# Air

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**An extract**

**Original title** Lucht
**Publisher** Querido, 2005

**Translation** Dutch into English
**Translator** Brian Doyle



## The Mountain

And yes, spring arrived today with sheerest simplicity and a deep blue sky, sharply defining the mountain that overshadowed the house like a giant. Kudo Yamamoto opened his bleary eyes and peered through a gap in the sliding panel: a passing cloud of white cherry-blossoms; the long winter had come to an end. He yawned and stretched full-out on the futon. His hand crawled around like a spider in search the scrap of newspaper on which he had scribbled some words the night before. He pressed the crumpled page flat against his chest, held it to his lips and let a mighty blast of air escape from his mouth before throwing off the sheet and trying to stand up. But he lacked the necessary energy and fell back onto the mat, the floor creaking under him in spite of his lean frame. At the second attempt to get up, he knocked over an empty bottle that rolled towards the corner of the room and clattered against stacked up boxes of saline drip. 'I have inherited a slanted house,' he mumbled, clearing the dust from his throat in front of the open sliding window. Clement warmth crept inside.

How often as a child had he pricked a hole in the paper wall panel to be able to admire the full moon, and how often had his father told him off for doing so, instructing him that the cold wind could make its way inside through the tiniest of holes and reduce the temperature of the house in a matter of minutes. But now the house and all its panels, the bath, the little garden, the well and the hand-woven hammock beside the pond were his, and there was no one to punish him if he decided to spend the entire night teaching tricks to a beetle or because the floor was strewn with a sea of beans.

He yawned twice and lowered the iron bucket into the well as he whistled a tune by Chet Baker. With a bit of effort he managed to heave the splashing water to the mouth of the well. He cupped his hands and refreshed his face and neck, gurgling gently. The carp plopped in the pond and the postman by the old maple tree waved with the letter. 'From the West,' he yelled, 'a letter from the West.' A little confused, Kudo Yamamoto accepted the letter, held it up to the blue sky and examined the postage stamp in the upper-right-hand corner of the red and blue edged envelope. 'Air Mail,' he muttered and tore the letter open with his index finger as a slight sense of hesitation crept up on him. A renowned New York publisher had taken receipt of his plan to condense the entire cosmos into seventeen syllables and were offering him an exclusive contract for his poem. A photographer was on his way from New York to shoot a portrait of him in front of his celebrated collection of Western books. In spite of the fact that he had only retired to the house at the foot of the mountain a few weeks before in order to dedicate himself in complete silence to his poem, the people in Manhattan were already aware of his new address. News travels fast, he said to himself,

throwing a tea-towel over his shoulder and setting the kettle on the burner. The smell of gas filled the room, infused with the scent of an extinguished match. Once the pot has started to gurgle and air bubbles the size of crab's eyes were dancing to the surface, he turned off the gas and poured the water slowly over his green tea. How had they managed to work out why he had given up his room in the city? He couldn't get it out of his head. So far from the mountain! Surely no one was still looking for him? They can't hold my past against me, he continued in this thoughts, I was a puppet; they put the words in my mouth, literally. Yet the proposal from the American publisher had had the effect of a command on him and he could do nothing other than agree to it. 'That poem isn't going to run away,' he muttered as he staggered outside with two bowls of tea. 'Ho, ho,' said the postman, dusting the white cherry-blossoms from his cap as if they were snow.

Kudo Yamamoto tried to condense the entire cosmos into seventeen syllables, because it was written in ancient documents that the duration of the longest process of consciousness, engendered by the observation of the senses, was equal to seventeen moments of thought, each shorter than a flash of lightning. If that single sentence was able to say everything that had ever been thought, said and written and everything that was still to be thought, said and written, then his past and his future might disappear in smoke with the natural movements of his brush.

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The story had circulated for a while that once upon a time a shaved-headed monk would journey every day from the coast to the valley and shake the sand from his shoes on the town square before telling his audience about the power of the wind. That is how the mountain came to be and it was given the name Great Buddha. Since it was written on ancient scrolls that the mountain knew the secret of immortality, adventurers down through the centuries had attempted to climb it, wearing an eagle's tongue around their neck in case they lost their breath. No one had ever returned from the mountain. Kudo Yamamoto likewise made a detour along the narrow path to buy tea and fish in the valley where his uncle had built a wooden house. You could sometimes see the entire Milky Way through a tear in the paper on one of the panels. As a child he had thrown a red ball in the air in the orchard behind the wooden house and observed that it had become smaller and smaller and then returned to its normal size. 'You threw the sun in the air and caught the moon,' said his uncle as he balanced the ball on his nose like a young sea lion.

In the year the Fuji Photo Film Company was founded, the autumn fell to earth like a sputnik in the garden behind the house where Kudo Yamamoto had hung a mirror in the plum tree and had learned to knot his father's tie; he was now fifteen and was almost able to spin the ball on the tip of his finger for a full minute. Although it was not yet dark, his mother switched on the light to be able to see what she was putting into the suitcase. Her husband had left for Washington a year earlier, commissioned by a construction company to study the behaviour of hurricanes. The few days before Kudo Yamamoto and his mother left for America they hardly said a word to one another. She took her husband's photograph with her to the market, set it beside her as she washed the rice and whispered to it before going to sleep. But he too was silent and didn't agree to her suggestion that he return to the valley. Kudo Yamamoto arranged to meet the girl with the lisp one more time by the river. She threw her arms around his neck as he helped her cross the river, the moon hung in the sky like a bowl beside the mountain. They sat down on a rock overhanging the water; he scratched the date and their names with a flat stone.

Their time in America hovered over them like an eagle with guilesome wings. The house at the foot of the mountain had stood empty for three years and Kudo Yamamoto's father had collapsed during a discussion with an industrialist who wanted to hire him for a bridge project in Cincinnati. At his father's death bed he promised he would not dishonour the family name. He worked day and night in the glaring light of his desk lamp and graduated cum laude as a translator in the year of the snake. The following winter he started a well-paid job with the Federal Information Service in Washington. They made him sign papers in which he promised not to discuss his activities with anyone outside work; and he blindfolded his elderly mother before she dictated a letter to his uncle, that the only light that shone in America was her son, who had been chosen from hundreds of candidates for a job in a building taller than the mountain, a well-paid prestigious job in the service of the fatherland. She asked him how things were in the valley; whether the winter had not been too severe on his orchard. He answered that the Great Buddha had clothed himself in a garment of white and that he had seen the discarded corpse of a dog floating in the river after gathering wood and that he had stood there in the freezing cold with the wood piled on his shoulders for the best part of fifteen minutes staring at the river. At home he had chopped wood and set a fire in the inner courtyard; he had spent the entire night sitting by the fire wrapped in a blanket. He had seen the dead dog open its eyes in the flickering flames, as if the biting winter wind had breathed life into him, and whispered that he was his brother who had died in America. In answer to the question Kudo Yamamoto had added to his mother's letter in a postscript his uncle replied: the girl no longer has a lisp because an aviator with a burly moustache and a scar on his cheek had told her in the tea house that she should keep a stone in her mouth when she spoke. She fished a pebble the size of a pigeon's egg out of the river and kept it under her tongue day and night for six months. When she heard the droning of an airplane above the valley, she opened her eyes wide and spat the pebble out, hitting the ironmonger on the head. Saburo Sato says that she lives in a room by the harbour and that she and the aviator had a daughter, but what does Saburo Sato know!

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Once the postman had left, Kudo Yamamoto rolled the sleeves of his shirt up over his elbows and turned his bicycle upside down, gently bending his knees in the process like a weightlifter. He rotated the rear wheel with his index finger and studied the tyre. Roughly three quarters the way round he saw the tack. He stopped the wheel, extracted the tack from the rubber and dropped it on the ground. Befuddled, he got down on his hands and knees, placed his ear against the tiles and scanned the terrace. Where can it be, he mumbled to himself, tacks don't just disappear. He crept like a panda towards the well and searched the entire terrace: no tack to be found. The smell of the rubber brought to mind a slow-motion image of the girl with the lisp; how many times had he carried her on the back of his bicycle to the woods where she would lift her skirts above her belly button and let him see the black triangle between her legs. Once she had held her skirts under her chin and penetrated herself with his finger.

The image of the girl with the lisp blurred at the hefty twinges of pain in his head. He squeezed his eyes shut and stretched every muscle in his face. The pain subsided. After filling a bowl with water he loosened the butterfly nut on the rear wheel of his bicycle, lifted the wheel out of the fork and set it against the wall. He then removed the tyre from the rim and inflated the inner tube with a hand pump. He dipped the inflated inner-tube in the bowl of water. 'If they want to take my picture in front of my books I'll have to find somewhere to put them,' he mumbled. 'I'll have some shelves cut to measure in the valley.' Tiny bubbles of air filtered to the surface of the water; he had found the puncture. Kudo Yamamoto ran inside, wrapped a knife in a teacloth and stabbed it into his underbelly; a minor explosion followed and he burst apart into seventeen pieces.

And yes, the story of Kudo Yamamoto ends here with sheerest simplicity, the man who had withdrawn to the foot of the uncompromising mountain to condense the entire cosmos into a single breath. But the story would not have been worth the writing if it had been nothing but wind, if it didn't have a twist in the form of a letter that fell out of the deep blue sky on the real Kudo Yamamoto.

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# The Chest

Because he knew that the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the result of a translation error, Kudo Yamamamoto had kept silent for three days in a wooden chest that had been unloaded by a huge crane from the Black Hawk in the Bay of Tokyo. Intermittent sheets of rain pelted against the chest and he stiffened at every voice or passing footstep. When nothing but the light of the moon shone through the splits between the wooden planks he crawled out of the chest and walked into a local tavern. He was hungry as a wolf from the long journey and he ordered raw fish, tea and rice wine. The smell of his fatherland moved him deeply and an enormous teardrop ran down his cheek towards his mouth.

Under pressure, he had refused to admit that he had not understood the Japanese in which the emperor had agreed to an unconditional capitulation, that it was a type of Japanese spoken only at the imperial court. During the last convulsions of the war, however, he had sensed that Hirohito's had acquiesced, as if his blood longed to clarify the words of the capitulation, but his employer and the president did not want to lose face and decided to put an end to the war once and for all by dropping two atom bombs over the land in which his predecessors had watched as the last of the Samurai departed on horseback across the snow-covered winter landscape and how none of them had looked back.

No one was more aware of the power of language than Kudo Yamamoto and now that he was back in Japan he decided to reserve that power for poetry alone. In the big city he rented a room from on old friend from the valley. The first couple of weeks he rarely ventured outside and would lie for hours staring at the ceiling. In the evenings, by the light of a street lamp, he cast shadows on the bare wall and a smile appeared on his face when he heard his father and mother say: 'If the entire population of China were to jump up off the kitchen table all at once it would cause a shock wave measuring six on the Richter scale.'

One day he sat on a bench in the park and watched a frog on the edge of the pond ready to dive into the water. When he heard the plop, a combination of words arose within him that he was unable to place. He scrawled the sentence with his finger in the loose sand under the bench and drifted around the streets of the city until dawn. He heard from a sailor in the tea house that the home of a westerner was lying empty in the Ginza district. The following night he scrambled like a cat into a plum tree and clambered onto the wall surrounding the inner courtyard of the house of the absent westerner. He held his breath and let himself fall, crossed the inner courtyard and slid open the door. The light from his torch lit upon a typewriter and a portrait on top of a sealed container. He broke the seal and glared into the musty coffer. Printed in ornamental letters on the first manuscript on top of the pile: Metamorphoses – Ovid. He threw open the manuscript and on the first page he came to read how Daedalus had turned his mind to strange arts and had transformed nature by making wings for himself and his son Icarus:

*Some angler catching fish with a quivering rod, or a shepherd leaning on his crook, or a ploughman resting on the handles of his plough, saw them, perhaps, and stood there amazed, believing them to be gods able to travel the sky.* [1]

In Washington a few years before he had stood in front of a painting by Pieter Breugel in which the two legs and a hand of the fallen Icarus could be seen disappearing into the sea. Kudo Yamamoto remembered the farmer ploughing his imaginary field, the shepherd watching over his flock with the black sheep and the angler with a partridge to the left of his head. None of them, in spite of Ovid's version of events, seemed to be staggered by the site of the man falling into the water. If you look closely, he said to himself, you can see that nothing in the world is obscure, that everything has always been clear as daylight, and he slammed the manuscript shut, tied it around his belly with a rope and switched off his torch; a magpie fluttered for a moment in the light between the moon and the bare branches of the plum tree.

Each night he smuggled a couple of books from the West to his room and read them during the day in the park. In one of the books from the coffer he read that poetry should be as weightless as a bird, not its feathers. 'The course of the bird nullifies East and West,' he said to the mirror and he studied the behaviour of birds for nine whole years. One day, while he was standing at the traffic lights waiting to cross over to his bench in the park, he saw a crow with a walnut in its beak waiting for the light to turn green. Kudo Yamamoto stood and watched as the crow dropped the walnut on the zebra crossing. When the lights turned red the bird flew off and the cars drove over the walnut. When the pedestrian lights turned green the crow ate his walnut.

The autumn brought relief. He thought a great deal of the crow and the zebra crossing when he went to the park and decided that adjectives were a distraction for the reader. He made up his mind there and then to write poetry with nouns and to call a crow a crow.

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The wind played around his face. Kudo Yamamoto jumped on his bicycle and rode over a tack. 'Damn,' he said, 'then it'll have to be on foot,' and he closed the gate behind him. Ribbons of white cherry-blossom floated over the fields and a couple of swallows cleaved through the stippled air like a sword. The mountain watched as Kudo Yamamoto traipsed cheerfully along the path towards the sawmill singing 'Sakura, Sakura':

Cherry-blossoms... cherry-blossoms...

On mountains and villages

As far as the eye can see

Like a mist or a cloud

fragrant at sunrise

Cherry-blossoms... cherry-blossoms...

[1] A.S.Kline (tr.) *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, 2000.

in full flower

Let us go! Let us go!

Let us go and see them.

Because he didn't have a measuring stick to measure the walls of the room that would be used to house his books, he planned to borrow one from the caretaker at the saw-mill, who would throw in some sensible advice on the best sort of wood to use for his bookshelves. He tipped the edge of his hat high above his eyebrows and stifled a sneeze, and another sneeze. The sun soared from the flank of the mountain like a hang-glider and lighted on his face, leaving a kaleidoscope of colours to be disentangled behind his eyelids. 'Seventeen shelves should do the trick,' he figured. 'That should be enough to empty all of the boxes.' In spite of his efforts to concentrate, the flickering light continued to shimmer at the back of his open eyes. 'Chemistry,' he murmured, a word he considered close to his all-embracing poem, and he continued at a pace along the path.

And in spite of the fact that Kudo Yamamoto considered his memories to be air bubbles within which the storm of chemical elements had subsided, frozen images of the destruction of Nagasaki continued to plague him at the most unpredictable moments and from time to time the dead dog from his uncle's letter would lunge out of the river to snap at his calves. I'm like a sieve, he thought. Every day I wake up with my old memories in the body of a stranger. Long before I was born I was the great grandson of a one-eyed samurai, thereafter a translator on the pale-green lit twelfth floor of a Skyscraper and thereafter a stowaway in a chest on the way to his fatherland. 'And now a poet without a poem,' echoed from the direction of the woods, but Kudo Yamamoto did not hear it. He crossed the bridge and greeted the fisherman with the long grey beard.

'Kudo Yamamoto,' said the fisherman without losing sight of his hook, 'perfect weather for flying a kite.'

'Why are you fishing then, Fujiwara Basho?'

'Because there's too much cherry-blossom in the air, Kudo Yamamoto.

'What do you mean?'

'If I hold my net up in the air I can catch hundreds of them.

'But there are holes in your net.'

'The blossoms don't know that.'

'It is written: thou shalt not pluck cherry-blossoms, Fujiwara Basho!'

'The wind cannot read, Kudo Yamamoto.'

It was quiet in the saw-mill; nothing but the scent of fresh wood playing between the two warehouses in which the machines had not operated since the first of the year. Felled pine trees were stacked beside the river. A cock crowed hoarsely and crossed the courtyard of the saw-mill, its wings half-spread. The sliding window was open. The caretaker with the husky voice was sitting at his desk leafing through a pile of yellow documents and chewing on a pencil. Kudo Yamamoto

knew that his friend had seven measuring sticks, which he used to determine the length, breadth and thickness of the wood he had to saw. The cock jumped on to one of the stacks of wood and briefly caught his attention. Kudo Yamamoto cleared his throat and saluted the caretaker from the doorway.

'Been drinking, Yamamoto-san?'

'Yes, Nanashi was here.... Did you throw beans in the air?'

'Yes.'

'I need a measuring stick to measure my walls. Aaaa...tsi!'

'Bless you, I have seven.'

'Aaaaaa... tchoo, one is enough.'

'Bless you.'

'It's the spring;'

The caretaker sauntered inside and returned with a yellow measuring stick which he folded open into a triangle and then a square and then a kite. He explained to Kudo Yamamoto how best to use the measuring stick. He folded it completely open, set it on a plank of wood, placed his finger on the spot at which the stick ended and slid it further along the plank, turning it over at one and the same time.

'Two meters thirty-three,' he said.

'But I have to measure my walls.'

'Precisely the same. A little scratch on the wall and you can measure further.'

'I see.'

'Thought about the kind of wood you would like, Yamamoto-san?'

'Can you recommend something?'

'Diospyros Khaki from Nagasaki, survived the bomb. Kubota Koan has been drinking tea from its leaves for years; the nightmares and the itch have disappeared.'

'Is he still alive?'

'As the cock on that pile of tree trunks.'

Kudo Yamamoto saluted the caretaker with a quick nod, clicking the heels of his shoes together at the same time, and headed back along the same road he had come. It is February 1964, New Year's day. There is still snow in the north of the island and Kudo Yamamoto has a hangover as big as the Pacific Ocean.