Unlocking The Air

fiction By URSULA K. LE GUIN

THIS IS A FAIRY TALE. People stand in the lightly falling snow. Something is shining, trembling, making a silvery sound. Eyes are shining. Voices sing. People laugh and weep, clasp one another's hands, embrace.

Something shines and trembles. They live happily ever after. The snow falls on the roofs and blows across the parks, the squares, the river.

This is history. Once upon a time, a good king lived in his palace in a kingdom far away. But an evil enchantment fell upon that land. The wheat withered in the ear, the leaves dropped from the trees of the forest and nothing thrived.

This is a stone. It's a paving stone of a square that slants downhill in front of an old, reddish, almost windowless fortress called the Roukh Palace. The square was paved nearly 300 years ago, so a lot of feet have walked on this stone, bare feet and shod, children's little pads, horses' iron shoes, soldiers' boots; and wheels have gone over and over it, cart wheels, carriage wheels, car tires, tank treads. Dogs' paws every now and then. There has been dogshit on it, there has been blood, both soon washed away by water sloshed from buckets or run from hoses or dropped from the clouds. You can't get blood from a stone, they say, nor can you give it to a stone; it takes no stain. Some of the pavement, down near that street that leads out of Roukh Square through the old Jewish quarter to the river, got dug up, once or twice, and piled into a barricade, and some of the stones even found themselves flying through the air, but not for long. They were soon put back in their place, or replaced by others. It made no difference to them. The man hit by the flying stone dropped down like a stone beside the stone that had killed him. The man shot through the brain fell down and his blood ran out on this stone, or another one maybe; it makes no difference to them. The soldiers washed his blood away with water sloshed from buckets, the buckets their horses drank from. The rain fell after a while. The snow fell. Bells rang the hours, the Christmases, the New Years. A tank stopped with its

treads on
this stone. You'd think that that would leave a mark, a huge heavy thing like a
tank, but the stone shows nothing. Only all the feet bare and shod over the
centuries have worn a quality into it, not a smoothness, exactly, but a kind of
softness, like leather or like skin. Unstained, unmarked, indifferent, it does
have that quality of having been worn for a long time by life. So it is a stone of
power, and who sets foot on it may be transformed.

This is a story. She let herself in with her key and called, "Mama? It's
me, Fana!"

And her mother, in the kitchen of the apartment, called, "I'm in here,"
and they met and hugged in the doorway of the kitchen.

"Come on, come on!"

"Come where?"

"It's Thursday, Mama!"

"Oh," said Bruna Fabbre, retreating toward the stove, making vague
protective gestures at the saucepans, the dishcloths, the spoons.

"You said."

"But it's nearly four already--"

"We can be back by six-thirty."

"I have all the papers to read for the advancement tests."

"You have to come, Mama. You do. You'll see!"

A heart of stone might resist the shining eyes, the coaxing, the
bossiness. "Come on' she said, and the mother came.
But grumbling. "This is for you," she said on the stairs.
On the bus, she said it again. "This is for you. Not me.
"What makes you think that?"

Bruna did not reply for a while, looking out the bus window at the gray
city lurching by, the dead November sky behind the roofs.

"Well, you see," she said, "before Kasi, my brother Kasimir, before he
was killed, that was the time that would have been for me. But I was too
young. Too stupid. And then they killed Kasi."

"By mistake."

"It wasn't a mistake. They were hunting for a man who'd been getting
people out across the border, and they'd missed him. So it was to. . .

."

"To have something to report to the Central Office."
Bruna nodded. "He was about the age you are now," she said. The bus stopped, people climbed on, crowding the aisle. "Since then, twenty-seven years, always since then, it's been too late. For me. First too stupid, then too late. This time is for you. I missed mine."

"You'll see," Stefana said. "There's enough time to go round."

This is history. Soldiers stand in a row before the reddish, almost windowless palace; their muskets are at the ready. Young men walk across the stones toward them, singing, "Beyond this darkness is the light, 0 Liberty, of thine eternal day!"
The soldiers fire their guns. The young men live happily ever after.

This is biology.

"Where the hell is everybody?"

"It's Thursday," Stefan Fabbre said, adding, "Damn!" as the figures on the computer screen jumped and flickered. He was wearing his topcoat over sweater and scarf, since the biology laboratory was heated only by a space heater that shorted out the computer circuit if they were on at the same time.

"There are programs that could do this in two seconds," he said, jabbing morosely at the keyboard.
Avelin came up and glanced at the screen. "What is it?"

"The RNA comparison count. I could do it faster on my fingers."
Avelin, a bald, spruce, pale, dark-eyed man of 40, roamed the laboratory, looked restlessly through a folder of reports. "Can't run a university with this going on," he said. "I'd have thought you'd be down there."
Fabbre entered a new set of figures and said, "Why?"

"You're an idealist."

"Am l?" Fabbre leaned back, rolled his head to get the cricks out. "I try hard not to be," he said.

"Realists are born, not made." The younger man sat down on a lab stool and stared at the scarred, stained counter. "It's coming apart," he said.

"You think so? Seriously?"
Avelin nodded. "You heard that report from Prague."
Fabbre nodded.

"Last week . . . this week . . . next year--yes. An earthquake. The stones come apart--it falls apart--there was a building, now there's not.
History is made. So, I don't understand why you're here, not there."

"Seriously, you don't understand?"
Avelin smiled and said, "Seriously."

"All right." Fabbre stood up and began walking up and down the long room as he spoke. He was a slight gray-haired man with youthfully intense,
controlled movements. "Science or political activity, either/or: Choose. Right?
Choice is responsibility, right? So I chose my responsibility responsibly. I
chose science and abjured all action but the acts of science. The acts of a
responsible science. Out there, they can change the rules; in here, they can't
change the rules; when they try to, I resist. This is my resistance." He slapped
the laboratory bench as he turned round. "I'm lecturing. I walk up and down
like this when I lecture. So. Background of the choice. I'm from the northeast.
Fifty-six, in the northeast, do you remember? My grandfather, my father-reprisals. So, in Sixty, I come here, to the university. Sixty-two, my
best friend, my wife's brother. We were walking through a village market,
talking, then he stopped, he stopped talking, they had shot him. A kind of
mistake. Right? He was a musician. A realist. I felt that I owed it to him, that I
owed it to them, you see, to live carefully, with responsibility, to do the best I
could do. The best I could do was this," and he gestured around the laboratory. "I'm good at it. So I go on trying to be a realist. As far as possible,
under the circumstances, which have less and less to do with reality. But they
are only circumstances. Circumstances in which I do my work as carefully as I
can."

Avelin sat on the lab stool, his head bowed. When Fabbre was done, he nodded. After a while, he said, "But I have to ask you if it's realistic to
separate the circumstances, as you put it, from the work."

"About as realistic as separating the body from the mind," Fabbre said. He stretched again and reseated himself at the computer. "I want to get this

series in," he said, and his hands went to the keyboard and his gaze to the
notes he was copying. After five or six minutes, he started the printer and
spoke without turning. "You're serious, Givan? You think it's coming apart?"

"Yes. I think the experiment is over."
The printer scraped and screeched, and they raised their voices to be heard.

"Here, you mean."

"Here and everywhere. They know it, down at Roukh Square. Go down there. You'll see. There could be such jubilation only at the death of a tyrant or
the failure of a great hope."

"Or both."

"Or both," Avelin agreed.
The paper jammed in the printer, and Fabbre opened the machine to free it. His hand was shaking. Avelin, spruce and cool, hands behind his back,
strolled over, looked, reached in, disengaged the corner that was jamming the
feed.

"Soon," he said, "we'll have an IBM. A Mactoshin. Our hearts' desire."

"Macintosh," Fabbre said.

"Everything can be done in two seconds."
Fabbre restarted the printer and looked around. "Listen, the principles --
Avelin's eyes shone strangely, as if full of tears; he shook his head.

"So much depends on the circumstances," he said.

This is a key. It locks and unlocks a door, the door to apartment 2-1 of
the building at 43 Pradinestrade in the Old North Quarter of the city of
Krasnoy. The apartment is enviable, having a kitchen with saucepans, dislicloths, spoons and all that is necessary, and two bedrooms, one of which
is now used as a sitting room, with chairs, books, papers and all that is
necessary, as well as a view from the window between other buildings of a
short section of the Molsen River. The river at this moment is lead-colored and
the trees above it are bare and black. The apartment is unlighted and empty.
When they left, Bruna Fabbre locked the door and dropped the key, which is

on a steel ring along with the key to her desk at the lyceum and the key to her sister Bendika's apartment in the Trasfiuve, into her small imitation leather handbag, which is getting shabby at the corners, and snapped the handbag shut. Bruna's daughter Stefana has a copy of the key in her jeans pocket, tied on a bit of braided cord along with the key to the closet in her room in dormitory G of the University of Krasnoy, where she is a graduate student in the department of Orsinian and Slavic Literature, working for a degree in the field of early romantic poetry. She never locks the closet. The two women walk down Pradinestrade three blocks and wait a few minutes at the corner for the number 18 bus, which runs on Bulvard Settentre from North Krasnoy to the center of the city.

Pressed in the crowded interior of the handbag and the tight warmth of the jeans pocket, the key and its copy are inert, silent, forgotten. All a key can do is lock and unlock its door; that's all the function it has, all the meaning; it has a responsibility but no rights. It can lock or unlock. It can be found or thrown away.

This is history. Once upon a time, in 1830, in 1848, in 1866, in 1918, in 1947, in 1956, stones flew. Stones flew through the air like pigeons, and hearts, too; hearts had wings. Those were the years when the stones flew, the hearts took wing, the young voices sang. The soldiers raised their muskets to the ready, the soldiers aimed their rifles, the soldiers poised their machine guns. They were young, the soldiers. They fired. The stones lay down, the pigeons fell. There's a kind of red stone called pigeon blood, a ruby. The red stones of Roukh Square were never rubies; slosh a bucket of water over them or let the rain fall and they're gray again, lead-gray, common stones. Only now and then, in certain years, they have flown, and turned to rubies.

This is a bus. Nothing to do with fairy tales and not romantic; certainly realistic; though, in a way, in principle, in fact, it is highly idealistic. A city bus, crowded with people, in a city street in central Europe on a November

afternoon and it's stalled. What else? Oh, dear. Oh, damn. But no, it hasn't stalled; the engine, for a wonder, hasn't broken down; it's just that it can't go any farther. Why not? Because there's a bus stopped in front of it, and another one stopped in front of that one at the cross street, and it looks like everything has stopped. Nobody on this bus has heard the word gridlock, the name of an exotic disease of the mysterious West. There aren't enough private cars in Krasnoy to bring about a gridlock even if they knew what it was. There are cars, and a lot of wheezing, idealistic buses, but all there is enough of to stop the flow of traffic in Krasnoy is people. It is a kind of equation, proved by experiments conducted over many years, perhaps not in a wholly scientific or objective spirit but nonetheless presenting a well-documented result confirmed by repetition: There are not enough people in this city to stop a tank. Even in much larger cities, it has been authoritatively demonstrated as recently as last spring that there are not enough people to stop a tank But there are enough people in this city to stop a bus, and they are doing so. Not by throwing themselves in front of it, waving banners or singing songs about Liberty's eternal day, but merely by being of the g in the street, getting in the way bus, on the supposition that the bus driver has not been trained in either homicide or suicide, and on the same supposition-upon which all cities stand or fall-that they are also getting in the way of all the other buses and all the cars and in one another's way, too, so that nobody is going much of anywhere, in a physical sense.

"We're going to have to walk from here," Stefana said, and her mother clutched her imitation-leather handbag

"Oh, but we can't, Fana. Look at that crowd! What are they -- Are they -- "

"It's Thursday, ma'am," said a large, red-faced, smiling man just behind them in the aisle. Everybody was getting off the bus, pushing and talking.

"Yesterday, I got four blocks closer than this," a woman said crossly. And the red-faced man said, "Ah, but this is Thursday."

"Fifteen thousand last time," said somebody.
And somebody else said, "Fifty, fifty thousand today!"

"We can never get near the Square. I don't think we should try," Bruna told her daughter as they squeezed into the crowd outside the bus door.

"You stay with me, don't let go and don't worry," said the student of Early Romantic Poetry, a tall, resolute young woman, and she took her mother's hand in a firm grasp. "It doesn't really matter where we get, but it would be fun if you could see the Square. Let's try. Let's go round behind the post office."

Everybody was trying to go in the same direction. Stefana and Bruna got across one street by dodging and stopping and pushing gently, then turning against the flow, they trotted down a nearly empty alley, cut across the cobbled court in back of the Central Post Office and rejoined an even thicker crowd moving slowly down a wide street and out from between the buildings. "There, there's the palace, see!" said Stefana, who could see it, being taller. "This is as far as we'll get except by osmosis." They practiced osmosis, which necessitated letting go of each other's hands and made Bruna unhappy.

"This is far enough, this is fine here," Bruna kept saying. "I can see everything. There's the roof of the palace. Nothing's going to happen, is it? I mean, will anybody speak?" It was not what she meant, but she did not want to shame her daughter with her fear, her daughter who had not been alive when the stones turned to rubies. And she spoke quietly because although there were so many people pressed and pressing into Roukh Square, they were not noisy. They talked to one another in ordinary, quiet voices. Only now and then, somebody down nearer the palace shouted out a name, and then many other voices would repeat it with a roll and crash like a wave breaking. Then they would be quiet again, murmuring vastly, like the sea between big waves.

The streetlights had come on. Roukh Square was sparsely lighted by tall, old cast-iron standards with double globes that shed a soft light high in the air. Through that serene light, which seemed to darken the sky, came drifting small, dry flecks of snow.

The flecks melted to droplets on Stefana's dark short hair and on the

scarf Bruna had tied over her fair short hair to keep her ears warm. When Stefana stopped at last, Bruna stood up as tall as she could, and because they were standing on the highest edge of the Square, in front of the old dispensary, by craning, she could see the great crowd, the faces like snowflakes, countless. She saw the evening darkening, the snow falling, and no way out, and no way home. She was lost in the forest. The palace, whose few lighted windows shone dully above the crowd, was silent. No one came out, no one went in. It was the seat of government; it held the power. It was the powerhouse, the powder magazine, the bomb. Power had been compressed, jammed into those old reddish walls, packed and forced into them over years, over centuries, till if it exploded, it would burst with horrible violence, hurling pointed shards of stone, And out here in the twilight, in the open, there was nothing but soft faces with shining eyes, soft little breasts and stomachs and thighs protected only by bits of cloth.

She looked down at her feet on the pavement. They were cold. She would have worn her boots if she had thought it was going to snow, if Fana hadn't hurried her so. She felt cold, lost, lonely to the point of tears. She set her jaw and set her lips and stood firm on her cold feet on the cold stone.

There was a sound, sparse, sparkling, faint, like the snow crystals. The crowd had gone quite silent, swept by low laughing murmurs, and through the silence ran that small, discontinuous silvery sound.

"What is that?" asked Bruna, beginning to smile. "Why are they doing that?"

This is a committee meeting. Surely you don't want me to describe a committee meeting? It meets as usual on Friday at I I in the morning in the basement of the Economics Building. At 11 on Friday night, however, it is still meeting, and there are a good many onlookers, several million, in fact, thanks to the foreigner with the camera, a television camera with a long snout, a one-eyed snout that peers and sucks up what it sees. The cameraman focuses for a long time on the tall dark-haired girl who speaks so eloquently in favor of a certain decision concerning bringing a certain man back to the capital. But the millions of onlookers will not understand her argument, which is spoken in

her obscure language and is not translated for them. All they will know is how
the eye snout of the camera lingered on her young face, sticking it.

This is a love story. Two hours later, the cameraman was long gone, but the committee was still meeting.

"No, listen," she said, "seriously, this is the moment when the betrayal
is always made. Free elections, yes; but if we don't look past that now, when
will we? And who'll do it? Are we a country or a client state changing patrons?"

"You have to go one step at a time, consolidating -- "

"When the dam breaks? You have to shoot the rapids! All at once!"

"It's a matter of choosing direction -- "

"Exactly, direction. Not being carried senselessly by events."

"But all the events are sweeping in one direction."

"They always do. Back! You'll see!"

"Sweeping to what, to dependence on the West instead of the East, like Fana said?"

"Dependence is inevitable-realignment, but not occupation -- "

"The hell it won't be occupation! Occupation by money, materialism, their markets, their values. You don't think we can hold out against them, do
you? What's social justice to a color-TV set? That battle's lost before it's
fought. Where do we stand?"

"Where we always stood. In an absolutely untenable position."

"He's right. Seriously, we are exactly where we always were. Nobody else is. We are. They have caught up with us, for a moment, for this moment,
and so we can act. The untenable position is the center of power. Now. We can
act now."

"To prevent color-TVzation? How? The dam's broken! The goodies come flooding in. And we drown in them."

"Not if we establish the direction, the true direction, right now -- "

"But will Rege listen to us? Why are. we turning back when we should be going forward? If we -- "

"We have to establish -- "

"No! We have to act! Freedom can be established only in the moment of freedom -- "
They were all shouting at once in their hoarse, worn-out voices. They had all been talking and listening and drinking bad coffee and living for days,
for weeks, on love. Yes, on love; these are lovers' quarrels. It is for love that
he pleads, it is for love that she rages. It was always for love. That's why the
camera snout came poking and sucking into this dirty basement room where
the lovers meet. It craves love, the sight of love; for if you can't have the real
thing, you can watch it on TV, and soon you don't know the real thing from the
images on the little screen where everything, as he said, can be done in two
seconds. But the lovers know the difference.

This is a fairy tale, and you know that in the fairy tale, after it says
that they lived happily ever after, there is no after. The evil enchantment was
broken; the good servant received half the kingdom as his reward; the king
ruled long and well. Remember the moment when the betrayal is made, and ask no questions. Do not ask if the poisoned fields grew white again with
grain. Do not ask if the leaves of the forests grew green that spring. Do not
ask what the maiden received as her reward. Remember the tale of Koshchey
the Deathless, whose life was in a needle, and the needle was in an egg, and
the egg was in a swan, and the swan was in an eagle, and the eagle was in a
wolf, and the wolf was in the palace whose walls were built of the stones of
power. Enchantment within enchantment! We are a long way from the egg that holds the needle that must be broken so Koshchey the Deathless can die.
And so the tale ends. Thousands and thousands of people stood on the slanting pavement before the palace. Snow sparkled in the air, and the people
sang. You know the song, that old song with words like land, love, free, in the
language you have known the longest. Its words make stone part from stone,
its words prevent tanks, its words transform the world, when it is sung at the
right time by the right people, after enough people have died for singing it.
A thousand doors opened in the walls of the palace. The soldiers laid down then- arms and sang. The evil enchantment was broken. The good king

returned to his kingdom, and the people danced for joy on the stones of the
city streets.

And we do not ask what happened after. But we can tell the story over, we can tell the story till we get it right.

"My daughter's on the Committee of the Student Action Council," said Stefan Fabbre to his neighbor Florens Aske as they stood in a line outside the
bakery on Pradinestrade. His tone of voice was complicated.
I know. Erreskar saw her on the television," Aske said.

"She says they've decided that bringing Rege here is the only way to provide an immediate, credible transition. They think the army will accept
him."

They shuffled forward a step.

Aske, an old man with a hard brown face and narrow eyes, stuck his lips out, thinking it over.

"You were in the Rege government," Fabbre said.
Aske nodded. "Minister of education for a week," he said, and gave a bark like a sea lion -- owp! -- a cough or a laugh.

"Do you think he can pull it off ?"
Aske pulled his grubby muffler closer round his neck and said, "Well, Rege is not stupid. But he's old. What about that scientist, that physicist
fellow?"

"Rochoy. She says their idea is that Rege's brought in first, for the transition, for the symbolism, the link to Fifty-six. And if he survives, Rochoy
would be the one they'd run in an election."

"The dream of the election. . . ."
They shuffled forward again. They were now in front of the bakery window, only eight or ten people from the door.

"Why do they put up the old man?" asked the old man. "These boys and girls , these young people. What the devil do they want us for again?"
I don't know," Fabbre said. "I keep thinking they know what they're doing. She had me down there,),on know, made me come to one of their meetings. She came to the lab -- Come on, leave that I follow me! I did. No
questions. She's in charge. All of them, twenty-two, twenty-three, they're in
charge. In power. Seeking structure, order. but very definite: Violence is
defeat, to them, violence is the loss of options. They're absolutely certain and
Completely ignorant. Like spring-like the lambs in spring. They have

never
done anything and they know exactly what to do "

"Stefan," said his wife, Bruna, who had been standing at his elbow for several sentences, "you're lecturing. Hello, dear. Hello, Florens, I just saw
Margarita at the market, we were queuing for cabbages. I'm on my way downtown. Stefan. I'll be back, I don't know, sometime after seven, maybe."

"Again?" he said.

And Aske said, "Downtown?

"It's Thursday," Bruna said. and bringing up the keys from her handbag, the two apartment keys and the desk key, she shook them in the air
before the men's faces, making a silvery jingle and she smiled.

"I'll come," said Stefan Fabbre.

"Owp! Owp!" went Aske. "Oh, hell, I'll come too. Does man live by bread alone?"

"Will Margarita worry where you are?" Bruna asked as they left the bakery line and set off toward the bus stop.

"That's the problem with the women, you see, said the old man. "They worry that she'll worry. Yes. She will. Ad you worry about your daughter, eh?"

"Yes," Stefan said, "I do."

"No," Bruna said, "I don't. I fear her, I fear for her, I honor her. She
gave me the keys." She clutched her imitation-leather handbag tight between
her arm and side as they walked.

This is the truth. They stood on the stones in the lightly falling snow and listened to the silvery, trembling sound of thousands of keys being shaken, unlocking the air, once upon a time.

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