

RAPACIOUS SKIES

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New York

An eye toward the horizon brewing with shades of grey on a workday afternoon, the forecast rain is but brief relief from the summer humidity—enjoyable while it falls, infuriating when it departs and leaves soggy, damper air. In New York, a summer thunderstorm means water—often a significant amount. A recent flood of storm water overwhelmed the city subway's pump system, shorted the subway's electrified third rail, and disabled the morning commute. Hundreds of thousands of people who normally travel hidden underground were suddenly taking to the street—the commute compressed into a single plane, surface level. The city was temporarily crippled. The water disabled our transportation infrastructure; the space of the city was relegated to the surface of land.

California

In the Sacramento Valley, brewing dark clouds are ominous in the summer heat; they signify a small amount of precipitation and potential for thousands of “dry” strikes of lightning. Here, thunderstorms are associated with fire. The dry, “Golden State” grasses are so many millions of hectares of tinder. Crisscrossed firebreaks of tilled soil are scattered at property edges and forest intervals, attempting to contain and reduce the spread of flame, though they cannot stop the embers and sparks that float through the air and skip over their planar futility. The concern is not for crippled transportation networks or flood but burning wilderness, lost homes, scorched fields, and disrupted power lines. Large electrical transmission lines feeding this part of the valley snake through matchstick pine forests. Fire can mean loss of power—and for much of the semi-rural population, loss of water too: The pumps drawing well water from the aquifer below are powered by electricity. The lack of water creates insurmountable hardship in the fight against flame. Helicopters crowd the reservoir skies as they fill their tumblers to satiate the burning thirst.

Australia

Like California, Australia succumbs to unpredictable drought cycles that sear across manmade bounds and enable the spread of lightning-ignited fire. The extremity of weather conditions is increasing with an unanticipated frequency, bringing excessive flooding, drought, and severe storms unmatched in the weather documentation that form the basis of much modern design and engineering. The systems believed sufficient for the documented world are turning out to be less reliable as we realize our world is much more dynamic than we planned.

