness joins the perpendicular is abrupt.’

‘Master, can you see Others?’

‘Only the Sun.’

‘Master, how will you know if there are Others?’

‘By observing what I cannot see, son.’

## ACT II

On a long slope in a small wood two men chop. The elder strokes a tall tree, the boy asks, ‘What does it say?’

The elder replies,

‘Branches and roots are how trees trace and entangle each other, *how* they try - is *how* they eternalise each other. Procreating tomorrow, a perfect past.’

The young man, barely pubescent, looks up through the canopy tops. Today is strange, there are more clouds than leaves. The elder thwacks the boy with his bamboo stick, points to a rippled trunk some sixty feet tall.

‘This is the first.’

Pointing to another,

‘This is the second. Fetch the village.’

## ACT III

Beyond the valley walls of Ziro is Bhutan, Tibet, Assam, China and Myanmar. The valley is a terra cotta bowl with sloping timberland and a granite rim. Lined with dwarf forestation Ziro is an empty space, a vessel to be filled with water and rice: simmered, cooked, eaten. In and around, giant flying squirrels perform ariel acrobatics. The day is the Myoko Festival, a moment of difference gathered beneath a skyward tightrope. Below, the crowd calm a baby pig. Wash its sweat-fear with sweetened beer. Dust its tension with ground rice.

The song, the shaman binds.

The pig, the women baste.

## ACT IV

A mast is a tall upright post. A mast supports the sail of a ship. In ships one mast overlords all the other masts. A mast: pronounced ‘must’ is a spiritual teacher overwhelmed by God. The Bobo masts twin to string a handwoven rope. A tight rope. A sapless branch from which a barefoot man enters the sky. Like the squirrel dances a twig. Some fall. There is no net. Just the basti. A basti is a peasant village. A basti is an enema for the colon. The sthala basti draws the abdomen so tight into the diaphragm it makes a syphon pump, sucking drinking swallowing water through the anus, swelling it around the bowel. The man’s chest puffs, his belly shrinks. His legs and feet dangle; mute.

‘What can you see?’ they cry out from below.

## ACT V

Roland Barthes thinks the phenomenon of voice an epiglottal erection. A puissance of human projection. Bridled power of the leap a puissance is a jumping competition. In France, and the West, the horse sits on its haunches, balances in perfect equilibrium the rider’s seat maintained at 90 degrees. The explosion that follows effortless, clears 7 feet without tipping a single brick. The rider believes and the horse knows that the will towards explosion is the will towards levitation. In the East, the science of the erect spine is a vertical column of spinning chakras. Fizzing bubble gum balls lining up. Like David Hume’s pot blacks vertically stacked, miraculously floating in their own psychic pockets.

## ACT VI

The puffed chest of the phoenix kettles gasses of transfiguration.

The erect spine-mast distils straightness, ...med-i-tates the master.

Up Up Up! All eyes gaze up.

On the tightrope the funambulist’s feet become flesh claws, his bones a weightless web.

The straining rope, a single sitar string; shringing.

Below, faith and fear accumulate.

Lips tight shut.

All breath locked, stewing a cyclone.

Silence swirls the valley air, strains the one-village-breath, forces it up the flanked valley neck towards heaven, only to fold like dough back to its centre - to make a voice.

‘Where is the centre, boy?’

‘Inside the ribs, master.’

## ACT VII

‘The lung’, Roland Barthes says, ‘swells but has no erection’, ‘it is the soul that accompanies the song’. ‘The breath is the pneuma, the soul swelling or breaking’.

‘Any exclusive art of breathing is likely to be mysticism’, he reminds.

‘MASTER, who makes the snake stand up, fusing its scales fluorescent?’

‘Stardust floats when stirred correctly, like bird

songs plucked by arboreal sticks the

pitch, fine-tuned by the ribs.

A song is a body escaping eternal falling.

A body is a shrunken singing animus drinking remembering weightlessness.

## ACT VIII

Upon the wire the open beaked bird ....UP

Compressing and decompressing its sonic ...

Plato’s featherless biped ... on naked feet.

Calls his Achilles’ tendons ...UP

Heels. Wait.

Calls the frozen faith ... onlookers...UP

Tethers knots the dual masts ... songless bird.

Evaporate bulbous pads... running jaguar. UP

*Puissance et jouissance.*

Straining, straining, the myth of respiration.

## ACT IX

Apani apani two totems one animus configured, stand watch the beating alchemy

of Nature MAGIC ecstatic transformation: feathers for skin, helium for air,

hallucination the point of view, born between sun and moon the black eagle turns.

Not a soft neck, not a stiffened spine, not the will: the sinew wings stowed unfold the diaphragm, body and feet withering with uselessness give way to the hopeful balloon.

The Man Bird cyclones the audience breath, balls the air, steps away.

All breath STOPS.

## ACT X

Roland Barthes says, ‘the pauses, the checkings and releasing of breath, occur like shudders of passion’. WHO THE AUDIENCE. Straining. Strain...ing. Wings moistened by upward scent. The featherless acrobat LEAPS.

The shaman’s knife CUTS.

The man flies. The pig dies.

The basti drinks itself a noctambulist dream.

The village swells with radioactive delight.

The world spins dizzy, hurtling  
a shriek.

‘What is exchanged?’ The Master asks.

‘The sick and the sour.’ The boy replies.

‘What is gained?’ The Master asks.

‘Cleansed water to nourish the rice.’ The boy replies.

‘Who will eat the rice?’ The Master asks.

‘The pigs.’ The boy replies.

‘Who will eat the pigs?’ The Master asks.

‘Us, Master.’

‘And who will eat us?’ Boy.

The Trees, Master.