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Postcards from Tornado Alley

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Postcards from Tornado Alley

Weather Patterns

Locked in my parents' closet when I was seven. We could hear the twister from a mile off. I was chewing gum and blowing bubbles. My brother smacked me and said, "I don't want that to be the last thing I hear."

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The birds yelled from the eyeball sockets of trees. The clouds cracked open—a canvas by Monet hanging in the air. On the ground people tiptoed over rooftop shingles and upturned nails. Kids made a fort beneath an overturned truck. Power lines let down their hair. The windows busied at picking themselves up off the lawn. Adults spoke to their scalped homes to take stock of what needed doctoring.

A baby is found buried in the mud, ten miles from the home it was plucked from. It is completely untouched, like the tornado rocked it to sleep and set it in its dirt crib.

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Last May, a storm went through South Carolina that was pleasant and soft. I opened the window to let its song soothe me to sleep. Seven hours before, in Oklahoma, a wall of debris fenced in my neighborhood. A headline read, "PEOPLE ARE WALKING AROUND LIKE ZOMBIES." My friends' homes were brushed aside. Twenty kids killed inside an elementary school. My sister's grade school swept over. There is a video on YouTube of a teacher recording the strike on her cellphone, and in the background my sister is shouting, "I hate this."

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Kids are tucked in and lulled to sleep with stories of squall lines and dips in barometric pressure. On Saturdays we know exactly when to go in for lunch. The siren alert system is tested at noon, and all through the state the air is saturated with a ghostly aria.

Surprised by Joy

Two teens slurp their Ices by the road in the rain. A truck hydroplanes, ballet-



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spins off the road, scoops dirt into the air and scatters it like dandelion seeds. The teens are a few feet away. They know the driver and flip him off before walking back to class. So above it all. Their straws make throaty growls in the dregs of their cups.

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A taste of steel in stomach. The vodka steeped in the metal flask under the bed, all of it on an empty stomach. Standing by the window and fingering the blinds, pictures of slamming the car door on your arm. The kiss of electricity when you press a metal prong into an outlet. The current of butterflies beating beneath the skin of your arm into your shoulder. Dinner is ready! You sit with them, and when they leave the room, you are surprised how easy it is to run the knife over and over and over your arm. How good it feels to be slapped when you're caught.

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Traveling through time—more like never getting off this freaking highway. Float

for six hours, sing for sixteen more until, at three in the morning, the horizon resembles hammered steel. Slip into the furnace of the city at dawn. Wait out the sunrise at an IHOP, stacking coffee creamers until it is a decent time to wake your family and have breakfast with them. The first time in a year. At the door, Father tells you Mother has been in the hospital the last two weeks.

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The Tulsa Race Riots happened from May 31st through June 1st in 1921. Six thousand African Americans were arrested, the rest corralled into holding pens. Thirty-five blocks of buildings charred to the ground by fire. It is the first and only time U.S. aircraft bombed a U.S. city. Officially, thirty-nine black people died, but three hundred were estimated missing.

None of this is taught in my Oklahoma history class. The textbook spares a paragraph, a cute anecdote about the only remaining building from the riots, and the bullet holes still notched into the walls.