THE TORNADO POSITION

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THE TORNADO POSITION

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Thesis

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Epilogue

When you are in shelter, assume a safety position. In general, this should be on your knees, bent over with your head against the wall and covered with your arms. . . . If you are restricted . . . or cannot otherwise assume the standard safety position . . . place yourself in such a way that you are offered maximum protection [and] structure. . . . Do not waste . . . the moment of the tornado.

compliments of: Tornado Myths, Facts, and Safety

-The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Global Climate Monitoring
The forecast was all made up. Aside from the true parts, which have yet to happen. What’s not to trust about sleeping beneath a pool table, and convulsing. The forecast was stained with a lung-shaped watermark, disheveled like a wet sheltie.

The forecast was a load bearing wall in a cornfield that couldn’t bear the criticism, couldn’t tolerate the cellar flooded with tadpoles, the remains of the funeral home with shag carpet and polyester lilacs. The forecast was panic in the sirens that droned the cows back to sleep.

The forecast was the impulsive clouds that meddled with the atmosphere. Changed the temperature to Antarctica, next Malaysia and sultry, last, a plague of wrens freckling the town with troubled feathers. The forecast was the last will and testament of the Notary Public hastily written on a postcard. The forecast was the helicopter that ensured the safe arrival of an NBC news affiliate. The forecast was a notarized deed cataloging the disaster of Biblical proportions in the armoire.

To complicate matters, the forecast was folded into a sailor’s hat, like the pamphlets the NOAA distributed after the last incident. Rescue efforts were the forecast. Electrical outage was the forecast. The forecast, to be diplomatic, guarded against going outside to check on the funnel cloud. Suggested, instead, light candles if faith fails again.

The forecast was a state of emergency declared in the local brothel. The revolt that ensued was the forecast, contemptible and subject to exile.

To go through the rigmarole, the forecast was useless and blaming it will only make the memory worse. The forecast offers an illusion of safety, like the sucker punch of an airbag. The forecast was the fear of your last words getting lost in the dishwasher. The forecast was forced to surrender, like the scab at your elbow, itching to collapse and suspect. The forecast was me undercover, or you with your wrists roped together, and not praying.
SHORT DOCUMENTARY FILM

Cut to a highway overpass like a bomb shelter. An unsuspecting family of four driving into Oklahoma en route to Wichita, Kansas to visit grandma with terminal dementia. Cut to an airborne Dodge Caravan in need of an oil change, paint job to cover the primer, tire rotation, rear end suspension. Cut to the damage sustained after being dropped from the heavens, like an asteroid with a VIN. Cut to the loss of virginity in the arms of a stranger, on the eve of disaster, on the hood of the aforementioned Dodge caravan. Cut to Leonardo DiCaprio and coal sketches of naked women as the wind kicks at strands of pubic hair. Cut to a dissected doublewide. A cowboy missing his horse. A blemished sun smeared from the sky, like finger paintings by blind children. Cut to me in my boxers watching reruns of the catastrophe unfolding on Cinemax, a bucket of popcorn pressed between my thighs next to a warm Miller Lite. Cut to commercial: American Idol, Midol, Tampax, and Listerine, so when in the casket the extra’s teeth will sparkle. Cut to a sex scene as the storm front bares down on the log cabin and somehow fire still glistens on flesh, the improbable romance. Cut to a makeup artist whose specialty is corpses, battle scars, and werewolves. Cut werewolves from the script. Cut to neck braces, gurneys, a man scalped by a satellite dish dislodged from the balcony of the luxury condos. Cut to a vase of quiet petunias that show no signs of trauma. Cut to the family of four now huddled in a public bathhouse in Texas. Cut to the storm chasers and the widows in thin veils with tissues. Cut to rows of children in the tornado position as if knelt in prayer, waiting for class to be cancelled. Cut to a child crying in the shell of a bungalow, a meteorologist in the studio, waiting for news from the field reporter recently relocated to the emergency ward at St. Anthony’s hospital.
Cut to commercial: Depends, Clearasil, Nicorette.
Cut to onlookers standing too close and poking
the funnel with a stick like a sleeping wolverine,
like a grenade that failed in its time of need,
but kicking might get a desired result. Cut to a man
in a mobile home. Rather, man in a mobile casket.
Cut to a hillbilly without a clue or sense
of hygiene, acting like he saw something other
than the insides of a prostitute. Cut to the scars
in the heartland. An aerial view, serpentine burial
mounds the indigenous constructed like veins
running away from arteries. Cut to a two-
by-four thrown through a retaining wall,
spear-like. Cut to the calm. The aftermath where all
the citizens reveal themselves, act as if just born,
and cry until the golden retriever crawls out
from beneath the wreckage. Cut to the credits:
Tommy Lee Jones as the tornado. Winona Ryder
as distraught widow. Jack Nicholson and Danny Devito
as homeless guys two and three, respectively. Me as
consumer accumulating ample late charges when
the VCR eats a video. Cut to me as casualty surviving
the day-to-day weather, surviving, but aware of tomorrow.
HOW TO ASSUME THE TORNADO POSITION

(1)

In grammar school, I learned to index: dire, times in; emergency, in case of; survival; inextricably, fucked. I was taught to love the innermost wall, the windowless space, the inhabitants that seek shelter. I pursued the body’s natural reactions when struck with panic. The limpness, the aches of security, the sound of a voice when I can’t discern a body. At the sound of the safe whistle allowing the body relief, I learned to drool on command.

(see also: ponderous—how a body still beating and a body beaten differ only in the placement of the hands).
ONCE A BOY

Once a boy knew how to tie
his extremities in a half-Windsor.
Warp a human frame with no need
for an emergency blanket, the half-moon
of a tortoise shell. Too many
limbs to account for, like steel ribs

from the imploded replica Eiffel Tower.
The false alarms made a contortionist
of the skeleton, obscured a line of sight

from Shoney’s to the cut-rate blood
bank I nearly fell in love with.
That sudden blindness instead

of wanting to be violated just a little.
Still, congratulations were in order:
to the heavens for making the world

bone cold with all their omniscient
presence. Once a boy understood how
to resemble a gun swollen in a pocket,

a rabbit’s foot pressed into the palm
of someone else’s hand, a thumbtack
lodged in a foot spreading tetanus.

To the echo-friendly hallways of the vacant
grammar school. How the years were filled
with herds of faceless children huddled

in a near three-point stance, no longer
waiting to kiss their mothers at night.
To the obsolete phone book parted open,

all the yellow pages spread like coffeed
teeth. Tornado alley left this burnt prairie
like a barren bowling alley with the pins
strewn as rooks glistening the board.
    Once a boy learned the hard way
    that no meant no. Unless there was reason

to believe none of the lawn flamingos
    would be standing come daybreak.
All that pink scattered like a piñata’s

entrails, abandoned naked and vulnerable.
    Once a boy went coma-silent when
the western hemisphere buttoned up

its floral blouse and left the world to wonder.
    A place incomplete, the lack of public
baths, altars for sacrifice. A creature left

wanting, like a collie with three legs
    and a deflated basketball. A person who
knew better. Once a boy, before the elements

made dents, there was a need for more
    than a subtle hint, a way to almost
remember what landed him here in the first place.
SIREN SIREN AND NOW I’M EXPECTED TO SLEEP

Siren stirred me away from the coma I was tending. 
Siren, the disco music I shook to when all else failed. 
Siren, like the willow unplotted, uplifted, and gasping. 
I siren, grasping a crescent wrench and whirling around 
on the balcony, when seeking enlightenment from above, 
despite an ability to ignore my biological clock’s ticking. 
The sleep siren I can’t conquer or ignore, siren. 
The are you listening siren. A heaviness in the chest, a cough, 
a speech impediment. Siren heard, the ricochet down 
the hallway, the baby, its own siren at three AM. 
The smoke detector sirens back and forth about the ill-advised 
tantrum, the temperature rising almost tantric, and I forget 
what the siren was about. The siren inside my body aching. 
The bomb siren, the flood siren, my internal alarm clock. 
The siren that squawks at me to turn the volume down 
on the radio, turn the thermostat up in my little igloo. 
Cue the siren for the migraine, naughty and ugly. 
I’ve memorized your song, siren, and it bears repeating. 
It bears repeating. It bears repeating. It bears repeating. 
A siren I’m not responsible for breaks the brittle peace, 
the land speed record, the bread, a wedding where red flags 
siren the mother-in-law, the pall bearer, the tenuous peace 
I foster, one hand stuck to the other. Siren siren pushing 
at a school bus security exit, the children siren with such 
vio ence the windows steam over. I siren with relief 
when the sirens stop catcalling me like the militia, 
the mating call ritual that leaves me lonely with my siren 
in the morning. The harsh voice growing hoarse, and crumbling 
at my feet, the ash from a disregarded forest fire. 
Siren, you’ve made your point. Siren, you’ve said enough 
of the elements raging on the lawn, on the nasty horizon 
undressing. Let me be, siren, my ears are stuffed with fever. 
Siren, quit calling me to wreck, as I listen to you, like an opera 
singer and suicide bomber, skin grafted together.
WHEN USED AS DIRECTED, THE TORNADO POSITION

I can verify, has been known to cause bleeding in a few isolated incidences.

There is no clear correlation between the tornado position and the increase in my sex-related injuries, but biologists have yet to rule anything out. In isolated incidences, I’ve experienced excessive reruns of *The Wizard of Oz* at three a.m., dizziness, and a chronic desire to sit in the washing machine while the spin cycle rumbles in the basement. The maneuver should not be performed when under the influence of alcohol or Mexican foods with habañero, or while operating anything with cylinders. Not even mother’s Buick. The antenna bent to resemble an outline of two doves mating and the vomit stain on the passenger seat that recalls a camping disaster—circa 1994. Side effects are similar to those reminiscent of nutmeg, only the initial symptoms remain constant: acute pains, like glass shattered in a trash compactor. A marked increase in fear of open spaces, like an auditorium, or a large, nameless expanse like Canada. As well as daydreaming the Tin Man into the dishwasher with other inappropriate metals, family pets. In extreme cases of misuse, the need to love oneself with knees tucked under the chin, like a torture device, persists for weeks following contact. Additional side effects may include: severe
disorientation. But that’s the point. Why else let all the blood run to my head in hopes of feeling hijacked by gale force winds as if teethered to a mechanical bull?

The faces of friends look like tie-dyed grave-stones in a cemetery that won’t stop spinning. Studies have shown a marked increase in reports of motion sickness in the following areas: my bathtub, sometimes the broom closet.

I only attempt the tornado position when I’m heavily impaired. When I need to know there’s enough room for my chest to squeeze between the floor and my jaw line.

Twice, I felt a heartbeat under my tongue, like a cigarette butt in a tequila bottle.

Once I believed it was edible.
Weatherman, I have no desire to engage the outdoors today. So many cold fronts billowing like smoke on the day’s low ceiling. O the outdoors—the Great-Out-of-Doors. Maybe rain flicks at the window for the time being, but what’s next? Currently in your area, overcast with a chance of bodily precipitation. I bide my time beneath the sleeper sofa. I crank it up, the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, stave off lonely, until the sky dissipates into cotton candy. Or something more soothing: the sweet voice of Weatherman telling me, It’s okay to come out, I’ll hold you until forever, at least until the sky’s clear over Denver. Please, Weatherman, do not try to seduce me. Not in my current condition of mistrust and vulnerability. I’m not capable of loving you proper, or any warm body, for that matter. With each red morning, I fill the bathtub with Bactine, apply Saran Wrap to the windows, double-check the locket around my neck, the cyanide pill within it. Just because I can. Just because I can, I practice a new practice of breathing. A new kind of taking in, if only I had a shiny pair of gills. I study the migratory patterns of the native birds, the blue heron, because the animals always know first. Maybe thunder only three counties over, but what’s next? Currently in your area, the clouds are breeding at unprecedented rates, doubling in population in six seconds flat. I have glued my eyes—no need for anti-adhesive just yet—to the television to monitor any facade of storm, any pretense of tempest in the near future. I am falling hard for Weatherman. I have survived yet another Tuesday, but the sky is dropping, like the fever I can incite in myself, and Thursday may be preempted by my untimely passing. Currently in your area, the violence is spreading with each gust of sweet nothings blown to ear, and the storm is beginning to break. And what’s next? The barometer stagnant.
The horizon doing nothing out of character. 
Me dropping to my knees in search of safety.
I conclude, at this time, I have fallen in love 
with Weatherman. I have fallen into relentless 
fits of obsessive compulsion: I monitor the mist 
on the sills of my body twice every hour, 
twist the locks on the windows, beware intruders, 
pull my hair out—a strand per degree in the dropping 
temperature—tear my humble garments, like tissues. 
I check the storm doors to make sure I’m alone. 
What’s next? Currently in your area, nothing 
but Weatherman. The Doppler radar has never looked 
so sexy. I want nothing more from these, my final hours, 
than to fuck Weatherman until the rain delay is over. 
The commercial break concludes. Until there’s peace 
within my turbulent body. There are too many ways 
to say what I’ve never said without using my hands. 
In my area, it’s awkward with no chance of survival, 
even when there’s nothing, Weatherman, threatening 
any attempt. I have nothing to say for myself at this hour.
HOW TO ASSUME THE TORNADO POSITION

(2)

My head to the indoor terra firma. I’m conductive. The static electricity is no act of God at these hours. The heat, the sparks, the grid system my body resembles with impulses passing through each limb, each eyelid, my abandoned regions. I bear the comparison to an Alaskan fishing village. The attempt to keep the lighthouse active when the fog rolls inland. Its chewed shore. I only bear the comparison during the offseason, when night lingers for twenty-three hours a day. My motor still choking, my hands numb. It’s impossible to see motions, no matter how dramatic, how calculated. What I’m left with is a vision of myself walking on miles and miles of hailstones.

(see also: central nervous system—the body’s idea of supply and demand, offering nothing in return for what I reluctantly give up, offering nothing in return for what I never once owned).
WILL OF THE METEOROLOGIST

Under the proper kind of weather,
I want to be remembered as the reporter

who brought you Winter Storm Watch '94,
the evening edition of Flood Warning,

and warned you, devout public, to cover
your petunias, wrap them in turtlenecks

when a frost kill threatened the summer
of '87. I’ve defined myself by the cumulus-
nimbus, the calming effect of rain on Chilean
llamas, and the distress a July sky causes

golfers on the back nine. A fog has settled
on my horizon. May the following bequests

be made on the occasion of my passing:
I bestow to my daughter, April, my poncho

from embedded reporting on Hurricane
Andrew. To my first son from my third

marriage, I leave my faithful thermometer.
Its bottom has leaked mercury for years.

My second wife, if she’s still alive,
please, find my other set of keys

for the evacuated, but storm-friendly condo
in the Gulf. To no one in particular, I wish

to impart a weather-beaten hemorrhoid pillow
from seasons of storm tracking behind a desk

cascaded by a jet stream map of lonely Seattle.
For years, I projected baseball to be rained out

on account of tornados, grapefruit-sized hail.
Dual Doppler radar tracked me like El Niño,
the sky now empty as it ever was in tropical Chicago. Like a typhoon with nowhere to be,

I am the dissipating clouds over empty Idaho. Constant funnel clouds have plagued since

the first diagnosis. Tomorrow: chance of snow with little to no discernible accumulation.
The Tornado is equal parts Vitamin C and arsenic. Equal parts zeppelin held high enough, and the once-warm pavement laid prostrate. Therefore, helium and how do we deal with such things when the Earth hasn’t been flat since the Collapse of the Roman Empire. The Tornado is not the asteroid that created the Yucatan. Nor the canker sore you tongue each morning-after. The Tornado is no tributary to a greater place, like Heaven. It will not even get you to the outskirts of Paris. The Tornado has always hated France. The Tornado never mutters the words: Love me, nor makes off-the-cuff reference to the Aztec Calendar during awkward conversation. The Tornado is equal parts herbivore, carnivore, and Surgeon General’s Warning—to be ignored. The Tornado never uses air quotes for added emphasis when debating the Greenhouse Effect in relation to the exotic mating patterns of the Praying Mantis. The Tornado is asexual, and should be stored at room temperature, and was Best Used By the Y2K Scare. No wait. I take that back. The Tornado has no expiration date, is as timeless as Apocalypse predictions. The Tornado has no relation to any flightless bird. It’s not the distant cousin of the ostrich, or emu. It’s not even an offshoot of the archaeopteryx. Around the Tornado, there are no flightless birds. There is a lineage lost somewhere between Mexico and Canada, but genealogy never mattered much. The Tornado has an ideology you’d never buy into. The Tornado is not you, dearest daredevil, nor you, sweetheart stunt double, my amorous adrenaline junkie. Not even you, the handsome heretic. The Tornado, however, is your acid reflux, the buxom beauty that got away when you lost the karaoke contest to the jukebox that plays the bagpipes when unplugged. Your appearance will never set off sirens or cause mass terror. You will never know pain that smooth. The tornado is the woebegone divorcée, waiting by the phone, and telling nursery rhymes to telemarketers. The Tornado will be convalescing on the clothes-
line after the fallout from a mutual parting of ways, irreconcilable differences, the increase in percentage rates. Your bravery will not be called upon now or ever for that matter. The Tornado is two-parts Zoloft, and one-part placebo. A third of what goes missing when you hold too tight and squeeze the life out. The tornado is the last one out of town. The last American patriot, making its way—in its own wake—down the street of a devastated town, that you just might miss if you blink too soon.
ANXIETY FOR BAROMETRIC PRESSURE

Let me brood over the barometric pressure a while. It’s heavy, as if gravity, on my shoulders with shorter hours and infrequent tension headaches. I prefer to brood over the heaviness of gravity and reinvent my nervous ticks. I set the clocks back each hour to brood longer. My quest for more hours is set back by clocks with extra digits.

Let me brood over my intimate pieces, the poor boy I make, the makings of me like the internal workings of a combustion engine. Each tiny explosion sets me into motion. I plod circles into the Earth, because that’s what I do. What I do is retrace my steps with lower expectations for my hours.

Let me brood over this for awhile. The fog lapping at my shiny buckles. Let me be the brooding fog, the low life fog, with the wherewithal to weigh heavy on the Earth, a flag over a coffin, and press my body into Michigan, like an ugly fossil. Let the aborigines brood over me for hours. Let them get tension headaches and talk about my cranium as if an intricate bowl for pears.
Contrary to our popular belief, 
the tornado position has never 
been recognized by the Kama Sutra. 
Not alongside the famed position 
of the Wife of Indra, nor is it a deviation 
of the Camel’s Hump with bodies 
melted together, like flammable 
watercolors. It is not conducive 
to the Lotus Position, nor is it cousin 
to the Milk and Water Embrace, 
but this did not deter our attempts, 
or the internal bruising, that led to a quick 
evolution of sex positions as we once 
knew them. Current capacity only allowed us 
to contort into a mimicry of mud 
wrestlers in Indiana, trying to hit it big. 
A method measured by how we failed 
to heed warnings when cautioned: 

*this is no time to be enjoying yourselves.* 
Due to pre-existing conditions, 
like a sports hernia and nymphomania, 
we took the necessary precautions. 
Deep breaths, a double dose of Dramamine 
before said venture became noteworthy. 
Vodka, were it not for you, your sweat, 
we would not have accomplished. 
We could not, had never, not even 
in the seductive streets of coastless
Pittsburgh, without your kind charity, dexterity, double joints, cast iron hips.

O Pittsburgh, your streets that spread like thighs across the Ohio and Allegheny.

Your steel demeanor, seductive eyes milling about, undressing the viaduct of their ribbed garters and guardrails gets my gears turning each night.

Nothing turns a lady on like ketchup. Thank you, my lower extremities, despite your emotionless climate, for donating your share of the body to the science and research of the libido, how catastrophe has sensual properties.

It's no longer a matter of can it be done, but should it, why wrap into oneself, proceed forward with no sense of vigilance? Are the throes of a sky in revolt not excitement enough? When does one need a neck ache under such tremendous friction and pounding?

Some say, claustrophobic. I say, erotic. This debate will weather the storm.
THE TORNADO POSITION
[Historical Reenactment]

The tornado position, like panic attacks and hot flashes, has mysterious origins. Only obscure documentation exists.

It’s been depicted in cave paintings by Homo Erectius Africanus. A hammer-browed man knelt as if sexually assaulting himself.

This, the precursor to modern man’s disaster prevention program. The outskirts of Pompeii, shells of humans mimicked the maneuver for the same reason. The mountain’s indigestion. Rumor: it was transported by night to Eastern cultures across the South Pacific, along the Silk Road under Gengkis Khan’s fist. Later, by Christopher Columbus or another douche bag, in exchange for silk brassieres, tobacco, and head lice. It may have come westward like malaria, like some pharmaceutical, media-enhanced disease, it spread when we thought oxygen was contagious. Shipped to the States in plywood crates, it was marked, Fragile. Handle with suspicion. And Contents may cause isolated cases of stomach twisting and lower back spasms.

It is alleged to have migrated from Canada with denim tuxedos and the Neil Young craze of the 70s. Perhaps hereditary like male pattern baldness, or congenital like the heart murmur I modified, so each beat was a rough echo of your name. Perhaps it evolved like the flightless bird from other flightless birds. Its point of genesis:
the armadillo. The need to feel safe for no reason. Something like a mirage of water in the desert. A hope that keeps the body aching, lips licking.

Or like rare species separated on New Zealand, it just happened in isolation and adapted itself to the atmosphere of political unrest, refused to cross picket lines. Like the Immaculate Conception, there’s no evidence of its conception. No embryonic trickery. Maybe it was simple:

Spontaneous combustion in a crowded vestibule, 1956, somewhere in the south of Kansas. Where we’ve never been, but were told it exists.
The Sleepytime tea has boiled to a char for the second time this evening.

Honey, for a third time, busy signals and candles melted until the wick was burnt clean of its only duty, until the table feels like the back of an aged-hand, veined and tense. Only these hands know where to slip,

Honey. Behind the nook of the ear, the warmth between body and linen,

in the crack of your lips, cutting words off before they infect the bare skin like needles, Honey, always tingling as Novocain under a compressed tongue.

The bottom of the teapot, Honey, is like dried paint curling upward due to wear. I wander the cold corridors of this, our humble abode. I trace the silhouettes the Christmas cactus and fair-weather fern cast on the walls.

Those neat skeletons with the ribs I would certainly finger, were I, Honey, looking for the keys misplaced, the sorrow we were so troubled to find, the proper way to conceive a child. The clouds perambulate,

Honey, as though at a mixer, a cheap soirée, the Sadie Hawkins dance
when I left my lips on your neck;  
my pheromones, like a Swisher Sweet

in your hair, can’t be washed off  
with aftershave or even double malt.

Though we tried to bleach clean our pupils  
that saw more, Honey, than I can speak

of and still remain a lady. However,  
as the tea burns to flaked rust, Honey,

I do recall the heavens opening up when  
we, for the last time, let the curtain drop.

The bones of our home ache the hours  
since you left. The home to my bones

seeks rest, yawns outward the morning  
after the day you traipsed toward town,

leaving the toilet seat up, the garage door  
open, the oven turned on, me turned on,

your cruel saunter toward the horizon  
despite cruelties that glisten in the socket

of its yet-to-be-seen eye. How drained  
you must feel, my voice snapping at your heels,

the weight of a tireless night draped over  
your shoulders. How we never said goodnight.

Tomorrow, Honey, there will be time  
for sleep at all the wrong hours of day.
THE TORNADO POSITION
[In Retrospect]

Much like the defibrillator and Life Alert, it came too late to play remedy to a percentage of people’s irreconcilable differences with life.

Now afterthought. If only we had known better. We could have pulled damaged bodies from the rubble, so they wouldn’t lay limp on the coroner’s table, wouldn’t get fondled by the evening security guard, wouldn’t stay unclaimed until dust filled their eye sockets, like ash lakes, an overcast sky. Too late for the boys in the thumb of Michigan out cow tipping, who suffered trauma-related aneurysms when a phallic tube presented itself from the sky, spread a trailer park across an abandoned amusement park.

Too late for acres of mobile homes lining fields like pillboxes, the women in their sultry Victorian nightgowns blown away like cocktail umbrellas. The priest impaled by the Methodist steeple, praying to the god of ill-humor for tax-deductible write-offs, the charges to be dropped, now off to meet his maker. Too late for a lady in a Coleman camper collapse, the mustached park ranger with a Sycamore lodged in his chest. Great Outdoors, how menacing you can be, like when I put a tin foil swan in the microwave and learned how pretty things are ugly sometimes. Then there was the gondola captain even the Jaws of Life couldn’t salvage, turned into
a casket with a pulley system. Not to mention
the jetsetter couple taking off from Toledo
and landing like a meteor south of Cleveland.

For the two lovers beneath a kitchen table
swapping enzymes, unknowing how in a flash
the last words they’d taste would be the lips
mouthing, nobody can love you like I love you.
Even the raccoon, which I thought was a feral
cat for over three months, became casualty
due to a lack of precautions on my part.
Due to assuming the severe weather warning
was Only a Test, I repeat: I’m going to regret this.
A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

Dramatis Personae:
Tornado: Ageless and naked.
Attorney: smallish, hunchback, forehead shines like the water of a smooth lake, wears a suit pulled tight, buttons like rivets about to give, speaks out of the right side of his mouth.
Police Interrogator: wears a fake mustache, trench coat, etcetera.
Police Investigator: combat boots, traditional police attire, also wearing a fake mustache, etcetera.

Time
3 May 1999
Setting
Police interrogation room, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

All three characters are gathered around a rectangular table and the tornado takes slow drags off a cigarette. The Interrogator, Investigator, and Attorney sit in near darkness, and steam rises off the respective coffee cups of the three individuals. The only light, aside from a small, iron-barred window, is a high-wattage lamp pointed directly at the tornado, though the tornado doesn’t sweat, is unfazed. The room is sterile, almost institutional, and though it’s not apparent, looks as if it would smell like an open jar of formaldehyde with a pig fetus bobbing in it, or like an urban efficiency with a steady gas leak waiting for a match to be lit.

Act I

Interrogator (laying a dead armadillo on the table next to the remnants of the mobile Doppler radar): Do these look familiar to you? Any recollection?

Investigator (setting a sundial on the table as if the time would change under the artificial light): You’ve got thirty minutes for a confession.

Interrogator: Where were you last night?

Tornado (head tilted upwards, reminiscing of something like childhood):

Interrogator: You’re avoiding the question. Tell us where you were you last night. I’m through playing games with you.

Attorney: You don’t have to answer that.

Tornado (taps out cigarette on the back of his own hand, lights another, looks at the cement, cold as a vacated trailer park):
Interrogator (licks fingertips and fashions mustache in a way that appears compassionate and understanding): Will you speak to the survivors?

Investigator (looks down, zips up his fly): There are no survivors, only casualties.

Attorney: You don’t have to answer that.

Interrogator: Will you speak to the casualties? The Clerk of Courts impaled on a statue of the Virgin Mary, the reverend bludgeoned with the pipes from the organ, the prom queen asphyxiated with fishnets, wearing her anorexic chic gown while doing the electric slide across the disco ball promenade?

While the Interrogator lists off the dead, a likeness of each, all of whom are wearing fake mustaches, struts across the stage as if it were a runway for a fashion show: pivot, pause, strike the pose, and lay down a wilting begonia.

Investigator: We caught you with a mouth full of cattle, hands clenched with the turnpike’s guardrail. I can’t even afford myself the mention of the school bus or what you did at the convent, the humiliation of the former-Miss America.

Tornado (slow, meticulous drag from a cigarette, French inhales, bends to ground as if with heartburn):

Interrogator: Will you speak to families of the deceased?

Tornado (Steel look of indifference that recalls hollow water pipes. Each of his audible heartbeats mimics a busy tone, the crumble of static on the weather channel as the wires cut, the tense noise between gunshot and deadweight):

Interrogator: This wasn’t your first rodeo, was it, cowboy?

Attorney: You don’t have to answer that.

Investigator (folds hands, looks at the floor, fashions mustache downward, attempting to look older and knowledgeable as he provides what he considers to be insight): They say it starts young: a robin fallen from the nest underfoot. A garter snake set on fire, twisting like the fuse to faulty dynamite. A frog broken with a shovel and still. They say young, but mean impressionable, like modeling clay, silly putty. The brain, that is, the frontal lobe, perhaps, cerebral cortex, by chance. The intricate workings, both malleable and hostile. At once a blind hamster on a wheel and a sniper’s hidden turret.
Attorney (falls to his knees and cups his face as if to drink from his own palms): You don’t have to answer that. Is there not an ounce of justice in this town? (starts weeping)

The lights go dim. Near calm darkness, like storm clouds swallowing the sky. Only the throb of the cigarette’s ember can be seen, like a pulse rapidly increasing with each breath drawn in, as if a weathervane misplanted in the refurbished arboretum, but still pointing at a gentle north-northeast pull.

Act II

Roughly two hours have passed. Smoke builds along the ceiling and the beige paint on the walls begins to curl as if nails were run across the surface while trying to keep the shutters from shutting. The light in the room is thinner, duller. The three men have grown weary, dark rings grow beneath their eyes. The interrogator has removed his mustache and is pacing the room, wall to wall. The tornado is methodically quiet and has yet to move, aside from drags on the cigarettes. Ashtray has spread itself on to the table, like the larva of an inchworm.

Interrogator (wipes sweat from brow): What of the suction vortices? The Better Business Bureau demolished, burning like the pyre we ceremoniously neglected, the ashes of pamphlets hovering like fruit flies, the lifespan of an hour, all next to a woman in a poodle skirt, undisturbed, her pigtails remaining ordered.

Attorney: You don’t have to answer that.

Tornado (Lights another cigarette, scans the ceiling as if it’s risen since he arrived, while contemplating the room’s barometric pressure, the mango-scented air freshener that tries to mask the smoke, the cold front coming in the next couple of hours)

Investigator (Removes his bulletproof vest and mustache. Places both on the table. Pulls a fake soulpatch from his pocket and places it below his lip): There’s an eyewitness testimony and surveillance equipment that put you at the scene, where you were seen behaving like a child in midst of a temper tantrum. Nothing the world has seen before. You have yet to produce an alibi. Who will corroborate with a monster like you?

Interrogator: (Leaning over the table, knuckles pressed down in a red fist, looks directly at the tornado): The mayor is willing to plea bargain, the judge can be persuaded. Make your statement, there’s no reward for feigning innocence, like an assassin with black flecks of residue on his hands. Just tell us you did it.
Attorney (removing his sports jacket to reveal an impressive accumulation of sweat stains that resemble various states, including Texas): You don’t have to answer that.

Tornado (Chain smoking now. Two cigarettes at a time. Rubs chin, ruminating of ballistics, and begins to hear severe weather sirens, but notices no one else in the room reacts to the increasingly loud drone. Starts to fidget):

Interrogator (growing agitated and disciplines his mustache, which starts peeling from his face due to the room’s increasing humidity): Tell us where you were last night.

Investigator (removes soulpatch and applies fake, bushy eyebrows to his face for the added effect of anger): You’re going up the river for sure.

Attorney: And, this, your idea of justice.

The room fades to black. The sound of thunder drowns out the possibility of communication between the characters. Next, lightning makes the characters’ movements seem frantic and disjointed, like the strobe lights of a haunted house. All three men pace about nervously. The tornado sits frozen in his seat. The interrogator gesticulates wildly. The investigator repeatedly slams his fisted hand onto the table. The attorney rises to get a face full of the investigator’s coffee. All the while, the tornado hardly appears to be breathing and the lightning continues, making the room mute, the men are mechanical animals. An eerie calm befalls the room, but not the men it contains.

Act III

At this point, both the Interrogator and the Investigator have removed all fake body hair attachments, giving them the appearance of being clean shaven, and then they don gray wigs like those of our Founding Fathers to intensify their seriousness and distain for the tornado. Also, same as before, the runway models of the deceased cross the stage, only this time they pick up the flowers that were left earlier, clench them in their teeth, and exit with an exaggerated gait. In the background, a bass drum, something jungleish, is pounding increasingly faster as the scene progresses.

Interrogator: The pregnant matron, the near-sighted paperboy . . .

Investigator: The Episcopalian church, the Chuck-E-Cheese . . .

Attorney: This is rape of the justice system . . .

Tornado (continues his frantic mannerism as the sound of the severe weather siren gets louder and louder inside his head):

Interrogator: the roller skating waitress, the Girl Scout troop selling Thin Mints . . .
Investigator: the one hour photo, the taxidermy . . .

Attorney: an embarrassment to all things American . . .

Interrogator: a criminal, a murderer . . .

Investigator: a pirate, a pervert . . .

Interrogator: contemptible swine . . .

Attorney: according to our justice system he is innocent until proven . . .

Interrogator: I will fry you myself so God help me . . .

Investigator: your prints were all over this abomination that no man has been subjected to as long as man has controlled the earth . . .

Interrogator: the next drop of light you see outside of this life will be Lucifer himself getting ready to sodomize you with a lightning rod glowing so hot from Hell’s flames it makes Arizona seem like an icebox . . .

Attorney: I see justice has gone out the window. What’s next; habeas corpus no longer applies?

Investigator (visibly sweating): the orphanage, the tanning salon, the massage parlor . . .

Interrogator (spitting in the face of the tornado): you pagan . . . you heathen . . . you terrorist. What do you have to say for yourself, you filthy . . .

Attorney: You don’t have to answer . . . .

A clap of thunder louder than a Learjet kills the lights. The interrogation lamp explodes, dusts the room with sparks and glass. The room is engulfed in sounds resembling a trash compactor filled with a Volkswagen and a jigsaw. The lightning continues to make the men’s movements animated until they fall to the floor, heads squeezed between knees, arms hugging necks, as if in elementary school again. The tornado still motionless. The rolls of thunder cease. The lightning cracks its last whip. The room goes dark for two minutes and some change. The only presence is the continued glow of the cigarette.

A slide guitar starts playing a slow and sorrowful tune, something like Robert Johnson or Leadbelly. The walls have collapsed and the men vanish as a fragile but natural-colored light comes on.
Tornado (sitting on his chair, alone on a stage blacker than space, lighting another cigarette and about ten jack-o-lanterns on the floor, clears throat and dusts self off and stands up, puts on a fake mustache and a gray wig, speaks as if giving a eulogy at his mother’s funeral):

The winds. There will be no more winds. I’ve swept myself through my last panhandle, the last of this dustbowl, my inevitable last words must not be guilty pleas. I will not cut up my clothes, light candles along the sidewalks lining the homes that couldn’t support themselves, leave teddy bears in the Wal-Mart parking lot with flowers on their laps, nor throw my body prone on the chamber doors of some church. I’ve got nothing against the chains of Marathon stations displaced in spots the road doesn’t inhabit. No ill regard for the paper boxes, the piano emporium, nor the plastic surgery practice, all of which lay in my silhouette, like a deer clipped by a semi, crawling toward the berm. I suggest no apologies, but seek no malevolence to well in my eyes. I’ll produce a confession when the sirens stop heeding my arrival, allow me to pass through, a cough on the radar. How I cope with loss of myself: these arms outstretched, palms cupped upwards, asking for that which I cannot cram into my mouth, cannot spit out a mouth of teeth for. I thought I was the tongue soothing chapped lips, I thought I was the switch goading the electric chair, thought I was the lamb swallowing all but the lion’s mane.

Fin

Note: The 3 May 1999 outbreak in the Oklahoma City area produced over 50 touch downs, many in urban and suburban areas. Over $1 billion in property losses were tallied, with around 50 fatalities. One of the twisters was reported to have a peak wind speed of about 315 mph, as determined by mobile Doppler radar, making it the strongest wind ever recorded on Earth (www.sky-fire.tv).
THE TORNADO POSITION
[In Retrospect, Part Deux]

When I had the chance to revolutionize the tornado safety position, I instead gathered fragments from a flatscreen TV to better watch the relief efforts on CNN during the 72-hour disaster marathon. Nothing beats a personal tragedy on repeat. See when a life turned into a jungle gym of twisted gutters and litter. Someone’s heart breaks with each shingle tossed some three counties over with the jet streams. I like to relive my catastrophes from the comfort of a Holiday Inn with soft-core porn after two a.m., and a continental breakfast that is never stocked with sausage or Canadian bacon, and only has expired Cream of Wheat from Mexico and lukewarm milk. The highest quality of a tornado is in HD, but a basic cable package will still pinpoint any moment of devastation with viewer discretion. I should have gathered the guinea pigs, placed them in electric blankets. Should have wrapped the antique decanter in newspaper ads for homeowners insurance. Should not have parked my mother’s Buick beneath the failing flag pole with my underpants strung up at half-mast. In retrospect, there were procedures: light candles in anticipation of a vigil mourning the loss of the cell phontower. Hang a framed picture of Jesus with a wreath of flowers in the exact spot where the unexpected can happen. Melt the hailstones to brew herbal tea for the relatives that RSVP-ed to my baptism but never arrived. All of which I forgot while reminiscing about being beneath that kitchen table with you, groping at each other like two mannequins arranged that way, while some weather rearranged the manicured hedgerow we carved to bear similarity to Mount Rushmore. Axl Rose replaced George Washington due to a minor slip of the wrist. What we needed were instructions to handle moments as instant as decaf coffee, or the decapitation of a monarch. What we needed was something definitive, like martial law only without the curfew. An executive decision only I could make, were I capable of making decisions.
Instead I retraced what I perceived as the likeness of the Virgin Mary left on the windswept driveway that led to a basement ankle deep in water. The obituaries will always read: *died unexpectedly at home. Is survived by no one, lived alone. Fancied sunbathing, star gazing, was an avid fisherman.* The service will commence when there’s reason to think this won’t happen again. Not unexpectedly, at least.
WILL OF THE CASUALTY; OR, A LETTER TO HIS WIFE COMPOSED IN HIS HEAD

At least 30 people, mostly employees, were killed in the furniture store. Survivors were buried for up to 14 hours and several days were needed to remove the bodies buried under the tons of rubble.

-Waco, TX 1953
www.tornadoproject.com

Darling, I am the same alive as I am dead. My pulse, Darling, a slow drip. A gutter choked with sandpaper leaves the neighbors refused to pluck last hurricane season. Tell the poor neighbors to disregard

the oil I poured on their lawn, the poinsettia I left to wilt on their porch, the times I curled into myself when conversation turned political. A filibuster that diverted attention from a bill proposing evolution as determining factor behind survival:

the time between the sirens’ tattling and when the cyclone tongues the fauna. Tell the kids I escaped as a refugee from the clouds’ tantric dizziness, but went numb under a rusted water heater, buried beneath two tons of ottomans.

Children, you inherit a small legacy that is only rivaled by the casualties of which your father is now one.

I lay here on my shallow death bed: piles of upholstery, a desecrated Persian rug, and a semi-shattered, but still functional bidet, for which, my darling, I no longer have use. There was a chandelier lodged
in the armoire alongside the body
of the acned stock boy, a Volvo
within the innards of the sleeper

sofa, a duvet draped over the corpse
it will forever be embracing. The adobe
hacienda next to which we dwelled,

abandoned like a mattress with springs
studded through the pillowed-top,
discarded along the side of the interstate.

I, Darling, lived a notorious quiet among
tumbleweeds that made the Mexican
border seem like the last of the brothels.

The small calls of the search party now taunt.
They best be parted in two. One for my teeth.
The other for the coupons I clipped

that, like me, will never be redeemed.
Last night I felt restless. Each night
restlessness shook me like winds

thrown across the blank wasteland
of West Texas, though I never wanted
to watch the clouds spill into cold maps

across the godforsaken sky over Waco.
My pulse, Darling, creeping, a Gila
monster that swallowed more crickets

than the throat would allow to pass.
My glass eyelids, a windshield with lightning
bugs smashed in the line of sight at night,

a dying cigarette tossed out the window.
As I pass the time feeling each of my
vertebrae snap, I find I am as much dead

as alive when I, Darling, called you
my darling, that night before the slate sky
collapsed like a net made of chainmail.
Some wind-burnt zodiacs. The cataract horizon.
    Cloud-caped eyes like the wires of a horsetail.
You were feeling transcendent when your future
    revealed bounteous sexual encounters, none of
which involved the use of unnecessary roughness
    or gonorrhea. I was left to ponder the etymology
of words like *terminal*, *degenerate*, and *hemorrhage*.
    The moon stole itself against the funneled clouds.
A child beneath a stairwell recalling the trauma
    of an elm tree tossed about as if in a pitbull’s mouth.
An orgasm like razorblades. The stain of one more
    hailstone melting in the shape of a removed kidney.
The wind was both vindictive and warm asphalt.
    You counted contusions as if they were lightning
strikes keeping my pulse in rhythm with the chorus
    to *Total Eclipse of the Heart*. I counted on you
to remedy the sky’s gallstone rampaging our little
    boulevard, scraping the paint off the ‘87 Pontiac
that only backfires, and never led us anywhere in peace.

Not even the most optimistic of horoscopes were remotely
    believable when we tallied the casualties the way
we cut notches in the bedpost. Nothing was trusted
    in the foreseeable future. Not the windmill, arms hoisted
and propelled so fast we could see the weeping line
    of manicured arborvitae straight through them.
Not the local displaced cowboy from Oklahoma,
    making our woman swoon. Nor our dearest parents,
wine-drunk, hunting for nursery rhymes on top
    of the radio tower to explain that the sky is nothing
to fear. If not the sky, then what the sky is flinging.
    If not what was flung, then the fear of being relieved
of our breathing duties. We believed what we were
told in close caption. Even the Russian subtitles lied.
Tragedy still breeds a paranoid state of emergency.
    No machine in the world revives a heart with whiplash,
breathes life into a person blown from the bandstand.
    No machine could ever spin a tornado backwards,
so we can understand why we don’t look each other
    in the eyes at the crime scene, the chalk outline of our
bungalow. There’s no such thing as an innocent bystander.
THE TORNADO POSITION
[In Medias Res]

The last song stuck in my head Vinegar aftertaste on the linoleum
Dusty left footprint Bass line of exploding generators
Crucifix of a telephone pole A fried lightning rod
The desire to come to terms with The loaf of bread we let stale
The dead goldfish The telemarketer on hold since last calendar year
Not buying a George Foreman grill when we had the chance
We obsessed over making an entrance Our faces shaved and taut
like horse skin Sparklers jammed in each ear Head between thighs
Forgetting to say Godspeed, fare thee well There was a sound we didn’t hear
Did someone say Herculean Twice the loss of virginity
Once in the trunk of a car Lastly when I felt around beneath the furnace
No reason to pull the fire alarm Pull ourselves from under the dumpster
When was the last time we spoke Of Parcheesi The steps in grief
The average human runs at 15 RPMs Speaks in parables that leave us guessing
The weather’s intentional amnesia Forgot to knock
Forgetting the home we cobbled two-by-fours with Styrofoam awnings
How dissolving doesn’t mean vanish Only out of eyesight
Nothing you’d recognize Sometimes clouds assemble
Sometimes historically dangerous Nuclear reactors Please seek shelter
Acres upon acres of Cabbage Patch Dolls The average cyclone knows
the logistics of MPH Did I leave the oven on The phone off the hook
The goat outdoors The windmill in the attic Wet grass asks the nose
for spare change We ask the Earth for armor In moments that require elevated panic
Panic We remember those who have touched us Touch ourselves
Achieve multiple orgasms Severe thunderstorm warnings in our bedroom
Between breath and puncture Beneath the eyelids
Behind us as we cut our bodies out like paper dolls One arm longer than the other
No head of which to speak Humidity glasses anything made of copper
Why do I change subjects midsentence Change our meteorological vernacular
Tornado Mother Nature’s cunt in the sky Charcoal sketches of cotton balls
The shelter we beg This hollow of throat And this too
THE AFTERMATH

After the symphony of freight trains
and mangled Chevrolets, the skyscrapers
trembled, vomited all their window AC
units onto the lawn. There they purred
until their thermostats stole the last breath.
We held our breath like butter at room
temperature, letting a little slip out until
it amplified into a scream. It was unequivocal
that the vomit running between my knees
was your leftovers. At the point of impact,
I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I felt your
clavicle on my hand, my ear in your mouth,
and there was a turkey. I knew how it got
there. But couldn’t explain what I was doing
with it just yet. The tornado position can be
disorienting at times. The only structure
still standing: The world’s loneliest bodega
(even its satellite dish was snatched up)
on a cul-de-sac alongside the McDonald’s
that gave away insect traps in the Happy Meals.

To the left, an alpaca farmer with his overalls
blown backwards, his wife blown completely
past 1994 and straight into hair metal, nearly
back to *Cat Scratch Fever*. The rugby stadium
resembled an implosion, like the threadbare
insides of Macy’s after the Labor Day white sale.

What we remember: The sky and horizon
dry humping, heavy petting until we forced
ourselves to look away. We sprinted like a chainsaw
through a model airplane and straight

into the sawhorse. We trucked it, really hauled
some ass, whatever that means, into the cellar

filled with canned prunes and sharks floating
in formaldehyde. Next the sky was a 747 in

the backyard, an Amtrak train burning down
the driveway at rush hour. Then quiet as an empty

church. When the tree branches were lifted,
we found parts of Wichita in the sandbox. Behind

the downed power lines, and stacks of coupons
for the local Dairy Queen that closed weeks ago—

*Buy One Get One Free at participating locations*—
we found the boy from the *Have You Seen Me* postcards.
In the late 1880s, the Corps (and later the Weather Bureau) felt that mention of the word "tornado" provoked undue fear and panic amongst the public.

Unlike the washed-up, has-been hurricane, not only am I not gifted with a name,

but I’ve been stricken from the record, disallowed of even utterance. Panic, they say,

panic at the tremolo of each caustic syllable, and now I must carry on known as that blur or what the sky seems to be doing. Why never Andrew, Hugo, or Bertha? Must I engulf the phallic symbol we call Florida, chomp at the bit when devastating New Orleans, The Keys, and the sandbag barricade, both manmade and ripe with intention to keep the weather at bay, grant no admission?

How does one shoulder the burden of being appointed nothing, if not twister, or cyclone.

How do the storm chasers greet me, if we are not on a first name basis: Hey, you. You there wearing the threadbare sheet. You there with guilt in your eye and now jaywalking in rush hour, after the crosswalks have been peeled away. I could be referred to as: (pass this word to NOAA and the god-fearing media)

Excalibur, Rasputin, or, as mother fancied, Quentin. I have done no more damage than the quake that rocked Mexico City, which still gets regarded in conversation as: the Quake that Rocked Mexico City. The headlines called attention to Mount St. Helens despite the ash that clogged all major interstates within a many mile
radius. Have I left more homeless, more families displaced than the tidal wave, or wait, was it called Tsunami,

that filled in the cracks, then buried the tourist streets of Sri Lanka with a coral reef and a beached schooner

with seasick passengers? The comparison begs to be made, and, I, the [Blank], must wander

this wasteland, a pariah among my peers.
Make anonymous appearances, not for privacy’s sake,

but for the sake of the misaligned, misinformed public that has forsaken me during my identity crisis.

When comfort only comes in a voice of Braille, how will history have me, when the remark that best suits my character must cease at the tongue, never cross the threshold of bitten lips. As if the act of not saying, rewrites the weather completely.

Don’t call the bomb: bomb, despite the ticking. Don’t call the gun: gun, ignore the bleeding. Don’t call me anything alarming.
Tornadoes struck an area stretching from Georgia to Canada late Wednesday and early today, killing more than 330 persons, the worst tornado death toll in half a century.

-The Charleston Daily Mail, 1974

Xenia, Ohio, Battered; Threat Extends
like a nine iron through a rotten watermelon. Like high tide devouring a shoreline,
dragging fragments of our coastal states
out to sleep. Only the manatees can hear
them dream of what it must be like to expand
into an archipelago. There was no way,
West Virginia, you could have known your children would be flung like Mardi Gras beads to a sky brandishing one breast
to a horny countryside. Every child left
in a drainage ditch, twisted around a silo,
waited for a gloved hand to warm them
under peroxide breath, dust them off. Indiana left as impotent as Bob Dole whipping out the little blue pill for the Superbowl halftime show in the bowels of the stadium. Atlanta was the newest capital of Tennessee, dragged up along the underground railroad. Only if the underground railroad was at an elevation of sixty thousand feet. Our northernmost border bent,
a wire brassiere, offering our half of Niagara Falls to Canada along with the Yoopers and the U.P.
Our citizens wander something like vertigo, begging eggs from the geese molted by gusts of weather. The storm dead from exhaustion. All the feathers ruffled. That gave the earth a good beating. Because-l-said-so-that’s-why.
Rhino-in-a-china-shop gusto. No more Mr. Nice Guy bravado. Xenia, OH, also dead from exhaustion. A lady can only be pummeled on both fronts for so long.
And so it’s been said. No more wicked
gusts through nameless cow towns

that Mapquest forgot to mention. Ever
the opportunist, I placed certain city limits

where I saw better hope of commerce.
A redistricting, if you will, that increased

the demographic of the now-homeless
and the inconsolable across the greater

Midwest. I will refrain from comment
concerning the incident where I lifted

a lady’s skirt for a quick peek at her naughty
undergarments. I lifted, as well, the rubble

that was once the foundation to her beloved
Christian bookstore and hookah emporium.

Herefore, I beg your endless forgiveness.
I did not consider others’ feelings when

I ravaged the Wal-Mart in the middle of their
buy-one-enema-get-one-free after-Christmas

sale. I refuse to apologize for the spike in customer
complaints and the lapse in constipation relief.

No more heartfelt goodbyes as I leave folks
graveling on their knees at Jesus’ doorstep,

searching for answers to questions, such as:
  Why, God, why send the devil from the sky

  and let us fall prey to his maniacal laughter?
  How can one overcome a Leviathan-sized

disaster with nothing to our names, nothing
  but cavities and condoms? And: What the fuck?
I will spread no more panic like chicken pox
   across my third grade class, rampant as rumors

of me peeing my pants at junior choir rehearsal
   while singing Glory, glory hallelujah.

I vow silence where once voices
   expressed displeasure in my affinity

for disorder at near, and I quote, epic proportions.
   Voices only the ghost of you could comprehend.

Heretofore, there will be no reason to see Al Roker
   scare the public on the eve of my coming.

I declare, heretofore, to leave the seasons without
   devastation, let the foliage sprinkle uninterrupted.

My heart—a combination of astrological sway
   and a Gulf stream rising like blues over Memphis—

drifts empty across the Atlantic. The breath off my lips
   lingers like gasoline vapors at the BP station.

I leave all my faith in the hands of the dry line.
   The cold filtering down from frosty Canada, my

father, dapper in his Mounties’ uniform and on
   horseback. And mother, sultry in her sombrero

and tequila-licked skin, rises to kiss my father under
   the neck. One thing, tragically, leads to another

and my second birth will leave thousands of gypsies
   displaced in fallout shelters and strip joints in search

for a sense of community. They will mourn the wake of my
   search for a lover, someone to call me darling.

Some believe in the so-called afterlife. Pray it’s not
   mine. My convictions lay all the closer to a rebirth:

no kiss from my mother or father, only a wet nurse
   in the panhandle of Texas under variable conditions.
THE TORNADO POSITION
[Where Prohibited]

I apologize to the palm reader for curling up like a hedgehog when my lifeline ended at the wrist with mention of a train accident in Omaha. I, too, was out of line at the christening of the Maiden of the Mist below cold Niagara, or at the bloody circumcision on the swank promenade at Saint John’s care center.

The Macy’s parade required no protective measures from me, but I didn’t know better. Once, again, apologies for the fetal position on the pitcher’s mound when I went streaking across Yankee Stadium. When the hostile crowd appeared, I was told: *act ferocious, gnash teeth, or play dead.* I chose the latter. I’m an expert.

Say a Peregrine falcon dive bombs a trout. Say a blizzard sweeps across the Hamptons. Say a star burns out along Orion’s loose belt. Say mother won’t answer the phone no matter how much I call. The tornado position is not justified. Reaction times are like hypochondria, when fear is an exaggerated behavior, like method acting in a Sex Ed video, or a faked orgasm at commercial so as not to miss SportsCenter.

It’s a judgment call, but the tornado position is frowned upon in the produce section of any Midwestern flea market. At Disney Land in line for a shark attack ride. In el baño during South Pacific on Broadway. Or in front of any contraceptive dispenser.

In accordance with the bravado I fail to conjure for you in your time of need, in your moments of hysteria, more ideal behaviors are preferable. I should hurl myself in front of a Chevette, take a bullet to the larynx, or try the barebones Heimlich. Rather, I prepare for a choked-out storm three states westward. The tornado position only offers short-lived relief, like a dissolving condom.
But it has been known to save a life. Except mine. My life’s never had F-5s clouded along the horizon. No bench-clearing brawls or rabid shoe bombers in my hometown. Never a loose circus tiger or whatever. But like a fireproof safety blanket, I coddle myself like still waters. Like a red sky at night. A warm body next to me. Even if it is just my own. Some place to bury my face. Even in inappropriate times, there’s the crook of the elbow. That muggy skin smell, like pumpkins rotting in the snow, sad faces on the porch in December. They, like me, didn’t know any better.
The apple blossoms hung listless in the breeze
on the unusually calm day poor mother
entered labor. An F-2, were it gauged, to be precise.
My birth, that is, not the temperate weather.

This based on the scale I conjured from dust
thrown from these hands. These bones I can’t
explain, they knew the topography of turbulence,
before we knew to call it turbulence. Before
we, with knuckles bare of rosary and cross,
knew what to make of the meshing of forces
so much bigger than us. We knew nothing then.
And we still don’t. The little we can do is measure it.

My ex-wife, parted from me by the Pacific,
nestled alone in Asia proper, I want you to know
it was nothing personal, just business. The weather
inside me was born disagreeable. The inside
weather had me by the ventricles, made a lunatic
of my once spring day demeanor. For this, I apologize.

My widow, I beseech you, please spread me,
my ashes, as a storm front cutting across the south
with the Gulf jet stream, then meander northward
at a sixty-five mile per hour pull, and stop when
you reach the shores east of Chicago. Leave me behind
as an aftermath of diminutive proportions. My remains
will retrace the paths my legs grew too weary
to pursue: the ruptured railways that ran like veins
toward the nastiest of weather. The places of salvation
trampled upon without mourning. The kind of pain
that befits a city to rebuild a few miles to the north. I leave behind nothing more than numbers that say,

in hindsight, it’s okay, it was bound to happen one of these days. What the few still standing, still alive,

already knew, despite the odds. It’s that I’m able to bestow upon you who still clamor about in a world

full of accidents and ambulances, radars and ravaging elements, a small voice to enlighten, remind the world

that what we were up against brought a loaded gun to the knife fight, a steel fist to peace treaties.

Each fatality a tally in the book I’ve been writing since the heavens opened up a birth canal capable

of unleashing a child ripe with a horrific disorder. Obsession, one might come to dub it. Perversion,

it seems, would also do the trick, all withstanding.

I was hailed as the man with weathervanes sprouting from each of my fingertips. The man Mother Nature couldn’t account for with his fervor swirling

windmills in his eyes, who would swallow the humble pill, formerly known as Xenia, to relive the tragic events

with a fancy camcorder. Capture the precise moment when the needle hit, took hold of the heart. Watch it again.

My gift to a world harboring fear of the unknown was not relief, but the knowledge of our barometer, how it always drops.
HOW TO ASSUME THE TORNADO POSITION

(3)

When the gravitational pull of some near-Earth is equivalent to the hydro pressure spewing from the throat of Niagara, when the Aura Borealis appears in the same sky twice during one free screening, when the ghost of Lincoln struts along the balcony of the Ford Theatre and proclaims: do\textit{es no one care about the self-destructive behaviors of the water buffalo}, when the Virgin Mary and Elvis Presley are sighted in the same English muffin doing the Samba, when Old Faithful erupts at the exact moment the Hoover Dam’s nerves seize up, when two people, who haven’t spoken in years, offer joint commentary on the addictive behaviors of hummingbirds, when cannibalism is no longer a hot button issue in parts of Ohio, when I no longer possess an illogical fear of ceiling fans, when the sky is not crimson each morning, the naturally occurring phenomenon will be breath, sticky and damp in your lungs, like your first word: \textit{No}.

(see also: when your ghost struts along the front porch of your childhood home, opens its mouth, and Lincoln logs fall out).
DOROTHY, IF WE ONLY KNEW HER

There are things a girl can’t be expected to make sense of:
digital enhancement cleaning

a stray pimple. A human body
dissolving like Alka-Seltzer,
which makes her heart burn,

a dead satellite over Kansas,
the gay icon she becomes,
due, in part, to a dream twister,

a flock of winged-primates,
and stunning, rubyred slippers
that glisten, always in infamy.

Or who she might have crushed
with her home’s failed orbit.
There’s no place like home.

Say it again, softer, little girl.
There’s no place like home.
Once more, into the camera.

There’s no place like her place
on a Hollywood star. Her place
in Auntie Em’s fragile bosom,

and her little dog, too. And, too,
Toto, you will have your name
stamped in cement on the avenue

of the stars for tourists to trace—
one day, a girl hopes, anyway.
A girl can’t always be expected

to have an intimate knowledge
of the heart’s motor functions,
or the electrical impulses
of a straw brain. But she holds
the courage to carry onward
when a man hangs himself

in the shadow of a plywood
tree. Oz, the climate was humid,
the lollypop kids—offensive,

and the munchkins—degraded.
The horse of a different color,
out of spite, is mauve today.
THE TORNADO’S OBITUARY

We knew so little it came to be habit.  
The macabre, the morose, a lipstick smear.  

The velvet parkway made hard by collapsed years,  
and endless drizzle. A decade of crumbled churches  
grows deeper. The dumpsters grow rubble like daffodils  
for sleepless hours, and are hungry like the feral cats,  
and accountable for the funeral of the bombardier.  
And years ago, before electricity kissed bulbs,  
the prophet shouted, *God’s revenge is upon us.*  
But this. This never concerned us, nor the orthodoxy.  

We are here to celebrate the life that passed by.  
We’ve come to trample a piñata in thy name.  

You will not be missed with a 21-gun salute.  
Were it possible, a bloodletting offers closure.  

A bloodletting, like fireworks downwind.  
You will not be mourned with a garland of rose.  

As if, you, the winner of the Kentucky Derby.  
Nor a dirge of soldiers carrying a closed casket.  

Nor the oft read 23rd psalm. Oft misquoted:  
*As I walk through the first valley desecrated.*  

*The Valley of Death carved by windburst.*  
*Nature’s vigilante justice reeked on innocents.*  

*I will not fear evil, with the exception of one.*  
*The rod and staff offer few fleeting comforts.*  

*They cannot shelter us of an airborne tour bus.*  
*Hear the sound. A hammer is swift to collapse.*  

And so on and so on. We all know the rest.  
There will be no mourners sliding veils shut.
No cremation. Not that we are capable of one. How can we burn what only spreads the embers?

You will be survived by a young widow cursing. A Navy Seal wailing. A trophy wife gone whoring.

A stadium full of the homeless lost to faith healing. In your years, you’ve made heroes of stairwells.

Made the horizon the nearest enemy of our trepidation. We’ll remember you by how quickly you vanished.

A constellation of candles will flicker coin-eclipsed eyes. One for each cross you refused, outright, to bear.
SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

February, I am flooded with sorrow. It pains me to know we will not rendezvous until next year. Next year I’ve sworn you off, a rash I’ve picked for the time it takes the sun to orbit this inclement rock. If only we were better acquainted and made love for no other reason than to make love. If only you weren’t a foreign entity to my body, the splinter to be removed with pliers, the tick to be burnt with the sharp end of a fine cigar, a peppermint lodged tight in my throat. February, I will fill you with heated helium to make your body a dirigible and shoot you down as the threat you are not, but would kill to be. If only my corpse, though still alive, had climate control settings: a thermostat to cool me off when you fire me up, storm windows to keep you outdoors and lonely. It doesn’t. I carry on. Next year, the lake effect is preempted by some little disorder that leaves me vulnerable to your tactless pickup lines, and affinity for role playing, though this is as unpredictable as you. My meticulous body incessantly plots against me. The peppermint melts, undoing itself all together.
ELEGY

If drunk, we would not have noticed, I believe.

Too weary for high adrenaline. Too swollen for round two.

What skipped town like an iron kidney stone. Knuckles white

and the gauntlet since seized up and the mechanics still.

You made what you could of dusk. Its dissected ribs.

If you could do it again, maybe change the angles, raise your elbows.

The blindside nature of a pitch-black morning.

If you change the angles, the mourners will take to wine.

A mourning process of bulldozers, smokeless pyres.

How many piles of picture frames and plaid curtains?

Of electric fences, mink gloves, and grandpa’s cowboy boots?

The urn made of a propane tank has calcified shut.

Radio psychics debate the chance of some recurrence.

The not knowing is a panic notorious as a sudden cataract.

The always hurried rescue efforts continue anyway,

disrupted only by the mandated rebuilding attempts.

The raising of a barn. Of the dead. Of oneself regardless.

The ground holds the sun in a fist, like clumps of human hair.

What was buried grows back despite your fragile efforts.
We call it *Outbreak*. Weather permitting, we call it
*Angel Breath*. Call it: *Mother Nature’s Backwash*.

Try: *the naturally occurring menopause from above.*
Or, *the mother of all this not-so mysterious wreckage,*

*the Eighth Wonder of,* what we knew as, *the Illogical World,*
*The Greatest Blow on Earth.* Mothers, sorry

for the loss of your daughters on the way to the cinema

to lose their virginity: Natchez, MS; St. Louis, Purvis MO,

where we learned to waltz with our shoes tied together,

threw handfuls of goose down feathers stuffed

in tattered throw pillows out our storm-sealed windows.

A feeble attempt to gauge the weather’s misdirection.

How it passes us by. The following areas will be under

anesthesia and a tornado warning until 7:06 a.m,

or until Jesus makes an appearance on Letterman,

but when will the milk be delivered? New Richmond,

Ellington to Princeton, Gainesville, where my child

ran rampant with police tape and breath that smelled

of sidewalk salt. Woodward, Waco, Flint,

unfamiliar with each other, share a fondness for infomercials

wherein the products cause cancer. Vacate the bomb shelter,

the VW hall, the crawl spaces we never acknowledge

or speak of in public unless the tequila gets the better of us:
Udall, Wichita Falls, Barnaveld, where the last carnival

on earth left the crowd disappointed, the dancing bears

medicated, the town on hiatus. Andover, Jarrell, Little Rock

until 8:15 or 7:00 central. Bridgeville, Haysville,

Wichita for the second time this month, all until the second
coming, the televised resurrection, when the big hand
and little hand become one and the time bomb goes off.

A moment of silence, please. We have nothing else to offer. Conditions: constant as acid reflux. The cloud cover: erratic.

The Doppler: stable, but requires medical attention.
The solution? Medvac with portable penicillin, a crash team,
or a mild mannered exorcism. The following areas under
which warnings? Tornado paranoia? Are advised to seek shelter

in the arms of their personal savior, on the lips of an ex-lover,
in back alleys where graffiti prophesizes: we are on the eve

_of disaster, apocalypse, Armageddon, the time nears when
all the roustabouts demand medical benefits, higher wages,
a pension, and a storm shelter wherein they can drag the tattered
bodies of their loved ones. Security no hourly motel can tender.

How can we stand at all when all this state does is keep shifting
with the tectonic plates we can’t keep in order? Hoisington, KS;

La Plata, MD; Van Wert, OH have all been relocated
to the lesser known, but economically thriving

highlands of South Dakota, just a short car trip
from the mugs of Mount Rushmore. The heart of the city

has stopped beating, we are in need of adrenaline,
a shot to the aorta, the commerce is failing,

the mayor indicted. Under a warning:
the following areas, slipped like letters never sent to a hero,

Pierce City, Jackson, all of Nebraska,
this is the toughest part of my job but somebody

has to do it: _M’am we believe we’ve recovered
that which remains of your lover, do you recognize

tthis tattoo of a unicorn with a sledgehammer
  in place of the horn? Tornado alley is no place
to raise a family, or raise Hell. Warning: Marion County, Georgetown, Cuyahoga, Talladega County, send up smoke signals like a mushroom cloud to call our immediate attention. Cross cultures the urgency of the message is spreading:

Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada proper, behold the love child of Force of Nature and how did things get so out of order? Bulahdelah, Toronto, New South Wales, Australia be prepared for the atmosphere to dirty those clean streets,

blow the sedate Kuala away. Bangladesh 1,300 sacrificed sheep did little for the 1,300 drop in population back in ’89.

Try to avoid a decrease in voter turnout and bury, to the neck, your heads in the sand. What I meant was: there is nothing that can be done for the water damage, the fissure in the ceiling. What I meant, actually: Please reconcile the place of your birth and the place you thought you were before the last atmospheric disturbance. I retract that last statement.

What I meant to say was: the Monarch butterflies’ seasonal migration was altered and flooded the streets of Mallorca with gold wings.

No. The transistor radio was transplanted in the Botanical Gardens. No wonder there is no reception on 100.7 FM. The truth is. What needs to be done: call in the bloodhounds to recover the abandoned bodies. Even those still managing, a breath, a faint whisper of words to their spiritual advisor, a lasting moan. Assume the tornado position, if for no other reason, than to feel the aftertaste of a heartbeat.