

Geneva Schlepp

Annie Lampman

Honors 380

Flora, Fauna, and Natural Phenomena

When Lightning Strikes

When lightning strikes, charged particles fly frantic through the air and make my body come alive. Without checking the forecast, I taste an oncoming storm in the smoky tang on my tongue and ozone aroma that stirs carnal instincts. Lightning has intrigue, an unpredictability that draws me to bask in its authority. I wish to move to Lake Maracaibo in Venezuela, considered the most electric place on earth, and home to the Catatumbo lightning phenomenon. Each day I would celebrate the 28 strikes per minute that grace the area. I would appreciate its majesty while cooking dinner barefoot in the kitchen. The constant crackle of sheet lightning streaking the star sprinkled night sky would be my lullaby, lying in bed with my eyes open and covers strewn. I would mull over a hardcopy of the local newspaper, doing the crossword puzzle en Español to the delicious strikes of *relámpago* that give me a delirious, heady rush. My attraction to this dangerous, untamable beast from the heavens confounds me. The pressure change in the air sucks logical thinking out the window. I cling to my memory of lightning, each a perfect experience charred into the fibers of my being.

My first kiss happened during a lightning storm, behind my Little Gems Preschool classmate's couch. We hid during the great thunderclaps, squatted in the thick shag carpet looking at each other in great anticipation of the next strike. With the sound of pattering raindrops on the wood deck audible through the sliding glass door's screen, Joshua leaned

forward for a kiss that tasted like the artificial cheese crackers we had snacked on. I stood up, more intrigued by the storm shattering the sky with its brilliant, white fingers piercing whatever it pleased. His father found us, unaware of our shenanigans, and led us to the open glass door to teach us to count the seconds between lightning strikes to estimate their distance between each other. I sat entranced, reveling in the shortened amount of time between strikes, signifying the approaching lightning. Just four seconds between the strikes. The beast was upon us. We cheered for each thunderclap and blinding white light. I was sad when my mom picked me up from Josh's house. Not because I left my little boyfriend, but because I got hooked on lightning which proves to be a very fickle and fleeting relationship.

In Scottsdale, Arizona, I was bedridden with a childhood flu, sidelined from the trip's activities of scouring canyon walls for Native American cave drawings. But nothing could have kept me from flying out of my pillowy white nest to the hotel window at the first boom of thunder. The scene outside intoxicated me with its spellbinding powers. The world bathed in a red glow at the first visible strike. I pressed my face to the glass and watched in awe as the Whiptail lizards scrambled their striped bodies across the dusty orange desert. The cotton-tailed bunnies pursued higher ground to avoid the imminent flashflood. I am sure their fur stood on end and small bodies hummed with energy. Static electricity fills the air in the moments before a lightning strike and warm-blooded extremities tingle with the flow of electrons. There were only a few seconds of slow, fat drops before the onslaught of crackling bolts, deafening booms, and dumping rain. I was infatuated.

The clouds brewed bolts, eager to fry a JV javelin thrower holding a quasi-lightning rod at the Eastlake v. Skyline track meet my junior year of high school. While only 10% of lightning strike victims are killed, survivors are often marred with Lichtenberg figures. Lightning zaps its

prey, scarring the surface of the skin with feathery red tree root patterns, branching in all directions. This is due to the discharge of high voltage electricity which ruptures the capillaries and leaks blood into the superficial skin layer. After over an hour of huddling in the gym for the storm to pass, the coaches sent us home. As everyone trooped out to their parent's awaiting Suburbans, Coach Hyland touched my arm with his freckled hand and said, "Now Geneva, I don't want you trying to train out in this weather. No run is worth risking your life". I nodded, no intention of staying inside to waste this perfect storm. I am unfazed by the ten billion joules of energy that could go straight to my heart as I run through the empty streets of Sammamish. The booms of thunder spur me on, sending me racing around the slick sidewalk corners, filling my nostrils with the warmth of the wet pavement and bathing my tongue with the sweet zing of lightning. I am oblivious to the fact that even being within 30 feet of a lightning strike will be the equivalent of getting blasted by 5 kilograms of a TNT bomb. Putting myself in the palms of danger, I feel more alive than I have in a long time.

This girl that has cancer sits in front of me pouring her heart out while the sky prepares to unleash on Pullman. I am drunk. Drunk on my first drinks of the summer and off the impending storm that sets my heart racing. The air is still and heavy, each warm particle laden with moisture, a tell-tale sign of a thunderstorm. The humidity frizzes my hair and slides drops of sweat down my forearms. Up above the cumulonimbus clouds churn, darkening the world to a lavender hue. They are full of tiny ice crystals that rub against each other in a frantic fervor, building negative electric charges that prepare to touch down to the unprepared positively charged ground below. Beware lone trees, open fields, and unsuspecting bystanders. Lighting has no qualms. Entire trees are split straight down the middle and set ablaze by unforgiving strikes. Summertime is the perfect breeding ground for this charge separation. The boys are playing beer

die on their homemade wood table in my hazy peripheral vision. The sound of the shirtless boys calling, “Die up!” blends with the far away claps of thunder, the only audible sounds in the stagnant air.

Lauren tells me how her twin brother died in a car crash. Her father had been driving. She turns over her wrist, revealing raised white dashes that she fingers over like insignificant tallies. My hazel eyes are electrified, wild and wide hanging onto every word coming out of her mouth, blinking the rain away with heavy lashes. My words tumble out, telling her of my recent diagnosis of depression and anxiety. I am giddy, telling this stranger about anxiety attacks, how my throat closes by an invisible fist, chest constricts to stifle attempts at breath, and head goes numb with the lack of oxygen. Lightning splits diatomic oxygen atoms in half which then join with other oxygen atoms to create the ‘pre-rain’ smell of ozone. Water streaks down my lips and chest and she points to her wrist tattoo that says “breath”. We laugh in lunatic unison, as she says, “I have anxiety and depression!”, catching the attention of the boys who are confused as to why we are still out here amid the storm. Hypocrites. They are out here, too.

I look to my left and right and wonder where the rest of our circle disappeared to. I guess our conversation treaded into too deep of waters for my friends. Kiyena yells at me through the ripped screen of the kitchen window, “Come inside, Neva! You are getting soaked”. She eyes my white tank top which has turned see-through. I yell back that I am fine, liberated, in fact, I am sensational. I am double fisting, clutching one Mike’s Hard Black Cherry Lemonade by the glass neck in my left hand and a warm can of Crispin Pearsecco in my right. My inebriated brain is conscious enough on maintaining my buzz to cover the tops of both drinks with my thumbs to prevent them from watering down. My hair hangs in drowned clumps against my tan neck that glistens with the pelting drops. The sky rumbles its approval.

Thunderclaps are a shockwave product of the rapid expansion of air due to the 53,000-degree Fahrenheit heat of a lightning bolt, five times hotter than the surface of the sun. Lauren laughs at the storm, her wide set eyes are beautiful, blue and pale. I don't think I have ever met someone so white and exotic. We stumble inside to the bathroom to continue divulging secrets. We lock the door and struggle to hold back laughter at our ragged mascara dripped reflections in the dirty mirror. She asks if I want to see her cancer and I nod, now solemn and somber. Lauren is a fragile bird, lifting her damp tee shirt to show me a malignant cancerous lump perched on her dainty shoulder blade. The patters of rain are soft now against the windowpane. She holds my hand when she sees the tears welled in my eyes. If either of us were struck by lightning, cancer would be the least of our concerns. Upon the strike, our bodies would go into overdrive: heart, lungs and nervous system short circuiting. Many times, those afflicted by a lightning strike go into cardiac arrest, have a seizure, suffer from spinal cord damage or amnesia.

Weeks later, I wonder if Lauren and I would have been so captivated in each other's presence if we hadn't had the drama of thunder and lightning spurring us on. That August thunderstorm, drenched in sweet malt liquor, changed me. How often I stare out at rainstorms, my body longing to be freed, thrown out into the mix to dodge lightning strikes. If struck, electricity would course through me and my belly button piercing would sizzle my skin with a third-degree burn. The clothes on my body might even be blown off by the rapid vaporization of the sweat and rain on my skin. Now that's the kind of liberation I seek. Thunder is foreboding to some. To me, it is melodious and beckons me.

Deep inside me yearns to be unpredictable like a lightning bolt. I stay bottled up, crackling, striking only myself like storms that stay contained within their very own cloud. But, on occasion, I release a sizzling bolt, charged with a white heat that incinerates the surroundings.

I am charged, reveling in the moment of freedom. However, I blink, and my eruption has passed. The skies clear and I am left with only the memory. I envy lightning storms with their unapologetic, unempathetic attitude that incites forest fires. They are unfeeling and aren't hindered with weaknesses like compassion. No one tells lightning where or when to strike.