


IT'S A HARD RAIN

Although it begins as an innocent cloud in a clear blue sky, El Nubé, as it's known, can turn deadly when it fills with water, grows an angry white tail and dumps millions of gallons of rain onto the desert floor. It can happen in a matter of minutes, causing floods, wreaking havoc and leaving locals with a reverential respect mixed with fear and wonder. 

AN ESSAY BY TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS AND BROOKE WILLIAMS

A sudden spring storm looms over the sandstone formations of White Pocket, part of Vermilion Cliffs National Monument north of the Grand Canyon.
Suzanne Mathia

A YOUNG MAN POINTS SOUTH TOWARD the only cloud floating in a deep blue October sky. We are part of a group of six with reservations to hike through Upper Antelope Canyon, east of Page, Arizona. We know that cloud. We call it El Nubé. El Nubé comes to the desert valley we call home, softly, innocently. We are not fooled. It can change quickly, and havoc results.

“If it moves over there,” our guide from Navajo Country says, making a quarter-turn to his right, “a flood will come.” The innocent cloud we call El Nubé expands as it fills with water. It grows a white tail and turns gray, and into a killer.

We ask the young man, whose name is Robert, how he knows that the fate of French tourists killed when they were flushed by a massive flood into this same canyon a decade before will not be our fate.

He says he has always watched that cloud and that the People know. He means his “People” the Diné, or Navajo, at home in the Four Corners.

In the fall, where we live, El Nubé has been known to drop through the gray, quilt-like ceiling after soft, female rain has been falling for a few hours. El Nubé, having grown heavy with water absorbed from the greater storm, hovers in the south end of the valley. The leg it grows is actually a tube joining it with an acre of ground.

Whether or not clouds are long-lived, purposed and migratory, we can’t say for sure. What we do know is that during the many hours we’ve spent mapping clouds, while many may simply move beyond our ability to observe them, others continually appear and disappear, absorbed into a different dimension. Whether or not they reappear later in someone else’s

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sky is the knowledge of eagles. If objects can be animate or inanimate, what all desert dwellers understand is that clouds are alive to anyone who spends time watching them.

Technically, El Nubé is the key element in a “microburst” storm. The “leg” is actually a rain shaft, which falls rabidly, opens and releases millions of gallons of water, accelerated by high winds, onto the ground. This occurs after dry air mixes with raindrops inside El Nubé, causing the raindrops to evaporate, lowering the temperature. Cooler air is denser and sinks through El Nubé, gaining speed as it falls.

Global warming increases the intensity of these storms and the floods that come from them — as the climate warms, the atmosphere absorbs more water. One degree in temperature rise means 4 percent more water in El Nubé.

As if part of some invisible, impossible-to-understand phenomenon to force water into the farthest reaches of our valley, El Nubé perches above the main arterial gulch, ominous, imposing.

We watch this cloud, El Nubé.

Everyone in our valley watches El Nubé.

When it strikes, El Nubé opens like a vein. Massive rock- and weed- and wood-filled waters pulse through our valley, flooding, widening, roaring

down the arroyo as it bends around our house. It passes through a deep canyon (getting deeper with each flood), gushing beneath our road through a culvert. Where the arroyo curves, the water sometimes jumps its banks and spreads out into a broad sheet, like a moving mirror reflecting the sky. When it has run its course, the roads of our valley are covered in deep red mud.

“Do you want those giant boulders moved from your driveway?” our neighbor who grades the roads asks.

El Nubé has paid our quiet valley a visit.

Late one day we watched El Nubé come into our valley. Warning calls came from people living closest to the storm. We waited. We watched El Nubé’s leg touch the ground. Half an hour. Forty-five minutes. Another call came from a neighbor up-valley. “Get ready, here it comes,” as if anything that hadn’t already been done (shoring up one broken berm, digging a trench to channel escaped water back into the aorta) could be done. We went out on the porch and listened.

First, the flash of lightning through pelting rain, followed by thunder, prolonged and distant and deep, as if it had eaten its own echo. The flood came closer, forcing air ahead of it, creating thick wind. Then came the smell, organic and foreign, when a deep part of the Earth was being exposed for the first time. The flood hissed as dry clay soaked in water. And up through our legs we felt the sound of gnashing, scraping and cracking rocks crashing together in the bottom of the arroyo. On one side of us, the flood thundered by in darkness. On the other, the rain-filtered light from the nearly full moon struck the black rim of the arroyo, exposing silhouettes of mature juniper trees, flood-torn and horizontal, moving by like a flotilla of black boats with both roots and limbs as sails.

This must be the desert storm for which wars are named.

Standing there, the “awe” we felt overwhelmed both fear and concern over whether the flood would breach the dike built to retain it long before our house was built. The words “awesome” and “awful” are both rooted in “awe.” “Awesome” is overused these days and can refer to anything noteworthy with at least some “awe.”

The word “awful” confuses us. “Awe,” by definition, is “an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration or fear,” suggesting that perhaps whoever first coined the word “awful” about a thousand years ago had only terrible, fearful experiences that were full of “awe.”

We’ve personally experienced El Nubé and the floods it brings multiple times — three in one year. We’ve paid thousands of dollars to have dirt moved into berms to guide the flow as it rushes into the valley south of our house. Every few years,

Rain fills the sky over the red-rock formations of the Sedona area near sunset.
Mark Frank



we set fire to a massive plug of tumbleweeds the wind has packed into our arroyo, call it the artery, the aorta, the main channel, removing any possibility of increasing the impact of the flood when El Nubé comes.

And it will always come.

To our knowledge, El Nubé's floods have killed no one in our valley. We are lucky. The deadly flood in Antelope Canyon was one of five floods in August and September 1997 that proved once again wild waters can be fatal. El Nubé went on a rampage during a five-week period, killing 22 people. Those who survived those floods were permanently changed. The power of nature is not an abstraction, but a reckoning. These events are dramatically described by Craig Childs in his book *The Desert Cries: A Season of Flash Floods in a Dry Land*.

Illegal migrants from Mexico were swept through a storm drain while crossing the border. Eleven hikers perished as a wall of water plunged through a majestic slot canyon, leaving only their guide alive. More vanished in a flood down Phantom Canyon in the Grand Canyon. Surrounding these deadly floods came still more where, miraculously, no one was killed. At 90 miles per hour a passenger train plunged into a flooding arroyo near Kingman, Arizona. Two hundred people fled to safety as the Grand Canyon's Havasu Canyon flooded, exploding rafts and kayaks out of its mouth into the Colorado River.

Childs makes numerous mentions of clouds — cumulonimbus clouds, murky clouds, convulsions of clouds. The billowing heads of clouds. He does not speak of El Nubé.

What does El Nubé tell us?

One day, El Nubé appeared in its traditional place in the south end of the valley. We walked out into the desert to watch. El Nubé's leg was wider than we remembered. The wind was powerful and smelled like dirt. Without our knowing, Rio, our Basenji, had crossed the dry arroyo on his way to the wild areas beyond. El Nubé began to rumble, flanked by a rooty-green smell tinged with damp, dry cottonwood leaves. We stood on a mound. We thought we would be safe. To the west, a dust cloud appeared as the flood flowed into view. It was hard not to panic as the flood-head roared past us, and then, we realized Rio was gone. Fear replaced panic until we saw him stranded on the other side of the arroyo, the flood thundering between us. Rio was blessedly on high ground, quivering, both terrified and mesmerized by the force of what passed beneath him. We lived with Rio for 15 years and that was the only time we saw that look in his eyes.

On the far edge of the arroyo, wind and rain had layered sand and silt to form a perfectly flat, table-sized area. One day in July as a soft rain fell, we watched a rivulet flow across the smooth surface through a notch formed in the edge above the main arroyo. The flowing water cut horizontally toward the source of the rivulet, and vertically, exposing the different layers deposited by recent weather. *This is the story of the Colorado Plateau*, we thought. We pretended we were flying high

above the Grand Canyon. With each rainstorm our Canyon grew deeper and deeper as it twisted and curved in different canyons. We imagined life in that Canyon — trees and grasses, deer and herons and warm-water fish. In our minds, we saw people living there, hunting and farming along the banks of that red river. We watched tributaries form. The degree of change with each storm was marvelous. Our imagination developed as the Canyon deepened. After one storm, sites for Phoenix and Tucson and Flagstaff appeared and we stacked flat gray stones to represent them. We carved roads into our landscape with a sharp stick. And in starlight, stones glistened like city lights.

Later that summer, El Nubé came to our valley once again.

The floods passed, dropping a frightening amount of water. We wandered into the damp air. The desert came alive. Foam, left by the flood, appeared as lace. Tall dry grasses, those bent but not broken, slowly rose as if from a bow. Pools of thick, brown water trapped by the flood dotted the landscape like dirty mirrors. Sage and thick junipers stout enough to stay anchored against the flood were strewn across the desert with other paralyzed debris. We worried about being sucked permanently into the mud before we could reach our tiny diorama of our own Grand Canyon, excited to see how it had further been shaped by the flood. We arrived at the place along the arroyo where our micro-Canyon had once spilled into it. Our Canyon was nowhere to be found. The river with all its tributaries, all

its twists and recent turns, was gone. The Phoenix stone, the Flagstaff and the Tucson stones had been swept away. Gone. Our entire landscape had disappeared. In its place, the latest incarnation of El Nubé had left a football field of perfect brown silt.

In a world of increasing unpredictability, where global warming is now recognized as local warming and climate change isn't something relegated to the future, but is right here, right now, even in times of drought, El Nubé reminds us the one thing we can hold on to is humility and awe — as we continue to witness, in the desert we call home, the true meaning of power. **HH**

EDITOR'S NOTE: Terry Tempest Williams and Brooke Williams live in Castle Valley, Utah, where they both write and teach. Rio has passed on.



A wide cloud releases a thin shaft of precipitation over Lake Powell on the Arizona-Utah border.
Paul Gill