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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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BALL LIGHTNING OR CORPOSANTS?

It is a plausible hypothesis that many of the things described as fiery balls, occasionally observed during thunderstorms and classified as ball lightning, are brush discharges from objects in the air or on the ground and are therefore identical with corposants, or St. Elmo's fire. B. A. Colonna, of the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, was one of a fishing party on Chesapeake Bay many years ago, that took refuge from an approaching storm on a wharf about 1 o'clock in the morning. On this wharf were several piles of old ships' cables or similar chains used for anchoring buoys.

The rain was falling in torrents and it was very dark. Suddenly there was a vivid flash of lightning accompanied by a deafening crash of thunder. "As soon," says a report of this experience, "as the first brightness had disappeared it was observed that the surroundings were still illuminated by numerous balls of fire, which rolled quietly along the wharf toward and over the cables. They seemed to increase in size from a small spark up to a diameter of four to six inches. Sometimes two would join and disappear with a slight sound; others fade away. The display did not last more than a minute."

Were these objects really balls, which rolled over the wharf, or were they brush discharges appearing successively at different points?

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