Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Weather

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Abstract
Footage of a tornado this spring morning on The Weather Channel. Tuberous as a taproot, it dips, retracts, stretches thin, then holds, taut as a sprung coil. Dark topsoil rises in spinning wisps as the funnel makes contact with the ground, widens, then moves like a vacuum across flat, unfortunate Kansas.

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The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.
—Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"

1. Footage of a tornado this spring morning on The Weather Channel. Tuberos as a taproot, it dips, retracts, stretches thin, then holds, taut as a sprung coil. Dark topsoil rises in spinning wisps as the funnel makes contact with the ground, widens, then moves like a vacuum across flat, unfortunate Kansas.

   On the far horizon, the nub of a white clapboard farmhouse—neat crop of outbuildings, small stand of trees—disappears under the swath, the funnel getting darker, spewing up broken boards, strips of paper, sheetrock, metal. The caption on the bottom of the TV screen reads like a poem:
   Danger Remains on the Plains.

2. We didn't run to the basement like the weathermen say you should. No bracing in bathtubs or solid doorways for us. This was North Dakota, 1975—the time before Doppler, too deep in the country to hear sirens. Instead, we ran outside, into the swirl of wind, as country people do, to get a closer look at the weather.

   In the wind-spun circle of our yard, between the house, the garage, and the barn—the well-worn path and turnaround spot where no grass grew—we shielded our eyes and watched the dark sky move above us. Our hair rose and fell in the wind. Our clothes lifted and whipped around our bodies.

   Then in one split second, the wind fell to nothing. The air hung around us, humid, time-stopped. We stood there waiting, in eerie, suspended quiet. And I remember Father pointing his bony finger straight up, directing our attention to where the sky had shifted to a violet gray.

   We were in the calm center of something developing.

   Overhead we could make out two strata of shifting clouds. One layer, low and dark, moved in a clockwise direction; and the other layer, light and touched on the edges by the sun, spun high and counterclockwise.

   It was a true miracle of nature's coordination, I remember thinking at the time. It was like that playground trick I could never master—spinning my right
hand on my belly in one direction, and my left hand on the top of my head in another direction, all the while standing on one foot and whistling a familiar tune.

3.
When I tell my fiction class I'm writing an essay about Midwestern weather, they break into spontaneous chatter. They are so brimming full of meteorological curiosities, anecdotes, and spare knowledge about weather, I cannot start class.

They turn to each other and gesticulate, they gab, then they begin to shout weather stories at me, three at a time—the great flood and where they were, the big blizzard and who got stuck, the time they sat on top of a roof and watched bathtubs float by, the time they hunkered in the basement under a mattress and heard the tornado roar overhead.

Wait, wait, wait, I say. I can't include all these stories. I'm from North Dakota, the land of weather extremes. I have a head full of my own weather stories. I have to tell about the big blizzards of my own youth! The winter of '66—the way the snowfall was so deep, it covered up whole houses. People just chipped archway tunnels out of the snow drifts in order to get out of their front doors.

I have to tell about the time a few years ago in Fargo when four people died of exposure stranded in a car on 18th Street, only two blocks away from the NDSU campus. The passengers stayed with the car through the night and into the next day as you're always told to do: Never leave the safety of your car.

The streets were so socked in with snow, the drifts so high, they must not have realized they were still in the middle of the city. The workers found the car full of frozen people when they began to clear the streets. People talked about it for weeks. What a shame. If only they'd gotten out and walked, they would have been to someone's house in minutes.

4.
I have to tell about that spring afternoon in northern Iowa, 1995, on the way home from Minneapolis, when I drove unsuspectingly into high winds and threatening clouds, and how I parked on the side of I-35 in my Eagle Summit, listening to the National Weather Service interrupt NPR with that EH, EH, EH sound, then the electronic voice coming on (as if all living, breathing people had been destroyed and only this machine was left to warn us).

And the voice was saying, in patched together snippets of pre-recorded phonemes, that the National Weather Service has issued a tornado warning for Franklin, Butler, and Cerro Gordo counties, and I remember thinking that I, personally, would have preferred a few names of cities, since I didn't yet know the counties in Iowa, and neither, I suspected, did the dozens of cars
and semis lined up and down the road around me with license plates from Michigan, Oregon, New York, Pennsylvania, California and other far-flung (and soon-to-be farther-flung) places.

I knew for certain you must never park under the overpasses, as it is your instinct to do, thinking they are shelters, when really they are wind-blown death traps that the tornadoes like to suck themselves under and smash things into.

And I remember wondering as my little car rocked side to side on its wheels, if I would know the exact moment when it was time to abandon the car, to throw myself into the ditch, face down in the grass, and dig my fingers into the clots of dirt.

Would I feel my car begin to lift? I imagined my burgundy wagon rising and spinning intact in the clouds, just as Dorothy's house had done in *The Wizard of Oz*, then being set down unharmed in some strange faraway land.

And in those long minutes on the side of I-35, as the rain blurred the windshield beyond seeing, I calculated that the car would roll to the east—the wind blowing in a northeasterly direction as tornadoes typically do—and so I moved into the passenger seat to avoid having the car roll over me when I bailed out, and I waited like that with my hand on the door latch.

5.
Confession: I never look out the window to check the weather. If I want to know what the day will be like, I turn on The Weather Channel.

Confession: I have one of those cell phones with Doppler radar and a satellite view of the weather. I often check it to see what's happening around me, weatherwise, even when nothing much is happening, weatherwise.

Confession: I like to watch Storm Stories. I'm fascinated by inclement weather and surprise storms. I enjoy anomalous weather patterns, as long as they don't involve me.

6.
In stories by Ernest Hemingway, the weather exerts a climate control over the plot, often pacing and foreshadowing calamitous events or unspoken secrets lurking inside the characters. When it finally hails or snows, or rains or blows, everything comes out—people crash and burn; they lose limbs; tempers flare; husbands confess infidelities; character flaws are finally revealed. Everything that was contained in the climate of the story from the first sentence comes out, but only the weather knows how the story will unfold.

7.
Sometimes I think the weather is trying to tell me something, but I'm missing the necessary equipment to decode the message, like when you accidentally
dial a fax number and all you hear is that jangled buzzing on the other end of the line. To you, it sounds like noise, but you know it makes all kinds of sense to another fax machine.

I want to know what the lightning was trying to tell me that humid July night in southern Minnesota, 1981, driving home from the Kandiyohi County Fair gig with my band—the last of four one-nighters in a row spread across three states.

The road crew stayed behind with the bus to pack the equipment. The rest of the band climbed into the van for the long drive home. Usually, our bass player drove, or our keyboard player. After that, the guitar players would pitch in and take the wheel. But this night everyone in the band was too tired to drive, so I took over at two a.m.

I remember feeling responsible for lives that night as I drove. I could see them in the rear view mirror, all those trusting bodies sleeping in sprawls in the back of the van—heads resting on crumpled-up jean jackets, long legs thrown over armrests—and me in the front with only the sibilance of the radio and the column of headlights spreading before me on the dark road.

What causes me to remember that night so vividly, even now, is not what happened the next morning—the phone that rang too early. It would be the first in a succession of early-morning or late-night phone calls, strung out over the next few months, all of which began with the words, "I've got some bad news," then continuing with details of bus rollovers, drug busts, truck fires, lost equipment, embezzling agents, lawsuits.

But what causes me to remember that night so vividly is the storm that threatened, the lightning that came in constant flashes, illuminating the entire circle of the sky, one fragment at a time. And the variation! Soft puffs of heat lightning all around and large flashes that popped off. Explosions on the horizon, the tentacles of lightning that spread like arcing wires across the length of the sky, and the deadly bolts that cracked open the darkness high above and drove a line straight to the ground somewhere in the unforeseeable distance.

For that night, the storm was all around—before me, behind me, flashing on every horizon—but it remained elsewhere. It was where I was not. And no matter how long or hard I drove, I could not reach it. It was the last unbroken night of my life.

Weather stories, by nature, are subjective, full of nebulous and atmospheric detail, which is hard to capture in words—the piercing cold, your wet shoes, the pelting rain, the gales that shook the windows, the slush under the tires, that free glide of wheels on black ice when your steering wheel becomes useless.

Sometimes weather stories get long in the telling. They're like that made-for-TV docu-drama that your coworker wants to summarize for you during
the coffee break the next morning, or the strange dream your lover or mother
or sister suddenly remembers and wants to recount over breakfast.

You know the story will include confusing shifts in time, scene, and ac-
tion, and that you'll have to listen along carefully and ask questions in the right
places. You know you'll never really get the feeling.

You know it will probably end with "to make a long story short" or "I guess
you had to be there." You almost hate for them to start.

9.
Weather theory: No conversation feels complete in the Midwest unless it in-
cludes some discussion, however cursory, of the weather.

Weather case-in-point: The movie, Fargo, begins with a long image of a
lonely Minnesota highway which quickly dissolves into a white, snow-filled
landscape. The movie is set in winter, which is unusual. Maybe snow is too
hard to capture, or too expensive to recreate, or too uncomfortable to film in.
Maybe film crews and actors don't like to stand around in the cold. For what-
ever reason, fewer and fewer American films feature winter landscapes.

So, the image of a snow-covered field is unusual to see in a film, but it is
not unusual to see in the Midwest where it's ubiquitous. In Fargo, a car finally
appears on the road, emerging through the snowfall like a mirage. As it gets
closer, we see that the car is towing a trailer with another car mounted on it.
And so, the story begins.

The action of the movie turns on high crimes driven by the worst of human
nature—kidnapping, embezzlement, grisly murders, one famously featuring a
wood chipper. Police investigations ensue.

In one scene, Officer Olson, a small-town deputy, follows up a lead called
in by a local citizen, Mr. Mohra. When Officer Olson arrives, Mr. Mohra is clear-
ing his driveway.

Mr. Mohra leans on his shovel and gets to the point, passing along the
information he has overheard—there's a funny lookin' guy out at Ecklund and
Swedlin's, where he tends bar, was asking about where he can find a prostitute
and bragging about how the last guy who said he was a jerk turned up dead.

"I understand." Officer Olson nods his head. "It's probably nothing," he
says, when in fact it will prove to be their biggest lead. He turns to go.

"Looks like she's gonna turn cold tonight," Olson shouts back as he walks
toward his car.

"Oh, yah, got a front coming in," Mohra answers.

"Yah, you got that right."

Weather Postscript: A fun thing to do in Fargo—the real Fargo, not the movie—
is to drive around town with a four-wheel drive during snow storms and rescue
people. It's an austere landscape; you have to make your own fun.
On the coldest, snowiest nights, I've gone out in warm boots and good mittens with friends and found dozens of people to push and shovel out of snow banks. In the middle of a rescue, if you discover that a driver doesn't know how to use his transmission to rock his car out of a snow rut, you feel embarrassed for him, like he's missing some basic skill for survival. You assume he's not from around here.

10.
The meteorologist for the NPR station in the university town where I teach is obsessed with the weather phenomenon, El Niño. To a lesser degree, he's also unnaturally interested in La Niña, El Niño's little sister. He's like the guy who keeps bringing the conversation around to the subject of his Corvette, or who only wants to talk about the stock market or the New England Patriots. Only, for him, it's All-El-Niño-All-the-Time.

He can segue to the subject of El Niño from any topic under discussion—corn futures, hog reports, poetry readings, shipping logs for Lake Superior, the pharmaceutical industry, the long-running success of the musical, Cats. His weatherman voice is deep and comforting, like someone you'd like to hear reading you a bedtime story. And when he speaks of El Niño, there is something close to love in his voice.

But the months and years between El Niños must get long for him. I hear deep sighs after a forecast for another sunny day and whimsy in his warning about another thunderstorm. Garden-variety weather. He waits for the day when he can flex his El Niño muscles and explain again, in a way we can never hope to understand, the mysteries of the Southern Oscillation Index.

In the meantime, he contents himself with side notes and digressions, small tidbits inserted after a report on the New York fashion industry about the current meteorological indicators—how they point (or do not point) to El Niño's imminent return.

*El Niño* Footnote: In 1998, during an especially active El Niño season, a retired naval pilot from Nipomo, California named Al Nino began to get irate phone calls from people accusing him of being responsible for the climatic changes. One man blamed him for the torrential rains and begged him to please stop them. A farmer accused him of causing his strawberry crop to fail. The BBC reports that another man called alleging that Al Nino had caused his daughter to lose her virginity, although it was never made clear what the weather might have had to do with that.

11.
My husband and I used to take long walks in the neighborhood after dinner. We said it was for the exercise. Really, it was just to get the bowels moving. We were eating too much and talking too little.
On these walks, we could chat about flowerbeds and trimmed lawns without fear of anything important coming up. We often passed by other couples from the neighborhood out for their nightly walk. Perhaps they too had stagnant intestines and stuck tongues. We'd smile and say hello. Sometimes we'd stop and comment on the pleasantness of the weather.

One night, my husband and I ventured too far, and at our farthest point from home, the weather suddenly changed. The air grew heavy as syrup. The clouds went from white to black.

We turned for home, breathing hard, sweating as if climbing uphill. A mist started to fall, the wind picked up. We broke into a run. Then lightning began to flash all around us. There was no thunderclap to follow; it was all soft, diffused light. Still it scared us. We ran home like this, holding hands, heat lightning flashing around us every few seconds, as if we were being photographed by the paparazzi.

By the time we got home to our stoop the storm had broken fully. We ran up the front steps, laughing hard and drenched clean through.

Every summer, after another tornado hit some farm in my hometown, my father would pile us into the Chevy, and we'd drive out to survey the damage. On the way, up and down the gravel road, we'd pass other families in their cars doing the same thing.

The tornado always seemed mysterious to us—judgmental, malevolent. Why had it taken the new house, but left the old barn; why had it smashed the shiny Mustang to bits, but left alone the rusted Ford; why had it leveled every last building, separated every board from every nail, but left unscathed the small shrine to the Virgin Mary in the front yard.

That afternoon in 1975, after our family stood in our yard and watched the funnel form above the farm, we grabbed each other and ran inside to escape the wind. Minutes later when the storm passed, we could see that the tornado had touched down one mile north of us on the Harrison farm. The buildings were mostly gone. Even then, the Harrisons were trapped inside the collapsed walls of their house with a young baby.

But when I think about this story, I realize that something is wrong with my memory of the day. Everyone in my family is present in the scene—my parents, my three older sisters, my brother—but, by 1975, we kids would have all moved away from home.

When I question my older sister, she reminds me that the tornado hit the day of Grandpa Geist's funeral. We had just come home from the cemetery, so that's why we were all at the farm together. And when she tells me this, I remember something I read years ago about ferocious storms, about how they sometimes coincide with the death of large-souled people, as if the atmo-
sphere cannot handle this new element that has been loosed into its presence and must disperse it in torrents of wind and rain back into the world.

13.
In a 1924 brochure, created by the Northern Pacific Railroad and distributed widely in the eastern United States to lure farmers to new territories in the Midwest, the reader is encouraged to "Come to North Dakota!" The first page of the brochure features a line drawing of the North American continent. The caption above the drawing proclaims, "North Dakota: the Center of the North American Hemisphere."

In the drawing, lines coming from four directions of the continent all end in arrows pointing at North Dakota, which is shaded darker so that it appears to hover large above all the lesser states. The first line coming from the west coast reads, "not too dry." The second line coming from the east coast reads, "not too wet." The third line, coming from the Gulf Coast reads, "not too hot." And the fourth line originating in the Arctic Circle, reads, "not too cold."

The text at the bottom of the page explains that "extremes of temperature to which the state is subject are not unpleasant due to low humidity. Hot, muggy days are very rare in summer and long twilight periods and nights are always cool. . . . The winters are cold, but it is the dry, crisp, clear cold that is more healthful and more pleasant for man and beast than the winter weather of regions of so-called moderate climates." The infamous dry heat and dry cold. Were there ever more useful weather euphemisms?

Lewis and Clark, in journal entries describing the Corps of Discovery's encampment in what is now North Dakota near the Mandan villages during the winter of 1804-05, note the temperature regularly: January 7, 1805: Mi­nus 20 degrees; January 9: 21 degrees below zero; January 10: 40 degrees below zero.

72° below the freezing point, Clark writes.

The journal entries are full of references to the cold, to frostbitten limbs, frozen toes. The Mitutanka, the village of Mandans closest to the Corp's encampment, appear often checking on the expedition. Sometimes they answer Lewis and Clark's questions about what they know about the territories lying west. They visit the fort, accompany the expedition hunters to find food. One wonders how differently the history of western expansion might have unfolded if the Mandans had neglected to check on Lewis and Clark, if they had feigned ignorance when asked to provide a "Scetch of the Countrey as far as the high mountains."

But the Mandans did not leave Lewis and Clark to freeze or flounder. Maybe they could not? For an unspoken code exists in cold landscapes—silent watchfulness for acts of stupidity by the uninitiated, followed by begrudging helpfulness once the forces of weather have outstripped arrogance.
And so we are here in cold places. And so I have my own stories of twenty-below-zero nights that I tried to drive through in North Dakota—whether through stupidity or desperation.

Once, a little drunk in the 1980s, two a.m., after the amorous advances of my married boss during a company Christmas party, I stormed off in my Plymouth Fury. I took the long frozen artery of Main Street through Fargo to be safer, navigating by peering through the two-inch porthole I'd chipped out of my icy windshield.

All along Main Street as I drove, I could make out the shapes of abandoned cars—makes, far more expensive, and models, far newer than mine—all of them frosted-over, as if powdered with sugar, parked at odd angles just where they'd stalled or been pushed at odder angles onto the side of the road. It looked like Mars or the Moon to me then, some alien, inhospitable landscape.

Nothing you've heard about twenty-below-zero cold is an exaggeration. Any attempt at description is a reduction in terms, a failure of language. Spit does freeze before it hits the ground. So does piss. Any part in your car that's weak will break. Your pipes will freeze and burst. Those nights, I would set my alarm clock for every two hours, so that I could go outside and start my Plymouth Fury to warm it up. Otherwise, it would have been a solid block of unstartable ice by morning.

But the Fury never failed me; it never left me on the side of the road. Not even that twenty-below night, coming home from my husband's grandmother's funeral in South Dakota. Almost midnight, thirty miles from Fargo, our gas line began to freeze. We lurched and stalled on the side of I-94.

I got out and lifted the hood of the Plymouth to prime the carburetor, unscrewing the butterfly nut, lifting off the lid of the air cleaner, and propping the flap of the carburetor open with a ballpoint pen, then pouring the liquid Heet straight down into the engine's gullet.

My husband sat behind the wheel, grinding the ignition and gunning the gas, until the Fury roared to life. Then I'd hop in and we'd proceed another three or four miles down the freeway until the car choked and we'd have to repeat the process again. We made it home that way, those last thirty miles, in three-mile increments.

By now, I've forgotten the precise feeling of cold, and I can't recall why I was the one who got out and worked under the hood while my husband stayed warm behind the wheel. It was my car; I suppose I understood its workings, and I was always better with machines.

But how to capture in words the feeling of the air that night—crisp and rarefied; clear, still skies; unadulterated winter; capital-C cold, like the sound of one thin violin note stinging through the air.

I'm certain we were worried as we struggled with the Fury, and I suppose we were on the brink of extinction. But what I remember most is that we were
not alone out there. Each time I got out of the car, I heard the sounds of other people stranded along the road—hoods and car doors slamming in the distance; people talking and calling to each other in the cold night; and laughter, I swear, somewhere out there it sounded like a party was going on.

Each time I jumped back in the car and we lurched forward, I didn’t even try to tell my husband what I’d heard out there. Some things about weather are too hard to explain, and some things are even harder to believe. Sometimes when weather gets that bad, all that’s left for you to do is put your head down and laugh right into the teeth of it.