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When the Paint Flies: Storm as Subject

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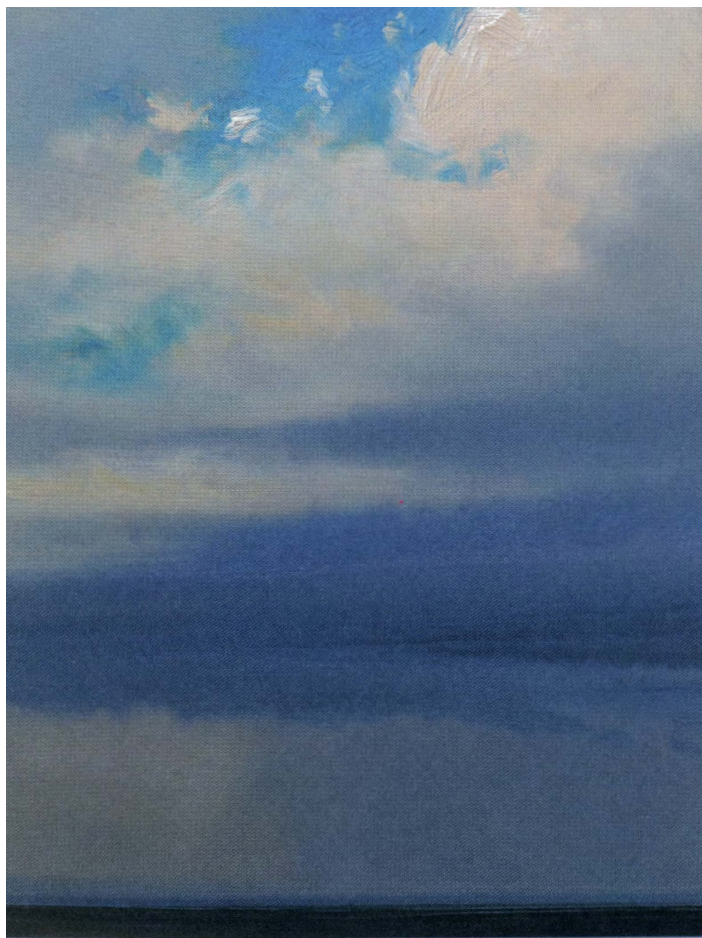
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Gust Front Sketch
Lisa Grossman

WHEN THE PAINT FLIES

STORM AS SUBJECT

Today's the day. The fever broke minutes ago, and I'm ready for relief. It has been getting hotter for the past five days — 90 degrees today and a cold front is coming, just ahead of the autumnal equinox here on the Kansas River flood plain.

Before I left the house, I checked the hourly forecast graph posted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to see when the shift would occur. Between 5 and 6 p.m., they said. It's 5:30 now, and 20 minutes ago it was a pressure cooker with oppressive heat and humidity.

I pick up some dry grass and let it fly — hard toward the north. The weather forming to the west is building fast — a deepening slate-blue line, gently bowing, with raggedy undersides. Brilliant white, towering cumulus expand overhead and down a line to the southwest. Blue sky peeks out behind mushrooming cloud tops. I keep glancing at the darkening gust front as I hastily set up my painting gear and camp chair on the ground below the tailgate. I grab paint tubes and quickly squeeze out fresh color on the palette.

Dang. A rumble. I grab some brushes. Paint fast! Faster than I've ever painted! Ha! This is dangerous, a risk. I'll paint as much as I can before the next rumble. No lightning yet. It's gaining on me. I whip up the most brilliant white I can manage: titanium white with hints of lemon yellow and cadmium orange, plus a dab of medium. No need to thoroughly mix it on the palette before I scrub it down across the top of my 12-by-9-inch wood panel, primed and tinted with a rusty-colored

wash. I lay it on thickest where the sunlit cumulus tops are building. I'd primed this panel with horizontal brushstrokes, my primary format, but towering thunderheads require a vertical panel, I decide.

Another rumble. But it's north and already heading away to the northeast. I keep going, knowing I'll have to stop soon anyway. Does lightning seem like a bad way to go after the years we've just been through? I push myself to *focus*!

I mix up some juicy blue-gray and carve out the gust front's bowed leading edge and the lesser, softer arcs above it. I've got to get that amazing turquoise up there behind those blinding white cauliflower tops before it's obscured by them. The gust front advances like a slow tsunami. Faster. The electricity in the air fuels my momentum. The urgency presses me into the moment of hyperawareness, forcing me to paint faster than I can think, or at least faster than internal critics and creative monsters can emerge and distract me. I'm making countless decisions, but they're the intuitive and emotional kind, visceral ones.

The best paintings are alive with the energy of these moments, and confident brushstrokes convey much more than careful, belabored ones. The key is to allow them to remain without fussing over them and smothering the piece with too much control. I paint with the

certainty that, even if it turns out to be an inferior painting, the paint will resonate with the energy of authentic expression — a creative spontaneity that can't be duplicated in the comfort and safety of my studio with nothing to respond to.

The wind is suddenly blasting my face. Yep, it's from the west now and smells like rain. The dry grasses rustle loudly. Five crows caw by. I need to get that light under the gust front right, glowing with the obscured descending sun and those first rain curtains to the northwest. I indicate those with downward strokes that contrast with the horizontal brushwork above. I go back and add some soft warm gray clouds through the middle and a little selective blending to integrate the various passages — it takes great restraint sometimes to not overdo it. The first few raindrops hit my hat brim, and I've got to prepare to pack it up soon.

A violent gust from the north now — aAAHHHH, the *coolth*! Relief floods my body. It's been hot so long, and it's exhilarating to feel the season turning — a fading summer's heat. The north wind presses down, and the clouds unleash their showers. That's it. Time to shut the painting box, throw the camera in its bag and pile the rest of the gear in the truck bed. I take cover in the cab and call it good. I watch the drama pass over me as torrents pelt the roof, and I'm surprised there's no lightning.

Within 20 minutes, the sun is pressing through again, creating a rainbow in the east. There will be more weather, after dark likely. This is Kansas - 90 today and 40, something tomorrow night. I can't wait. I step out of the truck, and all's quiet now - a lull. A great horned owl, a flicker, crows, cicadas, coyotes and crickets turn up the volume. A great blue heron wings by, and I imagine pterodactyls.

Sunset will be obscured by another thickening blanket of gray advancing. I think about how I'll lay in the horizon and the land at the bottom of the painting, maybe only a half inch of darkened flood plain expanse — a blended bluish distance with several layers of darker blue, green and rust cutting across the bottom to anchor all the drama above. I'll have to do that back in the studio from memory and maybe those photos I took to remind me.

On the drive home, my thoughts turn to another time I painted the weather turning. In April of 2019, I booked a week at Camp Wood YMCA, a camp in Chase County, to do some work in the area. Unfortunately, it was the beginning of months of heavy rain and flooding, including a tornado that scraped by southeast Lawrence. The day before I arrived, I'd heard a train was derailed by straight-line winds just south of Matfield Green, and since rain was keeping me

from painting or hiking, I thought I'd drive down for a look. I parked in a pullout at the top of the rise and learned from some railroad workers that one car of sugar, three cars of scrap metal and several of lumber were derailed and dumped. They were cleaning it up. Luckily, the five tanks of oil behind those stayed on the tracks.

The rain let up, and I grabbed a snack while contemplating whether there might be enough time to start a painting from the tailgate before the next round of rain hit. It was so hard to start, even after all this time as a painter. Where to begin, what to paint, how to focus on the process and keep it alive and full of discovery?

I grabbed one of my prepared panels, 6 by 24 inches, and set it up, intent on capturing the low, gray, horizontal cloud bands across the prairie to the southwest. At one point, the sun broke through, illuminating the freshly greened hills far off. Gorgeous. I began by trying to capture the fine, horizontal lines of distant uplands. The clouds bands were advancing rapidly, so I snapped some photos for reference later and let the paint fly.

A chilly wind enveloped me, and then it whipped up so fast and furious I started losing things! I let my apron fly across the gravel while I struggled to stow my gear and hold onto the painting with one

hand as it threatened to blow away, even though it was clamped into my field easel. The painting fell off the easel anyway, and I lost a glove in the scramble. I slammed the tailgate and lid shut and barricaded myself in the cab. The truck was rocking, and I was out of breath with adrenaline. The pounding wind and rain had me a tad worried about how bad it might get, though no extreme weather had been predicted, and there wasn't any lightning. My left ear was full of rain. My left side was wet, but my right side was dry. I rolled the passenger window down for air while my side of the truck was battered with wind and rain.

As I waited out the storm, I found myself wondering again, with all that we're learning from climate scientists about increasing intensity of storms and weather extremes, whether these atmospheric conditions I'm painting *look* different as well. How have their size, shape, color or features evolved with a warming climate — or have they?

The weather abated, and I assessed the damage. Yes, the painting was ruined, and the moment passed. The panel got sanded down for another day. My *plein air* paintings are hit or miss — many fail, but the ones that work resonate with the energy of my direct experience with nature, engaged in the creative process. Later, back in the studio, I made a large,

horizontal painting from those photos and called it "Gust Front."

I can be happy painting a prairie horizon and a cloud. But in Kansas, the real adventure is weather, and experiencing it is exhilarating and as good as painting gets for me.

Lisa Grossman is a painter and printmaker whose work focuses on the prairies and river valleys of eastern Kansas.



Blue Breaks Through
Lisa Grossman