

Lightning

Written by: Ella McKhann

December 10, 2025

Where I grew up, people didn't die when it stormed. Yes, there were the bad ones: the hurricanes that left the land in tatters, the people shattered. But I'm dreaming about a good, old-fashioned thunderstorm.

The kind where your dog cowers behind the porcelain bowl in the ground-floor bathroom, shaking as the sky falls. When you curl on your little brother's bed in the blackness, counting the seconds between each rip of light through a sliver in the blinds and the deafening crack that follows with a shake of the foundation. Excitement grew as seconds shrunk, the storm moving overhead.

My sixth grade teacher was struck by lightning three times.

How unlucky, to be made lightning's mark not once, *but three times*?

How lucky, to be found by light, *again and again*?

Severe weather has a season back in New England where I was raised, thunderstorm days peaking around 40.¹ In Northern California, that number drops between two and five.² Growing up alongside these seasons of sticks, sprouts, and storms back East shaped the way I view my own evolution.

Despite what California teaches us, the truth is that we can not expect sunshine with every rise. Nature is cyclical, divinely designed to give space for the full range of life to bloom and decay. The leaves will fall. Winter gives us time for turning inward, away from the spiderweb of crystalized frost on cold glass windows, towards the fire we are called to stoke within. This rest is what allows spring to burst forth with such energy for life. Seasons give us space to flow, to remember. Storms remind us of the sacrality of expression. Imagine the excavation of self a season of lightning could open within us?

The conditions that set the stage for lightning are clear, but the buildup of electrical charges and the formation of the strike remain much a mystery. A storm intensifies as positive and negative charges within clouds and between cloud and land gather. Scientists believe that tiny particles of soft hail called graupel, smaller than the point of a tack, grow by absorbing semi-frozen liquid droplets in clouds. In a flurry of chaos, these particles bump into smaller pinpricks of ice, leaving each with a different charge as electrons shear off on impact. These lighter ice particles are more easily taken by the winds of updraft, rising above the graupels and separating the charges. Which group gets charged negative and which gets charged positive depends on the temperature within the storm cloud brewing.³

Tension builds as opposition wars with attraction, and the air between sky and earth can only act as a buffer for so long. A power play ensues between the air's insulating properties and the building electrical field. When a critical threshold is reached, the sky splits open, equalizing these forces and grounding the energy. For a moment, the fabric of reality tears, giving way to pure light. The explosion, generated from the sheer heat of the sky cracking, is the sound that we hear as thunder. The best part? We don't quite understand where the inciting spark comes from.⁴ Scientists don't know the exact threshold at which the forces become too much for even Mother Nature herself to hold. In fact, it is likely we will *never* be able to forecast where lightning will strike.³

To witness lightning is to witness the passionate, fiery dance of the heavens making love to the earth. It is a wild release, a vulnerable glimpse into the reckless abandon of letting go. It is raw power in its truest, most natural form.

When I first moved to the California coast, I worked at a whale watch. The first day I awoke to a light drizzle pattering the sidewalks, I was convinced the boat wouldn't go out. A 65-foot, two-hulled steel trap would tempt the gods like a white flag waved on the open ocean. But the grand, droughted state of California has no such vengeance. So I donned a raincoat, said a prayer, and we set sail.

I survived unscathed. Four years passed, and I'd seen lightning only twice. Once, in the distance, a single crack over dark Santa Ynez mountains as I drove a road lined by orange groves in central California, navigating home during a school break. Second, on a similar road trip. Distant and quiet. A flash of light, a glimpse of childhood memory, and it was gone. A catch in the corner of my eye, so brief I wondered if I dreamt it up.

I miss the drama of a flash storm – without the dire consequences that seem to stalk the Western version. California gets about one real storm a year. Often in the winter, these atmospheric rivers bring weeks-long deluge. Trees rip fully rooted from the ground; peninsulas flood into islands. An air of anxiety hangs like a low cloud over morale, fear hidden within a joke that the waterworks will never end. This is not a good storm, California. Rain doesn’t make a good storm. Lightning does.

Lightning is a language, one I was taught to speak from a young age. Light travels faster than sound. Watch for the flash, and start counting. Five seconds equals one mile. The less space between sight and sound, the closer the storm.

This is how I found myself, eyes flying wide from my bed in Santa Barbara, ears straining for the sound of thunder as a flash of light painted the sky outside my window. I was convinced it was the bright headlights of a car shining in the tight-packed streets. But every time I closed my eyes again, light filled the inside of my lids.

My roommates came to get me. We sat, all five of us, curled in camping chairs on our sodden porch, and watched the heavens dance. It was quiet. No rain. No thunder. Just a silent, continuous symphony, and awe filling the darkness between us.

That night, we biked out towards the storm, following a call deeper than consciousness. Passing through bouts of torrential rain amid stands of eucalyptus trees, we ditched our bikes as midnight neared, sprinting and whooping our way to the point. The Pacific lay to the west on one side, to the south on the other. We stood, small and insignificant, swallowed by the night on a spit of land above the roiling sea.

I sat in the tacky mud of the cliff, the ocean below a dark reflection of the shrouded sky above. My hair plastered to my forehead, sweatshirt suctioned to my skin. Soaked all the way through, I waited. The whole world seemed to hold her breath along with me. It was once again quiet, still. And then, for just a split second, the universe revealed her hand. And the whole world was alight.

How do you quantify true, raw power?

Power is a word the meaning of which we do not understand, said Tolstoy.

But I think we can feel it. On that cliff under the tumultuous night sky, the chemistry I felt mixing in my blood was more than any physicist could write on a white board in a white lab.

I wonder if we’ll ever make sense of the sky splitting. I wonder if, deep down, scientists actually want to make sense of it.

Personally, I don’t want to find out. I like to let the energy move through me like a wave, hairs standing on end in the electric air. I like that it all becomes clear only in the briefest of flashes. I like that if we look away, we will miss the magic.

My hope for you? May you stand tall in a real, true storm. And may you learn the language of lightning.

She will demand your full presence. *Pay attention*, she calls. She will hold you in rapture as each strike burns away fear from the root and illuminates truth from the inside out. She will clean you out and fill you up. *Be bold*. Her primality will stoke the freedom to let loose that lives electric at the base of your spine.

A word of advice, as someone who has spoken lightning my whole life. Don’t cower. Listen to the ancient part of yourself she speaks to. Come to understand that despite the control we wish to have, some phenomena are beyond explanation. Be humble. Be inspired. Be fearlessly, recklessly human in the bath of her light, just as she is fearlessly, recklessly Nature. For lightning mirrors our own deepest fervor for life.

So listen closely. Let her have her way with you. Let her split you open. Let the mystery be a mystery. For just as decay leads to new growth, the cracks she forms give space for Love to come pouring in.



Ella McKhann grew up in the stormy state of Vermont before moving to the coast of California in her late teens. She has always been drawn to the most powerful forces of nature. Watching her loves for two of these great forces—the ocean and lightning—come together on one unforgettable night acted as the inspiration for this story.

References:

1. Court, A. (1960). *Thunderstorm Frequency in Northern California*.
<https://doi.org/10.1175/1520-0477-41.8.406>
2. *Guide to Northeast Severe Weather*. (2015). Retrieved October 31, 2025, from <https://weatherworksinc.com/news/Guide-To-Northeast-Severe-Weather>
3. How Lightning is Created | National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (2023). Retrieved December 14, 2025, from <https://www.noaa.gov/jetstream/lightning/how-lightning-is-created>
4. *Lightning Basics*. (n.d.). NOAA National Severe Storms Laboratory. Retrieved October 31, 2025, from <https://www.nssl.noaa.gov/education/svrwx101/lightning/>

Lightning photo at top: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/rain-clouds-over-the-sea-gm1225765684-360909006>

2nd page photo taken by my roommate.