

TO LOSE SOME NERVE

By Michael Ventura

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Three years ago October, in eastern Arkansas -- driving west through flat, moist country -- I saw the strangest cloud. Until then I thought that I'd seen every possible in North America. Given the least excuse I brag that I've driven my '69 Chevy from Key West to Bellingham, Washington; from Tijuana to Waterville, Maine; and from El Paso to the Montana-Canadian border -- driven every state, in fact, but Michigan, in all weathers and all seasons. So I had a right (as such rights go) to believe I'd seen every sort of cloud. But never had I seen a cloud like this.

It was about ten in the morning, a bright day, warm but not hot, blue sky overhead. Not an hour before, in a motel room in Brinkley, Arkansas, the Weather Channel reported thunderstorms to the west. The Doppler configurations on TV didn't look unusual. I figured I'd be driving west on I-40 at 70-ish miles per hour, the storms were moving eastward pretty fast, I'd be through them in no time and it would be fun. Until that morning I'd liked driving through storms. Friends have sometimes questioned my sanity when I've gone out of my way to drive into a thunderstorm, or when I've headed straight for a blizzard though I had plenty of time to take the long way around and avoid the danger. I tried often to explain that storms gave me something, something hard to come by. I tried to communicate that in my first novel, *Night Time, Losing Time*, when Jesse, a rock'n'blues piano player, is driving late with his young son Jes:

Jes and I were driving back from Shreveport in the rain. We were a little east of Houston. Jes was pissed that I wasn't letting him work the gas pedal, like I often did, but I wouldn't do it in weather. The rain started coming down so hard, the windshield wipers just sort of smudged it around, the glass never really cleared. It was a two-lane and the on-coming cars were just big double blobs of smeared light. If you turned hard, you'd skid. If you hit the brake, you'd skid. You couldn't tell where the white line was, or the shoulder. I bent to the wheel... We hit a turn too fast, the old car held the road, but it was so fucking scary both of us were shaken. I said, "I'm sorry, Jes." ...And the rain beat down. And the spray sound of our tires on the road. And every car that passed the other way raised a wash of water on us.

*And suddenly I felt a weird elation. We were completely cut off from the world. We were Out There. Together. Hurling through something that was and wasn't a storm. I mean, of course it was a storm, but it was also an intoxication, something meant, I mean **meant**, to induce [a] state of mind, or out-of-mind... I felt the storm vibrating through the steering wheel, loved the pounding drops on the hood, the watery hiss of the wheels, and felt approval in the storm, knew it pleased the storm to be driven through like this, and must have had some crazy grin on my face because when I looked over at Jes again he was surprised and said, "What?!" "Isn't this a great STORM!" ...And I prayed he'd remember this... And that maybe he'd psyche someday, sooner than I had, that the storm is there for our elation as much as for the crops.*

Elation is complicated. It can be joy, but it can also be terror -- and it can be both, and more.

Elation lifts you up and cleans you out, and bestows, in its wake, a fresh sensation of balance and an eagerness for whatever's coming next.

Anyway... with blue sky overhead, I drove west on I-40 across the Arkansas flats, and there was this cloud, if you can call it a cloud. Even from miles away, it loomed. As far as I could see to the north, and going on for almost as far as I could see to the south, it loomed, a massive wall rising straight up from the ground, I-don't-know-how-many thousands of feet high. White at the top, gray for most of its height -- but its bottom hundred feet or so, where it met the earth, was a different, spooky white. And I said aloud, "What in Heaven's name is that?!" It looked like one of those giant tidal waves in an end-of-the-world movie.

Traffic was light. The highway was straight. There was nothing but an eighteen-wheeler maybe half a mile ahead. The vehicles in my rearview were many car-lengths behind. I had to bend over my steering wheel to look up and see the top of this cloud. And I felt a deep happiness to see something so magnificent, a phenomenon I'd never even heard of.

Then the eighteen-wheeler ahead entered the spooky whiteness at the bottom of that cloud -- and disappeared. And I noticed that, on the eastbound side of the highway, vehicles kind of popped out of the cloud, with their headlights on and their windshield wipers furiously flapping. And just as it struck me that I couldn't see two feet into that cloud, I entered the cloud.

And couldn't see the hood of my car. There were no raindrops; there was water. Pouring. I lifted my foot off the gas pedal, held the wheel straight, hoped the road would stay straight, turned on my wipers and headlights, slowing now to about 35, hoping no one would ram me from behind, and I still couldn't see anything. After some moments, I could see two slashes of the white line as they disappeared under my left wheel. I steered to those two slashes, holding my car straight and steady, slowing even more. And then there was wind. Sudden and vicious. And stuff in the wind -- couldn't see what, but could hear stuff hit the car from my right, little stuff and slightly larger stuff, by the sounds. It became all I could do to keep Baby (my car) going straight.

A '69 Chevy Malibu is heavy, made of metal, not fiberglass. It's wide and low to the ground -- a grown-up can't crawl under it. Low center of gravity. Even skidding on ice, Baby doesn't swerve much, just kind of shimmies. A good car for a storm. But it was all I could do to keep Baby level with those two slashes of white line that were my only guide.

And then time slowed down, the way it does sometimes when things are really bad. In a kind of out-of-body way I noticed, with great surprise, that my arms and legs were shaking -- no, "shaking" doesn't describe it. My limbs were like wild rubber bands. I started to laugh, because how could my hands on the wheel and my foot on the pedal remain steady while my limbs were crazily trembling? Yet it was so.

Also, someone was screaming. "FUUUUUUCCCCCKKKK!" It had to be me. Still out-of-body, I checked my throat and mouth. Yes, they were screaming. But it felt kind of distant. Over and over, "FUUUUUUUCCCCCKKKK!" There's a Springsteen verse I've long loved, about a guy driving into a hurricane and getting splattered all over the road: *I wonder what he was thinking when he hit that storm.* Well, now I knew. He was thinking "FUUUUUCCCCCKKKK!"

Then my luminous out-of-body-ness ended abruptly, because of a sound.

How can wind sound like metal? The cliché is that a tornado sounds like a freight-train. Not really. Tornadoes sound like enormous metal plates clanging together. Way louder than a freight train. If you hear that sound once, you never forget it. I'd heard it

once. But not like this. That sound around me was (forgive the capital letters) TOTAL. I couldn't see it, because I could barely see anything. But steering got even tougher, and the sound was everywhere.

I don't know how I wasn't swept away, but after a timeless time the sound passed. Rain and wind subsided into only the worst storm I'd ever seen before this one. And then suddenly it was all blue sky and daylight! I'd driven through the wall. I was gripping the wheel so hard that it took me some miles to free my fingers. (It was two days before my hands stopped hurting.) I was still shaking, but not as wildly. The next day the papers reported that a swath of "killer tornadoes" had wreaked damage, injury, and death across eastern Arkansas. Nevertheless, though you Google your heart out, you won't find an explanation of that cloud. I've tried. (If any of you are luckier at it, please let me know.)

I'm not sorry it happened. It's a privilege to experience such immense, elemental, impersonal power -- to experience that and yet live! But I've suffered -- what can I call it? -- a loss of nerve. Elation has been granted me by many storms, and most of all by that incredible cloud. My many faults do not include ingratitude. But on my drives now a puny drizzle makes me anxious. I'll hunt for no more storms. I'm proud of my feet and hands -- they didn't panic. But the rest of me did. I've lost and gained. Lost what I never thought I'd lose. Gained what I didn't dream to gain. Stared into the face of a "something" I couldn't name. Beyond elation is something greater. It makes you smaller and larger. (In a whisper I say, "Let's leave it at that.")

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