

# Sky's the Limit

*Seeing the future in a disturbing summer storm*

**Lela Stanley**



IN SUMMER 2020, IN THE MIDDLE OF EVERYTHING GOING ON THAT YEAR, we had a particular thunderstorm in Washington, D.C. It was one in a line of them, a late July mini-season of tempests sweeping east. My girlfriend spent those days in the kitchen, clanking pots and song beats—distractions, avoiding the windows. I sat on the porch steps and watched rain turn the air white. We lived near a Metro stop, and every day commuters sprinted past, umbrellaless, caught out under the exploding storms.

Documenting extreme weather is a losing race now. You can't keep up. There's the monstrous cyclone and the worse one and the terrible rains before the flooding, and the fires—you remember the fires that year, maybe, in Australia, Siberia, et cetera. We all know how it's going, and it's all predictable, up to a point. As I'm writing this, the eleventh atmospheric river of the year is pouring down on California.

The shape of things to come may be predictable, but their particulars aren't. On average, we say, carbon dioxide will rise *so*, and temperature will react accordingly. But the number of storms that heat produces, the depth of falling water they bring, and the faces of the people displaced all are mysteries right up until they're revealed.

Even in that pandemic year, in its parade of other, more visceral horrors, the particulars of that storm caught me, snagged, and kept flashing in my brain. It's been years now and I keep thinking about it, the weirdness of it, how it seemed to me to demarcate a break with something, the arrival of something else: a future, I guess.

THAT SUMMER HAD BEEN VERY HOT, LIKE A LOT OF THEM LATELY AND LIKE most of the rest to come in our lives. I mean even hotter than usual—and remember this is Washington, D.C., which is not Delhi by any stretch but is also not really where anyone wants to be in July. It was then the second-hottest summer on record. Someone on the D.C. subreddit wrote that their glass door had shattered from the heat. There was a photo, a pile of shards. True or not, this seemed plausible: One day that week, the mayor warned, it would feel like 114. In the mornings I put out bowls of clear ice for the birds.

*Documenting extreme weather, one can't keep up. Locals said they'd never experienced thunder and rain as they did in this storm on July 23, 2020. The photographer edited this image to include twelve lightning strikes that hit between 8:34 and 8:47 P.M. that night.*

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By nightfall these lapped with dirty warm water, the lips of the dishes hot where the sun had struck them.

But we weren't in Phoenix or Death Valley, we weren't actually on fire, it only *felt* like 114, so since I worked inside, unlike my parents, unlike many, it was possible to ignore the heat, the way you can ignore a twinge in your molar, and then that low, slow ache in your jaw.

Heat makes storms, though, and so we had them.

I'VE LIVED ON THE EAST COAST MY WHOLE LIFE. I KNOW ITS SUMMER STORMS. Here's the map: The air surges with charge. The clouds inflate, dimple, color, soar miles above the earth, bringing evening hours early. Then rain; then the storm. It smashes gleefully against the trees, thrills the air, thrums a sudden volley on the windows, if you're behind them. Any streets go liquid. Maples and mulberries flex and bow, rippling the vines or telephone cables that grow through their branches, like a kid flicking wet towels. Sometimes the air goes a little green. Sometimes there's hail, a reminder that miles above us it's still very cold. Later, the detritus of trees will litter the ground, broken bits of deadwood and a damp mat of leaves. Maybe apples, windfallen, if you're lucky. Apple blossoms, if the tree wasn't.

That's the kind of summer storm I know. The one I'm thinking about was different.

For a while after it began, I lay on my bed listening to the thunder and reading, deliciously. A wet breeze snaked through the open window. Drops pattered and swept against the porch roof, sending up wafts of petrochemical smell from the asphalt. What's better, really, than lying around reading and listening to summer rain? I couldn't tell you what I was reading then, though, because the storm that followed drove it out of my mind.

Gradually I became aware that this thunder had an unfamiliar quality. It made the usual rolling crescendo, and here and there the sharp claps that frighten people. But there was another kind of noise, too, a slow growl that crept along low in the sky and seemed to move independently of these other, normal sounds: It could have been the mumbling of some giant machine, out of oil, out of things to eat. I was listening idly, lolling, when another clap cracked across the dome, so loudly I leapt up from the bed and hit my shin hard on the frame.

I went to the window, pushed back the curtain, and at first didn't understand what I saw. Lightning flickered without end. It strobed like a giant lightbulb, just out of frame and sputtering maniacally: on-off-on-off-on-on-on,

jittery lights flashing so quickly and overlapping one another so that it was impossible to count them. Every few minutes a dramatic arc of light shot overhead, followed by a louder blow, but these only contrasted against the bizarre, unending flickering. The flashes seemed to emit from a locus due east of me, past the wet traffic on Georgia Avenue, somewhere toward the Basilica, and this helped reinforce the feeling that they emitted from a single, insane lamp.

The air was dark lavender. I hung out of the window, stared. Raindrops hissed past, and the lightning flashed and flashed and flashed. Something seemed broken.

LATER, I LOOKED IT UP. ACCORDING TO THE DETECTION OF A NETWORK OF sky-probing antennae called the DC Lightning Mapping Array, that storm produced about 126,500 lightning flashes in two hours. Averaged, that's about eighteen per second.

I had never before looked at the sky and wondered, What else could come out of it?

Or, a different way of phrasing that: It had never occurred to me, before that storm, to be *afraid* of the sky. I'm not, yet. But that experience altered what I understand to be possible in the world by reminding me that, in fact, anything could happen, that only the sky is the limit when it comes to the effects that we're able to imagine of the climate crisis.

It's just a quirk of circumstance that it was a spectacular—and nonlethal—display of electricity that finally brought home to me how deeply weird and, yes, frightening, things might get. Often, when we read about the climate crisis and what it will do to weather, we hear that warming temperatures will lead to bigger and wetter storms. That's true, and it doesn't come close to describing how deeply strange things also might become. Methane explosions in the Arctic? Already happening. Megastorms flinging boulders a hundred feet above the ocean? Three feet of rain falling in one day on Topeka? Give it a minute.

Respect the weather: of course. Know what could happen. Look up when you camp. Plan ahead. But no one can plan ahead for a 126,500-flash lightning storm, even if nothing falls on you. Doesn't happen. You might never go outside again.

Not many people die from lightning strikes, of course, even when those bolts of lightning ignite wildfires. Even fewer have trees knocked onto them from a storm. Those numbers are sure to increase, as the climate continues





to warm—I mean, as fossil fuel companies continue boiling us alive. Increasingly bizarre and dramatic storms will inevitably keep more people inside anyway.

I can imagine enjoying, even relishing, getting to experience a huge, crazy storm as long as I came out of it unscathed and didn't suspect I might die in the middle of it. There, however, is the rub. It's one thing for people who have the means to reschedule a trip or get through an unforeseen extreme event more easily. Not so for folks for whom a trip into the wild is a big, expensive deal. Getting into the wilderness, however you define it, is already hard enough for a lot of people. Money, time, racism, *access*, or the lack of it, in all its forms: Slightly freakier weather is likely to be the last needle for many folks. It was unnerving enough to watch that ludicrous display of energy from inside a house. What about out on the trail? Or on the *water*? Imagine seeing those eighteen discharges of lightning every second from inside your tent, surrounded by trees whose skeletal branches—let's hope they're in good shape—flash terrifying shadows through the nylon walls. Or from the side of a mountain where you were caught unprepared when the wind blew up out of nowhere. I'd rather not, actually.

I'M TRYING AND FAILING TO SAY WHAT STRUCK ME SO ABOUT THAT EVENT, THE actual storm. Was it that the sky was truly wild, then, in a way I never consider it to be? *Sure, wilderness is great, until it's just too much*? Was it too wild for me, even watching it from inside my own bedroom? Isn't some—all?—of the appeal of the wild that we cannot predict it? I would not have enjoyed those three days I got once in Jasper National Park in Canada nearly as much if I'd known there was no chance at all of seeing any bears. That I didn't see any in the end didn't matter as much.

You might argue that uncertainty is the spice, but within reason, within the parameters of “normal” that we're used to. I'm not saying that a tendency toward weirder and bigger storms, which we know to expect with the worsening crisis, is more truly wild. It's the opposite: Those tens of thousands of discharges of electricity represent the mark of humans on even the weather, an unnatural influence. A weather report after the fact noted that there was three times as much energy available to feed that storm as it takes to create a regular thunderstorm. It was hard, in 2020, to not think about everything through

*Lela Stanley looks at the landscape on a trip to Iceland.* PATRICIA BIRCHARD

the lens of the virus, a product of earthly destruction, and I saw the storm then as one more thing that we—well, some of us—had set loose. I still do.

WE CAN PREDICT A LOT OF ALL OF IT, UNTIL WE CAN'T. MORE OIL BURNED equals more heat trapped in the air. More heat, bigger storms. More energy means more lightning strikes, a predictable, knowable increase of them: about 12 percent more for every degree Celsius. In that sense, such an experience, of watching thousands and thousands of lightning flashes, is unremarkable. In its reality it grabbed me and shook, keeps shaking. A flickering wall of lightning moving over the country, burning through satellite images with white fire.

We could see well enough then where we would be now. We can see some distance ahead. There will be worse lightning storms, another plague. And then there is the space beyond that, which we can't see from here. We know what will happen, until we don't. The temperature, now rising, could still lower, if we make it. The future could still surprise us, if we make it.

The week after the storm, I joined friends for dinner. We ate outside in a steady breeze, hoping any virus would be lifted aloft toward the next weather system, already clotting gray to our south.

"This weather's been absurd," one of my friends said. I mentioned the lightning and her husband shook his head. He grew up on a farm in Indiana; he knows exciting storms. "That was crazy," he said, looking at the radar shifting colors on his phone. "I've never seen anything like that." I've lived here all my life and I hadn't either. It looked like something I could imagine from a different planet, or a new one.

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*This essay was a runner-up in the 2023 Waterman Fund Essay Contest. The Waterman Fund is a nonprofit that fosters education and preservation of alpine areas in the Northeast. It has sponsored a contest with this journal to nurture new talent since 2008.*