

DONALD PLATT

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*Tornadoesque*

“Tornadoesque,”  
shouts our younger daughter, Lucy, glancing up at the sky,  
which has gone  
patchy black and gray with thunderheads, at the trees lashing  
their branches back  
and forth. The temperature has fallen 20 degrees. “But no  
tornado siren  
yet!” The leaves whip about and toss, cut-out paper  
dolls holding hands,  
dancing madly, ripped apart. As if on cue  
the wail starts  
low and steadily crescendos to a high-pitched shriek.  
Within that monotone  
I hear the panic of our other daughter, Eleanor,  
unable to stop  
talking. She’d begin a sentence in English, switch  
to French, and then  
finish in Spanish. I couldn’t keep up. The siren is a corkscrew  
auger boring  
into my eardrums. I wanted her to shut up,  
to stop speaking

in tongues. "I have memories all over my body," Eleanor  
confided. She was wearing  
only a thin white blanket wrapped around her. Her long

chestnut hair  
lay tangled on her shoulders and down her back.  
"Listen, Daddy,"

she said. "Just listen, and you *will* understand." And so I kept  
listening.

"In the last three days I've discovered the secret

of living.  
All my life I've been breathing through my mouth.  
I've been doing it

all wrong." We were sitting on her futon in the loft  
over her apartment's  
kitchen. A solid slab of sunlight streamed through

the horizontal slit  
of her screened window. "One must breathe through one's nostrils. Now  
I am breathing

through my nose for the first time in my life. Breathe with me, Daddy.  
Breathe."

Slow inhale. Hold. Exhale. It wasn't really so crazy—

she was using her breathing  
as a focal point to become calm and stop the speeding. Zen monks  
devote their whole lives

to breathing. Eleanor, be my guru. Teach me to breathe  
this new air.  
Wind blows the rain almost horizontal. In ten seconds Lucy and I  
are soaked to the skin,  
cold deluge. Hail, no bigger than BB pellets, pelts us. We don't worry  
about keeping dry  
anymore. Eleanor was afraid to leave her apartment,  
didn't want to go  
to the hospital. "I need to be alone, so I can discover  
who I am  
by breathing." Sarah, her friend visiting from Guadalajara, made her  
tomato soup  
into which Eleanor crumbled bread and blue cheese. "Don't push me,  
Daddy. I've got  
to eat." She moved her chair over to the full-length mirror  
propped against the wall,  
leaned forward, stared intently into its warped surface. "If I can see  
myself, I won't  
vanish. I've got to watch myself chew." For the next two hours  
she sipped half teaspoon  
by half teaspoon eight ounces of Campbell's soup, an orange ring  
around her mouth.  
She'd become the toddler I remembered, cheeks smeared with her first  
Chef Boyardee

Mini Os, half of which wound up on the floor. The tornado  
siren keeps whining—  
a dentist's drill grinding away the tooth until

it hits  
my root canal's nerve. Finally, Eleanor got dressed and packed  
a bag for the hospital.

In it she put her white blanket and a hand mirror. She made it  
from her fifth-floor  
walk-up to the fourth floor's landing, then sat down on the grungy gray

scuffed linoleum tiles  
in full lotus position. She told me and a neighbor, who had come out  
to see what was happening,

"Let's all sit on the floor in a circle and practice our breathing!"  
The EMTs had to come  
and carry her down to the ambulance in a special canvas chair

like Cleopatra  
on her litter borne on the shoulders of her strongest slaves. We walk  
head-down into

the soft wall of wind. When the siren stops, I tell Lucy that I've been  
thinking of Eleanor  
again. "I know," she replies. "You have that zombie look." The hail turns

back to rain.  
It pricks our faces. "When we were kids," Lucy continues, "Eleanor  
would get excited

and 'march.' She would take the dog on a walk and goose-step around  
the neighborhood for blocks.

Sometimes she made me go with her. It really freaked

me out. I couldn't  
tell anyone." It rains so hard the far cars and houses vanish.

"Walking is swimming

freestyle," Lucy calls out, then pirouettes so that her long blonde hair  
and soaked dress

fling rain upon rain. Small tornado, dog shaking its wet fur,

she whirls. "Tornadoesque,"  
she laughs, pleased at having found the right word for the weather  
that possesses us.