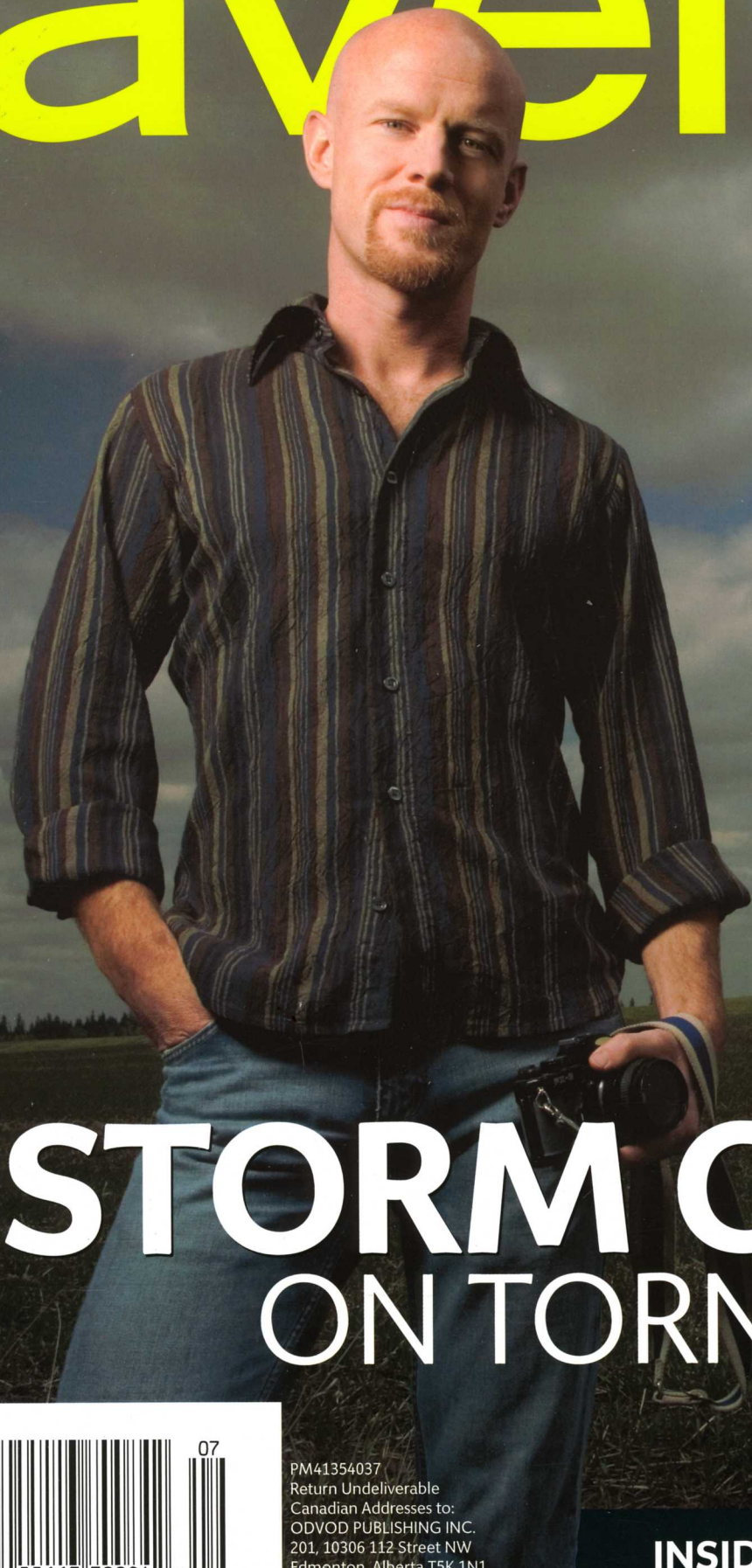


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STALKING



AT THE SKY

TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE EDMONTON TORNADO CUT A CRUEL SWATH THROUGH THIS CITY, PAINTER IAN SHELDON CHASES STORMS FOR A LIVING

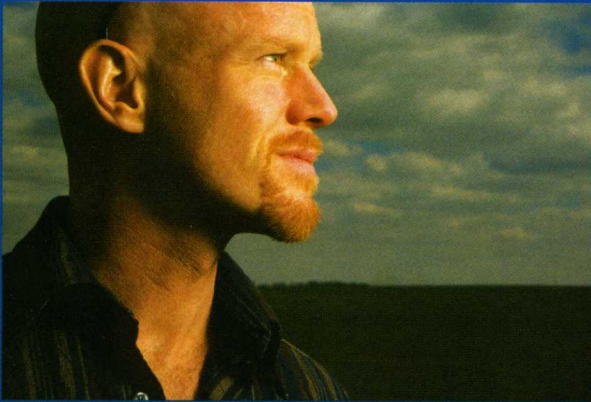
BY LISA GREGOIRE PHOTOGRAPHY BY DARREN GREENWOOD

EDMONTON IS OBVIOUSLY not Tulsa, Oklahoma, but with near record temperatures and humidity, that's exactly how it felt the last week of July, 1987. It would have been welcome news for heat seekers except those tropical currents from the Gulf of Mexico conspired to churn up a herd of storms — parts of the Red Deer-Edmonton corridor had been pelted for days. Mid-morning, on July 31, Environment Canada forecasters issued their first severe thunderstorm watch for the day.

Twenty years later, I'm sitting on an orange vinyl couch in Ian Sheldon's Westmount bungalow, looking at butterflies: iridescent blues, soda pop oranges, sulphur yellows. The velvety polka-dot Danaids once fluttered in the rain forests of Borneo like tissue paper at

a kid's birthday party. Sheldon has lovingly netted, dried, pinned each to its post and filled six specimen boxes for three quarters of his 35 years. His collection of bugs, butterflies and moths tops 1,000. I kneel on the hardwood, hunched over the display. Every time I rest on my heels, he gestures to close the case assuming, perhaps, he's boring me with his entomological predilections. He's not. I keep sticking my nose back in. I've never seen so many exotic creatures up close — earthbound angels with small, furry wings.

At 2:45 p.m., July 31, 1987, the ominous cumulonimbus clouds — the mother of all storm clouds — spotted that morning near Sundre had mushroomed 12 kilometres into the atmosphere and were approaching Edmonton at 80 km/h. Environment Canada issued a severe thunderstorm warning. >>



Above: Ian Sheldon storm stalking northwest of Edmonton

Right: Big September Square, 2007, 48 x 48 inches, oil on canvas



Soon after, someone near Leduc reported seeing a rope-like tornado touch down and disappear. At 3:07 p.m., a tornado warning was issued. Another call came in — a tornado in Mill Woods. As fast as forecasters could type and file, an updated warning went out. By then, everybody in the city's east end could see it. For an exceptionally long 45 minutes, the F4 tornado (a tornado of 330 km/h or more on the Fujita Tornado Scale) churned northeast through the city, devouring a path 37 km long and sometimes one kilometre wide. Twenty-seven people were killed.

With one hand, Mother Nature knits a delicate butterfly and with the other, she hurls a deadly tornado — both seemingly impossible, both equally mesmerizing and both ideal reminders that we can neither fully understand nor control the natural world. These are inspiring notions for Ian Sheldon: bug geek, visual artist, local god of thunder. It's the 20th anniversary of Edmonton's biggest storm and I'm here with Edmonton's biggest storm stalker. He had a solo show of paintings called *Dark Skies*, at a gallery in San Francisco three years ago, a city known for gentle rain and fog — at least when Sheldon's not around. During his taxi

ride from the airport, a fierce storm erupted and Sheldon watched amused as the cabbie flinched with each violent thunderclap. "It was absolute perfection," he says, blue eyes twinkling above a goatee. "The storm maker had arrived."

Sheldon has travelled the world with unrestrained curiosity, seeking rarities and wide open spaces. Born in Edmonton, he

British architecture and later, dramatic oils on canvas of the storms which had intrigued him since childhood. But he won't paint a tornado. "You have to leave some things alone," he says. "Some things are meant to be admired and respected."

We're heading west on the Yellowhead just outside of the city in Sheldon's green Honda Odyssey, fishing for thunder. There

I'LL LOOK AT THE SKY AND SAY, 'I'VE GOT TO GET OVER THERE,' AND THEN DRIVE. MY EYES ARE CONSTANTLY SCANNING. I'M CONSTANTLY LOOKING FOR COMPOSITION, SHAPES, SHADOWS AND LIGHT."

grew up in South Africa, the United Kingdom and Singapore before returning to Canada. He earned two science degrees — at the universities of Cambridge and Alberta — but science was never enough and he found himself sabotaging job interviews to go home and paint instead, first watercolours of

is no on-board computer or GPS — hell, there isn't even a map. He has no water or food, no cellphone. "It takes over my mind. I've got to get out there," he says, describing the spontaneous pursuit of a storm. Two things usually happen, and quickly, once a storm, and the euphoria of the chase, have



Left: *Sunset Storm*, 2005, 48 x 72 inches, oil on canvas

Below: *Storm Front*, 2005, 20 x 48 inches, oil on canvas



dissipated: he has to figure out where he is and then find food. The only item he grabbed on the way out the door today was a camera bag. He never forgets that. Inside are three cameras: a boxy, circa 1970s Yashica Mat 124G which produces a 6 X 6 cm negative; a 20-year-old Yashica film camera with 50 mm lens; and his trusty compact Canon digital.

Past Stony Plain we head north, turning left, right, left, left, right. I lose track. "I enjoy getting lost in discovery," he says blissfully, bouncing along a dirt road while I take fractured, illegible notes. "I'll look at the sky and say, 'I've got to get over there,' and then drive. My eyes are constantly scanning. I'm constantly looking for composition, shapes, shadows and light." That's admirable. I'm constantly looking for noteworthy buildings and road signs because I'm convinced we're lost. Today's sky is stratocumulus: a big cloak of nearly unbroken fluffy clouds. It's gray and flat. Dull.

That wasn't the case August 13, 2003, when a hailstorm and possible tornado pounded Lake Wabamun. He'd heard the storm warnings on CBC radio, had been tracking its

movement on Environment Canada's online radar. When it got close enough to the city,

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE STANDING IN A TORRENTIAL DOWNPOUR TO RECONNECT YOU TO THE EARTH

he flew out the door. "I wanted to be in there. I went straight for it," he says. "The darkness of that storm, it just enveloped you. I pulled over on the highway. I got out and stood in it. Rain was coming in all directions. I've never seen clouds so indigo black." There's nothing like standing in a torrential downpour to reconnect you to the earth, he says. "For a few moments, I felt like I was being embraced by nature's chaos. And it was so exhilarating."

Later, with photographs, a palette of his favourite oils smeared on cardboard and a white canvas before him in his home studio, the exhilaration returned like a spell. "It's almost as though paint was flying out of the brushes," he says. He completed the evocative 1.2-metre-high *Tornado Maker 1* in half the usual time and with only three layers of paint,

when six or seven are standard to capture the hues. "It took me right back to being out there. It was a rush in its own right." The piece sold immediately at a Toronto gallery for \$2,200, roughly two-thirds of what a similar piece would sell for today. It's clear others share his affection for prairie skies. "For my wife and I, it was the colours, those vivid colours that catch your eye," says Ed Mah, a senior portfolio manager in Edmonton and collector of Sheldon's work. "They just give me joy every day." They give Sheldon joy too — including the monetary kind. He just sold a storm triptych for \$11,000, the most anyone has ever paid for a piece of his work.

That's the glory. Today is the grunt work. We arrive at Highway 43 and hang a right. "Ah, there," he says, relieved, pointing to clumps of dark clouds. The road trip hasn't been for naught. "Over there looks like virga." Virga is a tease: precipitation leaves a cloud but evaporates before reaching the ground. This one hangs like a fringed miniskirt, illuminated briefly by a glorious band of light. The moment underscores the importance of being in front of a storm or present when it passes. That's often when sunlight bends

around those dense, saturated clouds, turning them red, green, purple and exposing exquisite textures and shapes. Anyone who's watched a storm retreat at sunset has witnessed the resulting celestial opera.

Max Dupilka was playing golf in St. Albert during the 1987 tornado. The skies were gray over the links but didn't appear threatening. That's the thing about thunderstorms: they can boil up in a clear blue sky, expel a torrent of rain, hail and high winds and then disappear, all within a couple of hours. And one area of the city can get nailed while another gets nothing at all. Meteorologists can consult a plethora of data, draw from their training and experience and say, with authority, conditions are present for a severe thunderstorm and a possible tornado. >>

“NATURE CREATES STORMS OUT OF NOTHING AND THEY’RE SO BEAUTIFUL, ESPECIALLY IN THE PRAIRIES WHERE WIDE OPEN SPACES LET YOU SEE THEM COMING AND GOING.”



Above: Shower Drop, 2004, 60 x 24 inches, oil on canvas



Above right: Storm Edge, 2007, 16 x 16 inches, glass

But they can't tell you a tornado is actually coming unless someone actually sees it. Meteorology is a science. Weather is not. And the mystery of tornadoes endures like the smile on the Mona Lisa. "All weather forecasting is probability," says Dupilka, a forecaster for 20 years and now a renowned atmospheric scientist at the University of Alberta. "I don't know if we'll ever know for certain which storms could produce a tornado like that." Dupilka studies all the ingredients that form Alberta's most severe storms and his research brings him closer to the answer all the time, but he doesn't mind being stumped once in a while. "It's comforting to know there are still things to find out. And the computer can't do it all. You need a human to do it."

George Kourounis is no meteorologist but he knows where the tornadoes roam. I catch him on his cellphone in Oklahoma where the professional storm chaser and host of Outdoor Life Network's *Angry Planet* is leading a tour group of international weather addicts through tornado alley. "As Canadians, we're quite weather-fascinated because we have such diverse weather. Everybody has a weather story," says the Torontonion. "Nature creates storms out of nothing and they're so beautiful, especially in the Prairies where wide open spaces let you see them

coming and going." But the dichotomy of how something so beautiful can also be deadly is not lost on Kourounis. "We want to see a tornado touch down in an open field," he says, "not tearing apart a town."

Like Kourounis, Dupilka, Mah and people like me who sit on the porch to watch lightning flash, Ian Sheldon is irresistibly drawn to severe storms. But no one, except Helen Hunt's character in the film *Twister*, actually wants to be inside a tornado. We just want to watch, from a safe distance. And sometimes, when clouds swirl and bloom and finally satisfy thirsty sparrows and canola fields with sheets of fresh water, it can be like church. "There's almost a spiritual transcendence for me when the rain comes down," Sheldon says. "It's heaven touching earth." Just for the record, the heavens are due for a doozy. According to Dupilka, 23 per cent of Canada's tornadoes occur in Alberta, with a significant one (F2 or higher) occurring every six or seven years. The last one, an F3 tornado, occurred in 2000 at Pine Lake. Twelve people were killed.

A batch of fresh canvases leans against the wall in Sheldon's studio, waiting to be drenched in phthalo turquoise, ultramarine blue and paynes grey. For now, Sheldon will continue to experiment with paint on glass, work on a book of watercolours commissioned by the University of Cambridge, select pieces for upcoming shows in New York and Montreal, plan his next collaboration with John Acorn to illustrate a book of Eastern Canadian butterflies and contemplate, with a shake of his bald head, the coincidences and dumb luck which made him choose art over science. Having witnessed his wide, wet landscapes, I'm glad he did. And now, when I see a storm brewing, I wonder if he's out there, standing in the rain, Mother Nature's son. 