

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 97 *CutBank* 97

Article 18

Fall 2022

Surge

Sienna Zeilinger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Zeilinger, Sienna (2022) "Surge," *CutBank*: Vol. 1: Iss. 97, Article 18.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss97/18>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

SIENNA ZEILINGER

SURGE

— *Montana Prize in Creative Nonfiction Winner* —

I'M GROWING UP in a place that anticipates disaster far more often than it strikes. I've felt the electricity in the air preceding a tornado, seen the sky go sick, but never been caught directly in its path, never seen the cloud cover corkscrew up on itself. In the Cleveland area, tornadoes touch down nearby enough that it's important to learn how to respond to them, but far away enough that our preparation borders on performance. Twice a year, during drills in school, we observe the ritual acknowledgment of their possibility. We process in a line down the stairs into the bowels of the school, away from any windows, past the tomb of dusty extra desks, past the boiler room. In tenth grade my lab partner leads me down here after Chemistry and comes out to me in this same hallway, and I feel at once honored and uneasy; we aren't all that close, and I'm afraid of whatever kinship she thinks she's recognized.

During the drills, our teachers call out directions over our bent heads, reminding us of the correct way to pose. Face the hallway walls. Kneel. Fold over yourself. Cover your head with your hands to protect against imagined chunks of earth raining down from the sky.

Tornadoes are measured on the Enhanced F-scale, a 2007 improvement on the F-scale used for decades. The EF-scale incorporates the estimated velocity of a three-second gust at the point of damage together with a judgment of the damage done, on a scale of one to eight, to any of twenty-eight absurdly specific indicators. Much of this is measured in retrospect. Small branches broken off a birch—on the “#27, Hardwood Tree” indicator,

a mere first Degree of Damage—would suggest winds of 60 mph. Loss of rooftop HVAC on the “#13, Automobile Showroom” indicator would correspond to a fourth Degree of Damage and 101 mph gusts. Because it’s so difficult to access the point of impact while the damage is occurring, and because gusts of wildly different strengths can cause similar looking destruction, the wind engineers at the National Weather Service acknowledge that this system of assessing tornado strength is “(at best) an exercise in educated guessing.” The whole cataloguing mechanism is built on approximation. The best anyone can do is almost.



HAVE YOU EVER STOOD in a cornfield? One plant bursting through its husk is inaudible to humans, but in a large field, when it’s quiet, you can hear them in rapid succession, and the effect is a grand, chastising *hush*. Cleveland is a “real city,” as I insist to my friends. It has an airport, an art museum, skyscrapers. But Cleveland is an urban island. It’s bookended by Lake Erie to the north, and everywhere else, country. As a teenager ready to be anywhere else, I have a recurring nightmare of running as far as I can and still finding myself in a *field*.

For me, that anxiety dissipates with the introduction of foul lines and a backstop. Softball is important to me, bodily and spiritually. For weeks, when I’m nine, I become convinced that if I can somehow become part of the ground I’m covering, I’ll be a better shortstop, able to move with the earth instead of against it. Before games I pinch some infield dirt between my fingers and sprinkle it on my tongue. I’m fully absorbed. I love everything about the game: the deception of steal signs, the thrum in your blood on a 3-2 count, the feeling of knowing whether you’ve lifted your back elbow up high enough at bat by whether the breeze ripples through your shirt. In high school, I find a home at catcher. The demands of the position make intuitive sense to me: leading from relative invisibility, finding the right words to buoy your pitcher in a tough inning, guarding something

important. Your home is everyone's home. Thick, white lines cascade away from your body and carve fair from foul. And you, crouching down small in a posture not unlike reverence, with your back to the backstop and your face open to everything else.

Maybe the lesson wouldn't be imparting so bodily if I weren't learning it from two teachers at once. Playing catcher and growing up in the Rust Belt Midwest are teaching me how to live and play in confined space. I need to be cradled on one side by reliability, predictability—a chain-link fence at my back, a Great Lake always north—in order to take risks. Otherwise, I'm a little edgy, hackles up, like writing with your back to the café door. At tournaments we get demolished by teams from Iowa or southern Illinois. We joke that those girls hit so hard because they've grown up aiming for the barn the next town over. Our imaginations are limited, but our admiration is true. Thinking of their lives in the prairie states makes me dizzy. No wonder those girls root themselves so deep into a game. How else would they know who they are, or where they're safe, or where they're free?



NOBODY HAS YET solved the mystery of exactly what's happening at the eye of a storm, but that's not for a lack of trying. In 1969, the Alberta Hail Project sponsored chases in which sampling vehicles were driven into hailstorms, so researchers could study the storms' physics and design suppression strategies. But storm chasing existed before institutional backing. The first storm chaser, David Hoadley, founder of *Storm Track* magazine, began trailing tornadoes near his hometown in North Dakota when he was fresh out of high school in 1956. One of the reasons he chases is to pursue "an experience of something infinite," as he wrote in a 1982 issue of *Storm Track*. "When a vertical 50,000-foot wall of clouds glides silently away to the east... and goes golden in a setting sun against a deep, rich azure sky," he writes, "one can only pause and look and wonder."

Dr. Chuck Doswell, one of the first scientific storm chasers, was a

forecaster on the National Weather Service's VORTEX projects in the '90s. He is one of today's most vocal chasers, and equally reverent. He writes of what he calls the "loss of self" that occurs during chases, when the storm is "so overwhelming in its majesty and power, you can become completely absorbed in the event. The 'self' has disappeared, in a flood of astonishment."

But Doswell is also a rational man. He recognizes that news stations interview him not out of a desire for him to share his careful research, but in hopes that he'll "spit out a colorful turn of phrase" in his signature white cowboy hat. He's an outspoken atheist; on his blog he has a thirteen-point takedown of the scientific validity of the Noah's Ark story ("What about microorganisms? How would they be gathered and maintained?"). And he recognizes that what is beautiful to him is the same force that may bring others the most devastating, frightening moments of their lives. In his keynote speech at ChaserCon 2014, Doswell denounced thrill-seeking "yahoos" who chase with no respect for the towns in the storm's path. Those who court danger for a photo, driving recklessly, with none of the equipment to report what they see, endanger both the local and the chaser communities, not to mention themselves. A tornado's beauty, Doswell insists, comes from *not* reaching it, from beholding it from afar. Once he knows he's on the storm's path, he says, that's "virtually always a signal to me to move."



THE SUMMER I turn fifteen, my body seems to forget its arrangement with gravity: here I thought I had puberty in the bag, and now I'm constantly tripping over myself. I don't quite hate my body. It's just that it's a stranger to me. My body decides to reintroduce itself by knocking into doorways and the corners of tables.

It's also, at least a little bit, not my own fault. One day, I'm subbing at shortstop. The other team's batter hits a one-hopper to right and tries to turn a perfectly respectable single into a double. I'm at the age where

I'm toggling rapidly between brimming self-assurance and wishing I were a ghost, so I can't stand any displays of hubris. I call for the throw and set up to guard second base like it's home, planting my body like a tree instead of swinging like a door, daring the runner to knock over all 110 pounds of me. She does, and she's out—of course she's out—but my hand is suddenly thick and wrong inside my glove. I pull it free, and my thumb droops from my wrist. I stare at this limp thing and for the first time in months I'm entirely sure that I'm synonymous with the rest of my body—because this? This is simply a thing I own, no longer me but *mine*. It doesn't even hurt.

I have surgery, have my birthday. Pins in my hand, candles on the cake. The next week I'm setting a ball on a tee for a younger player, trying to make myself useful. A shadow quickens over my right eye, and the next thing I know I'm waking up from the deepest nap of my life. Later I overhear the younger player bragging about how her swing was so strong it almost cracked my skull. I feel bad for her; I'm at least permitted to be in pain, while she has to mask the waver in her voice with self-importance. She is too shattered to make eye contact with me while my stitches are in. Meanwhile, people are talking to me about my body all the time. Everyone keeps joking about my thick head. I joke back about my hulk hand. I decide that yes, actually, I do hate my body. When I get my cast off, I discover the scar on my hand is the exact same length as the one on my hairline. A summer marked by what's been split open.

After I'm cleared to rejoin the team for fall ball, my parents and coach collectively forbid me from playing catcher. I'm dispatched to center field, catcher's inverse in every way. I'm used to thinking of my legs as coils, ready to spring up when it's time to throw down a runner at second, but otherwise planted. Now I bob on my toes between faraway pitches, keeping my legs loose enough to take wing at the ping of the bat. My position is no longer defined by how immovably I can guard the same pentagon. Now, it's expansive: how much territory do you want to claim for yourself?

And how much do I want? All of it. Out here there's room for abandon. Sprawl, but with direction. Flying, not floating. I dive for a swooping line

drive and come up with a mouthful of grass. It's a little like remembering you're an animal. It's a little like sex. It's the first time my body and I are asked to be as much as we can be and, no surprise, the first time I catch myself loving it.

My coach tells me the secret to playing outfield is to learn to read the ball off the bat, decide the exact spot where it'll land, then turn and make a break for that mark—everyone's faster when they can run without looking back. This means, unless the ball is hit precisely where you're standing, you're sprinting toward a guess. I'm not very good at guessing correctly, hence the last-minute leaping and diving. But I'm decent enough to stay there, and I stay long enough to realize I love it. There's no steadfast boundary delineating center field: you decide together with your left- and right-fielder where your respective territories start and end, and that negotiation changes batter to batter, sometimes pitch to pitch, so that one day at golden hour you look around and everywhere that's green looks like home. From out here, you see home plate upside-down, or maybe right-side-up? A tiny house, all along. You can't remember how that ever felt like enough.



OVER HALF OF Ohio is farmland. From the air, the state is tattooed with yellow-green grids, proof of productivity. The earth under our cleats is fed by lake and glacier, cushioned by enough clay to retain water and enough sand to drain it. My teammates and I are growing up on land that's so fertile, people have moved across the world for the dream of farming it.

The blue-collar suburb where we play has enough funds to hire a groundskeeper twice a season. For the first game, everything is in order. Crisp, correct. Dirt paved with the right dirt. The perfect infield, by the way, is twenty percent more sand and thirty percent less silt than northeast Ohio's soil. By July, I'm kicking the petals off a daisy in deep right that has charmed its way sunward. Weeds break through the basepaths and dangle flamboyant, like wrists. Then one day I show up to practice and the stalks

have been clipped, and everything is back to glistening, clean.



IF THERE'S ONE thing Chuck Doswell despises as much as irresponsible storm chasers, it's what he calls "disaster porn." "It seems the public has an insatiable appetite for disasters," he laments. "Crock-umentary" producers are constantly inventing terms for unprecedented events—*super-tornado*, *hyper-canes*—but by focusing our attention on the extraordinary, we neglect to take seriously the dangerous usual.

"Isn't a plain old devastating F5 tornado dramatic enough?" he asks. "Why does an event need to be 'off the charts' to be considered worth mentioning in a documentary?"



WHEN I LIVE in Providence I trick myself into believing I've found balance. I write about how I've reconciled with my concussion's aftereffects. I write about blue herons, snowy owls, and in doing so I learn that I'm patient enough to wait around and watch for blue herons and snowy owls. I can twirl from porch to porch, drinking Gansetts with my friends into the early hours, alight on a boy's cheap comforter, and wake up in the still dark to pull on jeans and a hoodie and catch dawn at the bay. I can have it all.

But also? I'm doing quite a bit of lying about what my version of "it all" looks like. Everything that would leave a mark is swept away by the next weekend. There's no room for shame to pick up and range over the land, but there's not quite room for honesty to breathe, either, in all its fullness. And so for the first time I write about the moment with L at that party in high school, but I put it in an essay about roller derby and girl-on-girl violence. I write it as a moment of threat, of violation, and it was. I'm praised for being vulnerable, for *going there*. As if by whisking the reader into that basement, close enough for them to smell danger, I have absolved myself of

the responsibility of holding the moment's riskier parts in my hands.

What I do not write or say: at seventeen, when I feel myself float away from under L's hands and mouth, before I crash land back to my body and throw her off me, I drift to hover somewhere above the couch, above us. And from that remove I can see that inside this moment there is a room, and inside the room lives any breath of this that I might ever want. And then I remember where we live and all that can tear apart in a breath, and I watch myself close the door.

•••

IN PROVIDENCE, I confuse power for control; I confuse myself with the storm. I thought the newness would shake something loose in me, but I'm still feeling pent up, explosive. In Cleveland, I could never shake the feeling that if I stood with Lake Erie at my back and howled, there would be nothing stopping the tiniest particle of that sound from rolling its way to Iowa or Kansas. And now, here, Rhode Island is one tiny, fragile area code. I feel like I could erode it all by myself. Who doesn't know that anxiety, of an offhand remark or a joke laced with truth careening away from your grasp, gathering steam and grime, turning destructive? The fear of any complicated emotion barreling into someone else keeps me straitjacketed. But it's a long time to twist into yourself. I want swell and recession, dissipation, resolution. I want the ocean.

•••

THE WAVES AT Narragansett Town Beach are rolling in at 3-4 feet—none of that blood-red seaweed, spit up in stillness onto the sand. The water surging and then dissolving, a bothness, depths beckoning. I go in up to my waist, up to my neck. And then, when a wave arrives, I jump to welcome it, catch its crest, twist back toward the beach. The wave flares, and I arch my back to see over its peak. We are soaring toward the shore, the salt and the scup and

I, and I'm home, and then the wave breaks and slams me into a somersault. Water where the sky belongs. My chin scrapes shell, and I wash up on the sand like ragged driftwood, bleeding, throat raw with brine, water pooling in one ear, a spray of seaweed caught in my swimsuit top.

I kneel, coughing ferociously, and then a trembling laugh sputters out: one wave, and I'm thirty yards north of my pile of stuff on the beach. There's a freedom in allowing yourself to be moved. There's a joy in realizing you already are. And relief, too, that this is not a place you have to leave all at once. That in fact, no place is. You can expand and recede at will. Come out splashing, go back in. The safety and the thrill all tangled together, ready when you are.