

Nobel/Interest Statement

I am interested in meteorological fringes. Last summer I traveled to Nunavik, an Inuit territory the size of California in far northern Quebec. Fourteen villages line a storm-battered coast locked in ice through June. The Inuit of Nunavik now have microwaves, snowmobiles and iPods, but patterns of storm and stillness still shape their lives. Many told me stories of loved ones lost in blizzards; set out on snowmobiles for a day of ice-fishing on a far lake only never to return. I often made the teller retell, unable to believe that a people who had faced the cold and snow for millennium could still get lost in it. A typical response to my prying was, “Skies were clear when they left...a storm came up.”

Even in the United States, with a powerful capacity to predict, storms still *come up*. For me, this is both frightening—if you have ever been marooned by the weather, reliant only on your wits, you will know just how frightening—and marvelous, because inherent in the chaos of the storm is knowledge unknown, an opportunity to discover.

This very moment, I am watching on radar an upper level low tighten over the Texas Panhandle. From the National Weather Service in Amarillo:

AN EXTREMELY DANGEROUS WINTER STORM WILL IMPACT THE PANHANDLES REGION THROUGH EARLY SATURDAY..NORTHERLY WINDS OF 30 TO 40 MPH WITH GUSTS OVER 50 MPH WILL CAUSE WIDESPREAD BLOWING SNOW WITH NEAR ZERO VISIBILITY IN WHITEOUT CONDITIONS THROUGH TONIGHT. HEAVY SNOWFALL OF 6 TO 12 INCHES IS EXPECTED ACROSS THE WARNING AREA WITH AMOUNTS IN EXCESS OF 12 INCHES COMMON MAINLY ACROSS THE OKLAHOMA AND EXTREME NORTHERN TEXAS PANHANDLES. SNOW DRIFTS OF 10 TO 20 FEET WILL BE POSSIBLE BEFORE THE SNOW FINALLY ENDS SATURDAY MORNING..THIS IS AN EXTREMELY DANGEROUS STORM. ANYONE CAUGHT OUTSIDE DURING WHITEOUT CONDITIONS COULD BECOME DISORIENTED AND MAY NOT BE ABLE TO FIND SHELTER. TRAVEL WILL BE DANGEROUS IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE ON FRIDAY.

And yet, invariably, despite such fine warning, for someone this will be a storm that *came up*. Our kind is terrifically persistent and incredibly brazen. But we have our reasons: Fishermen off the coast of Nova Scotia put out late in the season, eager for the pay out one last catch would bring; a trucker hauling fuel across the Midwest figures he'll push through the night and make it home for breakfast; mountaineers with only one window to tackle the top start up an icy slope. Why people press on certainly has something to do with why we are human. And why *we* try to understand probably does too.

Next I am headed to Yap, a remote group of islands in Micronesia where another breed of storm has come up, climate change. Peoples of the Pacific are used to climate-spun catastrophes, which send those from low-lying atolls seeking higher ground. Typhoons can level an island and meager vegetation takes years to recover from drought. But this time, in a way even the brightest meteorologists don't completely understand, we are involved.

For the Micronesians, this upheaval is happening at the same time as a cultural one, which has seen the decline of *weather magicians*, who once predicted storms, and *paliuwelap*, great navigators who could decipher the breeze and sail outrigger canoes across seas. Exactly how does this culture integrate meteorology? In October I will cross the globe to find out.