The People Could Fly

Told by Virginia Hamilton

They say the people could fly. Say that long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. And they would walk up on the air like climbin up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flappin against the blue up there.

Then, many of the people were captured for Slavery. The ones that could fly shed their wings. They couldn't take their wings across the water on the slave ships. Too crowded, don't you know.

The folks were full of misery, then. Got sick with the up and down of the sea. So they forgot about flyin when they could no longer breathe the sweet scent of Africa.

Say the people who could fly kept their power, although they shed their wings. They kept their secret magic in the land of slavery. They looked the same as the other people from Africa who had been coming over, who had dark skin. Say you couldn't tell anymore one who could fly from one who couldn't.
One such who could was an old man, call him Toby. And standin
tall, yet afraid, was a young woman who once had wings. Call her
Sarah. Now Sarah carried a babe tied to her back. She trembled to
be so hard worked and scorned.

The slaves labored in the fields from sunup to sundown. The
owner of the slaves callin himself their Master. Say he was a hard
lump of clay. A hard, glinty coal. A hard rock pile, wouldn’t be
moved. His Overseer on horseback pointed out the slaves who
were slowin down. So the one called Driver cracked his whip
over the slow ones to make them move faster. That whip was a
slice-open cut of pain. So they did move faster. Had to.

Sarah hoed and chopped the row as the babe on her back slept.

Say the child grew hungry. That babe started up bawling too
loud. Sarah couldn’t stop to feed it. Couldn’t stop to soothe and
quiet it down. She let it cry. She didn’t want to. She had no heart
to croon to it.

"Keep that thing quiet," called the Overseer. He pointed his
finger at the babe. The woman scrunched low. The Driver
cracked his whip across the babe anyhow. The babe hollered like
any hurt child, and the woman fell to the earth.

The old man that was there, Toby, came and helped her to
her feet.

"I must go soon," she told him.

"Soon," he said.

Sarah couldn’t stand up straight any longer. She was too weak.
The sun burned her face. The babe cried and cried, "Pity me, oh,
pity me," say it sounded like.

Word Power

scorned (skórd) v. treated with dislike or disrespect
bawling (bōl’ ing) v. crying loudly
croon (krōn) v. to gently sing or hum
scrunched (skrunchd) v. crouched; squatted
Sarah was so sad and starvin', she sat down in the row.

"Get up, you black cow," called the Overseer. He pointed his hand, and the Driver's whip snorted around Sarah's legs. Her sack dress tore into rags. Her legs bled onto the earth. She couldn't get up.

Toby was there where there was no one to help her and the babe.

"Now, before it's too late," panted Sarah. "Now, Father!"

"Yes, Daughter, the time is come," Toby answered. "Go, as you know how to go!"

He raised his arms, holding them out to her. "Kum ... yali, kum bubu tambe," and more magic words, said so quickly, they sounded like whispers and sighs.


**What qualities might the man in the painting have in common with Toby?**
The young woman lifted one foot on the air. Then the other. She flew clumsily at first, with the child now held tightly in her arms. Then she felt the magic, the African mystery. Say she rose just as free as a bird. As light as a feather.

The Overseer rode after her, hollerin. Sarah flew over the fences. She flew over the woods. Tall trees could not snag her. Nor could the Overseer. She flew like an eagle now, until she was gone from sight. No one dared speak about it. Couldn't believe it. But it was, because they that was there saw that it was.

Say the next day was dead hot in the fields. A young man slave fell from the heat. The Driver come and whipped him. Toby come over and spoke words to the fallen one. The words of ancient Africa once heard are never remembered completely. The young man forgot them as soon as he heard them. They went way inside him. He got up and rolled over on the air. He rode it awhile. And he flew away.

Another and another fell from the heat. Toby was there. He cried out to the fallen and reached his arms out to them. "Kum kunka yali, kum ... tambel!" Whispers and sighs. And they too rose on the air. They rode the hot breezes. The ones flyin were black and shinin sticks, wheelin above the head of the Overseer. They crossed the rows, the fields, the fences, the streams, and were away.

"Seize the old man!" cried the Overseer. "I heard him say the magic *words*. Seize him!"

---

**Literary Element**

**Symbol** Reread the sentences highlighted in blue. What does flying symbolize to the enslaved men and women?

---

**Reading Skill**

**Visualize** Reread the sentences highlighted in green. In the frame below, draw a picture of what you think the flying people look like. If you have room, you can add the fields, fences, streams, or the Overseer.

---

**Word Power**

**seize** (sēz) v. to grab and take hold of someone or something, possibly by force
The one callin himself Master come runnin. The Driver got his whip ready to curl around old Toby and tie him up. The slaveowner took his hip gun from its place. He meant to kill old, black Toby. But Toby just laughed. Say he threw back his head and said, "Hee, hee! Don't you know who I am? Don't you know some of us in this field?" He said it to their faces. "We are ones who fly!"

And he sighed the ancient words that were a dark promise. He said them all around to the others in the field under the whip, "...buba yali...buba tambe..."

There was a great outcryin. The bent backs straightened up. Old and young who were called slaves and could fly joined hands. Say like they would ring-sing. But they didn't shuffle in a circle. They didn't sing. They rose on the air. They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue. Black crows or black shadows. It didn't matter, they went so high. Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to Freedom.

**Background Info**

A ring-sing, or ring shout, is a custom that was performed after a long day of work on the plantation. Singers and dancers would form a circle. Then they would shuffle their feet on the ground, move their bodies, clap their hands, and sing. Ring-sings are still performed today in some parts of the United States.


_Do you think this picture is a good illustration of what is happening in the story? Why?_
And the old man, old Toby, flew behind them, takin care
of them. He wasn't cryin. He wasn't laughin. He was the seer.
His gaze fell on the plantation where the slaves who could not
fly waited.

"Take us with you!" Their looks spoke it but they were afraid
to shout it. Toby couldn't take them with him. Hadn't the time
to teach them to fly. They must wait for a chance to run.

"Goodbye!" The old man called Toby spoke to them, poor
souls! And he was flyin gone.

So they say. The Overseer told it. The one called Master said it
was a lie, a trick of the light. The Driver kept his mouth shut.

The slaves who could not fly told about the people who could
fly to their children. When they were free. When they sat close
before the fire in the free land, they told it. They did so love
firelight and Freedom, and tellin.

They say that the children of the ones who could not fly told
their children. And now, me, I have told it to you.