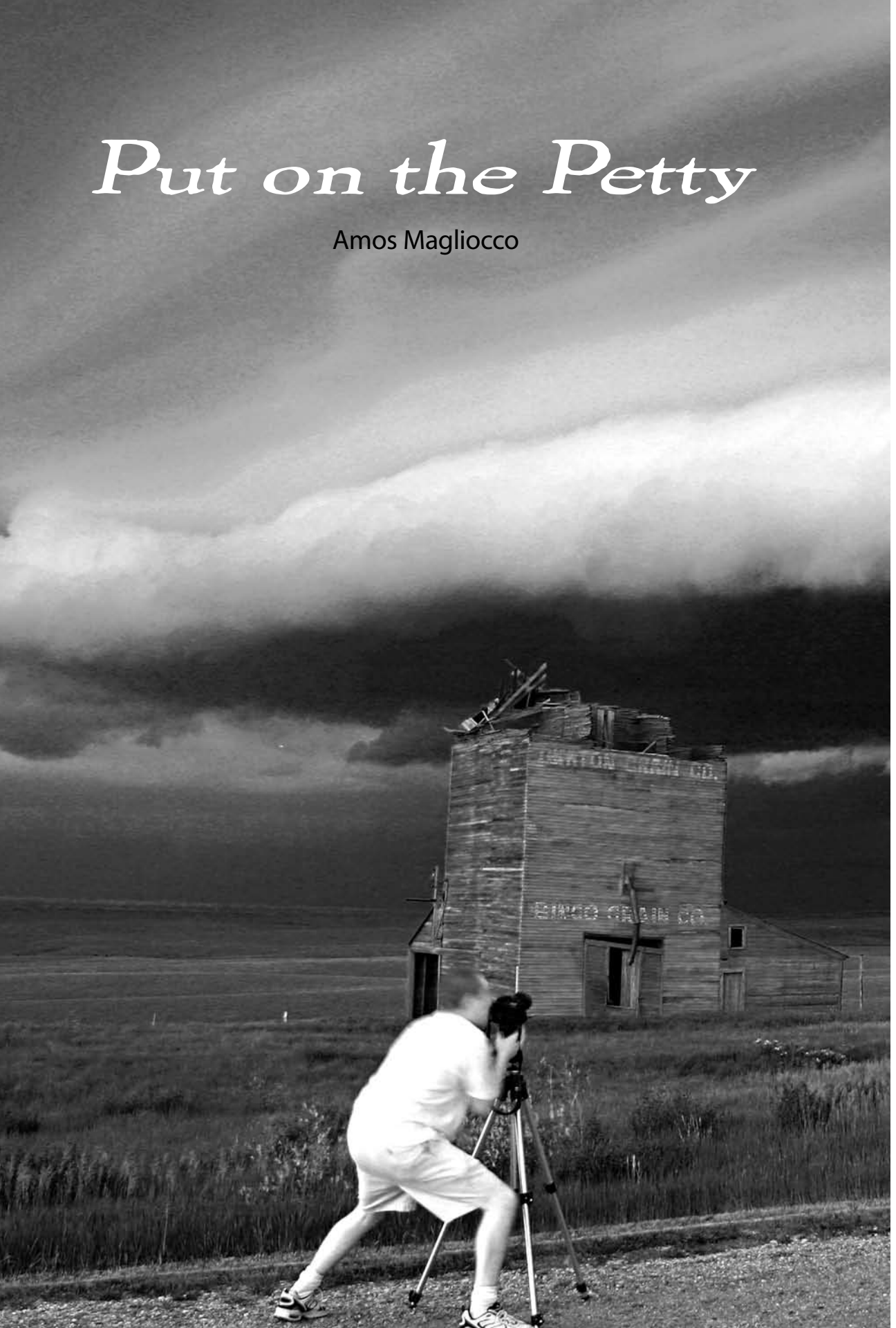




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Put on the Petty

Amos Magliocco



(essay)

After Eric and I survived an F2 tornado in Tulia, Texas, I thought we'd live forever. We rode out the tornado in a high-profile SUV—precisely the wrong kind of shelter—and after we'd crashed into a brick wall and ducked under a one-hundred-twenty-knot jet that screamed through the blown-

Photograph © Amos Magliocco

out windows, it seemed as if the Angel of Death had roared, in a breath choked with debris, and then fled, leaving us alone and lucky. We were unscathed, but for a scratch on Eric's ankle and a cut on the back of my neck—or at least that was how it seemed for days and even weeks after the event. We were okay. We'd made it. Our chief complaint was embarrassment: two experienced storm chasers with almost two hundred tornado documentations between them weren't supposed to wind up inside one. But the vortex had formed in an unexpected portion of the storm and reached full strength almost instantly. After we climbed from Eric's totaled Nissan Xterra and studied the devastated town around us, he turned to me. "Well," he said, thinking of the next chase, "I guess we'll take your car on Monday."

I laid my camera on the ground and cleared a pile of Abilene brick away from the passenger door, the sensation of good fortune already forming in my chest. Not a broken bone or even a gash that would require a stitch. A miracle.

Four months later, I reminded Eric of this good fortune in the hallway of an Arlington, Texas, psychiatric hospital. My friend and chase partner, who always wore white T-shirts and khaki shorts, was leaning against the wall in blue hospital scrubs and a bright red wristband that marked him as "actively suicidal." Even his regular shoes were a potential threat, and so he wore laceless plastic ones, more like slippers. He was losing weight, looking younger every day, as if he were retreating into the safety of boyhood.

I said, "We can get through this"—one of the many rehearsed lines I always used when I visited Eric, though my top priority was to listen and make "normal" conversation. From then until my next visit or phone call I would compose more such lines, desperate to talk him out of a chronic mental illness I'd learned about just days before his hospitalization, before what he would describe in his journal as an "adamant" desire to kill himself "in a sudden and violent way."

On my visits we talked about the weather—of course—and a coffee-table book he was publishing with another storm photographer. Eric's storm images are among the most widely reproduced in the world. Days before his admission, I'd helped him copyedit the captions of his pictures for the book. When I reminded him of our unlikely survival back in Tulia, a light appeared in his eyes. His odds were better this time around, in a hospital, receiving treatment. I thought this logic would appeal to a meteorologist with a minor in mathematics. But after visiting hours ended and the hallway marked "Extreme Elopement Risk" emptied of friends and family, Eric's rational mind battled compulsions that I would never dispel with one-liners, however smoothly delivered. It started late at night, when the urge to cut himself, for "relief," rose like a blue-gray

thunderhead on the empty prairie. One night he asked a nurse if they could draw blood. She tried to humor him, undoubtedly noting the bizarre request in his chart. The doctors would take vitals in the morning, she promised, and a few vials of blood in the process. He pondered injuring himself with the pencil he used for his journal but didn't want to lose his writing privileges.

Bob Fritch and Rachael Sigler, meteorologists and friends of Eric's from college, were outside Tulia when the tornado hit. They knew Eric and I were close to the storm, and they saw the tornado descend and rip northward along the industrial park on the town's western edge. "I wonder where they are," Bob said and gripped his steering wheel. They called on the two-way radio, but by then Eric and I were roaming the littered streets, snapping pictures and high-stepping over power lines. Emergency sirens punctuated a chorus of bleating car alarms. A sheriff's cruiser raced toward us and struck a power line that snapped with a booming twang like a giant banjo string. The sheriff slowed beside us and started to roll down his window. I waved him on. We were fine, I yelled. The last thing we wanted was to distract emergency services. Eric remembered Bob and Rachael and called them on his cell to say that yes, we'd been struck, but we were okay.

"You guys keep chasing," I heard Eric say. "We'll go to somebody's house and find a ride tomorrow."

It was a magnanimous gesture, a convention of chaser courtesy. Keep going. Don't miss the next tornado. But this was not a typical situation: we'd taken a direct hit. Eric's car was mangled; the upper corner of a building, bricks still mortared together, had landed on the hood and now protruded through the windshield. A whole semi truck leaned on the front passenger bumper, threatening to topple. The town smelled of shredded vegetation and motor oil. I sure as hell didn't want Bob and Rachael to keep going, didn't mind a bit if they missed the next tornado, especially with darkness and more storms headed our way.

A thin line of blood grew on Eric's ankle. He said he might have glass in his eye, and I was having a harder and harder time disguising my own disorientation, as if I'd been clubbed in the head. I couldn't tell if it was physical or emotional, some lower order of shock. But I wasn't fooling Eric.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked.

"I am," I lied. "Just a little slow."

We gathered our bags and arranged them on a wooden pallet above the wet ground while Bob and Rachael crept into town from the south, entering the damage path. Bob pounded the steering wheel. A paramedic who recognized

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the scale of destruction, he also knew something about Eric I did not; he'd helped him through a suicidal episode two years before, when they were in college, and he understood Eric's ability to mask illness. Later I would come to regard Bob as the one who had saved Eric in 2005, where I would fail when it was my turn.

When I met Eric for the first time he was twenty years old, thin and square-jawed with a teenager's boisterous smile, already married and the father of a one-year-old boy. His last name, Nguyen, didn't fit—he was Caucasian and had taken his wife's name. In those days Eric didn't know much more about the weather than I did, but that would change quickly. After he graduated from Oklahoma University's prestigious School of Meteorology, he gave me an anthology of severe storm research, a leather-bound volume awarded to all freshly minted atmospheric scientists. He already owned a copy, but the gift was a sign of respect for what an amateur nonscientist like me had managed to learn on his own.

We chased together often, usually in separate cars since we lived far apart—Eric in Norman and I in Bloomington, where I attended grad school. In the summer of 2005 we both relocated to North Texas, each happy to have a familiar chase partner in close proximity. I was especially lucky. Not only was Eric a friend, but he'd been chasing since he was seventeen and by now was regarded as one of the best in the world. His photo of the Mulvane, Kansas, storm is one of the most recognizable tornado images of all time: a narrow white funnel curves down behind an antebellum-style plantation house (a sort of residence rarely seen in Kansas). Silvery debris like the spray of a waterfall rises from the point of

impact, and, crossing the tornado, a bright rainbow arcs smartly to the ground. Chestnut horses buck and spit before a stable, and a white picket fence frames the scene. Though violent, the image renders the beauty of severe weather and is an eloquent reply to the question of why chasers do what they do.

We chased together for three years, compiling an impressive string of tornado intercepts; other chasers joked about attaching a tracking device to our vehicle. In the dry season of 2006 we found tornadoes shrouded by rain or hiding in twilight, monsters one could never really “see” until reviewing video later, frame by frame, for the sudden glimpse of a lightning-backlit twister. Yet in good years or bad, chasing hardly resembles what you’ve seen on television. We drive thousands of miles each year for that handful of minutes in which we witness tornadoes, and on most days nothing happens at all: even the best chasers fail in eight of every ten attempts. Afternoons fizzle into “blue-sky busts.”

Bob and Rachael drove us out of Tulia on the dark highway toward Amarillo. Eric was excited and antsy. He leaned into the front seat and talked about the storm ahead and the one we’d escaped. He reminded me of a nervous little boy. I looked him over again and saw only that same cut on his ankle.

The supercell in front of us had already produced a tornado, and another storm was approaching from the west. We were sandwiched between them, and Bob tried to conceal our predicament, making awkward small talk with Eric.

“Look!” Rachael shouted and tapped her nail on the passenger window. In the next flash, a tall cone tornado appeared far to our northeast, moving away. Nobody suggested we stop and film it; no one reached for a camera. The tornado was an object of detached curiosity, a silhouetted funnel, cousin of the beast that had smashed our truck.

Chasers do not ignore luck. Though most are meteorologists, trained to approach forecast problems from a scientific perspective, there remain much art and instinct to the process, what pros call “pattern recognition.” And chasers are superstitious, too. One of my superstitions evolved from noticing how almost every time I played Tom Petty’s album *Wildflowers*, the storm I was chasing produced a tornado. Eric thought it was silly, of course, as any self-respecting “met” would, until he saw it happen repeatedly. He was a scientist, but he wanted to photograph tornadoes, too.

When I bought a car adapter for my iPod, he questioned whether the Petty would still “work” when played from a digital file instead of the CD I’d always used. We brought the disc just in case. In October 2005 the Petty induced a

tornado from a storm that had looked hopelessly serene, and Eric was convinced. After that, rather than his rolling his eyes or feigning disdain for my hocus-pocus, we debated which storms “deserved” the Petty. We waited for a storm to show a hard crown, gleaming knuckles under the back-sheared anvil and a cylindrical updraft base, cloud matter crisp and rounded like fresh clay. Tornadoes are never guaranteed, no matter how impressive a storm’s appearance, but we sought to “help” those storms that seemed to be trying to produce one. They had to demonstrate intent. Occasionally it was obvious, and Eric would turn and say, “Better put on the Petty.”

We had not been playing *Wildflowers* when we entered Tulia, though. As we reached town, I leaned over Eric’s computer to find our next turn on the mapping software. Another program displayed radar data. We’d used the Petty an hour earlier when we’d intercepted a beautiful tornado in a flawless pursuit near Olton, Texas. Now we were simply repositioning for the storm’s next cycle. A disorganized lowering beneath the updraft signaled no imminent danger. While I was studying the roads, Eric glimpsed a dust whirl over his left shoulder. “Oh, shit,” he yelled. “Tornado!”

When we reached the Amarillo hospital, I didn’t check in as a patient. I assumed I was okay, as is my habit. But when a nurse called Eric back, he glanced to me and I was glad to join him. The truth was I didn’t want us to be apart anytime soon. It was as if we both sensed there was more danger ahead, some kind of unforeseeable debris bearing down on us still.

I followed him to the examination room. The doctor was a young guy from Boston, a Johns Hopkins grad who seemed glad that someone recognized his dialect. He wore a navy-blue suit under his lab coat, and gold cufflinks gleamed from beneath the long white sleeves. “I’ve just returned from a banquet,” he explained. I wondered what he thought of the Texas Panhandle, where local culture revolves around high school football and historical oil wealth.

“Who’s the patient?” he asked.

Eric raised his hand. “I think I have glass in my eye.”

The doctor patted the table, and Eric hopped on. The doctor searched each eye with a narrow penlight and applied drops that caused Eric’s pupils to dilate completely; it was the first time I’d seen his usually bright, clear eyes so full and strange. I would see this again when the antipsychotics caused full dilations.

And then a third and final time.

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After the drops, Eric described the room as “overexposed.” In storm imagery, sunlight below a cloud base can “burn out” that portion of the picture. Settings for clouds and sun are entirely different. It is impossible to adjust for both.

The doctor asked what had happened.

“Car wreck,” Eric said.

“Did the car roll?”

“No. It didn’t.”

I assumed the doctor was asking out of more than curiosity. “We got hit by a tornado,” I volunteered. Eric blinked a few times and then smiled and nodded slowly. I choose now to see that as a moment of relief for him, a release from yet another secret.

“While you both were in the car?”

“Yes,” I said.

He looked me over. “And you’re okay?”

“Right as rain.”

Eric shook his head no. “He seems a little loopy to me.”

The doctor began searching my scalp. “Did you take a blow to the head?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, we haven’t had anybody else from Tulia. I guess you boys are the only victims.” And it was true. Nobody else was treated for injuries. All businesses in Tulia had closed for the night; staff and customers were secure in their home basements or shelters when the sirens blew. The mangled Sonic drive-through, normally a hive of cruising teens and preening middle schoolers on Saturday nights, was empty because a new location had opened the night before, on the other side of town.

Eric and I kept chasing in the days and weeks after Tulia. We ventured out two days later, in fact, though we were tense. He said we were chasing differently, and I agreed. It was logical. Intelligent creatures learn from mistakes.

They adjust. He became fascinated with the statistical improbability of meeting such a small tornado at the moment of its maximum power. Later, he assisted another meteorologist on a paper dissecting the data collected by Eric's onboard weather instruments. In Tulia we recorded the most dramatic pressure drop in history: nearly two hundred millibars—the equivalent of being thrust three thousand feet into the air from sea level. The data were so extraordinary that to survive peer review the author had to establish a theoretical basis by which such measurements were conceivable.

The paper concluded that we were struck the instant before the “supercritical vortex” began the process of “vortex breakdown” and that we experienced the “corner flow region,” where the greatest pressure falls are theorized to be. In layman's terms, a tornado is never more violent than the moment before it unravels.

I returned to teaching, though within a week the flashbacks started, and my concentration broke. During a workshop, I found myself staring at a young student writer and imagining how the fibrous insulation had drifted down long after the winds calmed. Three weeks after the accident, I canceled classes and called Eric. We had spoken frequently and chased together since Tulia but never discussed the psychological effects.

“Are you having flashbacks?”

“Yeah,” he said. “All the time.”

We talked about their random appearance, how there seemed to be no identifiable prompt. He was relieved to hear it from me first, and I was glad to share it with him. I did not mention that it made me reconsider chasing and how absurd it would be to die in a tornado before I'd published a book. I was a writer first, not a weather geek. I never threatened to quit, but the shift in my tone was surely apparent to Eric.

Our last chase was June 6, 2007. In Valentine, Nebraska, near the Sand Hills just south of the Dakota border, we waited in a restaurant parking lot with dozens of other chasers. Eric met his longtime photography agent in person for the first time and gave the man a hug, as though they'd been close for years. The day's storm erupted in the foothills of the Badlands, and we rushed across the border and turned west on Interstate 80 as a tornado snaked out from under the storm. It was so far away that we could only see the funnel in our peripheral vision, the faintest outline on the rolling terrain. We drove and drove but never seemed to close the distance. It was Eric's last tornado, and it already looked like a memory.

When he entered the hospital two months later, medicines wrecked his short-term memory. He forgot that he'd invited me to visit the same day as his new girlfriend. She waited ahead of me in line, a small, shapely girl with a rose tattoo on her ankle, and I guessed who she was. When the doors swung open, Eric spotted her, and they hugged and started down the hallway together. I thought of leaving, giving them time alone, but it had taken an hour through heavy traffic to reach the hospital, and I wanted to see him. I decided to stay a few minutes and then head back. When he saw me, a smile spread across his face. "There he is," he said. "Showing up unannounced."

"We talked about it yesterday," I said.

He shook his head. "Damn meds." The three of us leaned against the wall and chatted for a half hour. Eric's beard was coming out patchy and blond. They wouldn't let him anywhere near a razor, he said.

His girlfriend tucked herself under his arm, and he looked relaxed, even confident. He gave no indication that he wanted me to leave. He directed the conversation, in fact. When his girlfriend asked if I'd been in the tornado, I nodded. "He's a survivor," Eric said. A week later, he revealed that he'd been hallucinating during this entire conversation, seeing a fence opening and closing around the three of us.

"I know so much about suicide I could make it happen right now if I wanted," he wrote in his journal. "Sometimes I wonder if being an expert has condemned me."

I was not an expert, nor did I know, while Eric was hospitalized, the meaning of the word "survivor" in the context of suicide. Instead, I absorbed everything I could find about Eric's disease, schizoaffective disorder, and the meds he took. I could diagram the molecular structure of Effexor and explain, as I did the last time I spoke to him, how the drug could produce a temporary serotonin deficiency before the desired increase. "Good," he said. "That gives me some hope." Now I know how, in the lexicon of suicide, the word "survivor" stands for the six people closest to the victim.

Eric's wife later found his journal in the evidence bin at the Arlington Police Department. I'd seen it on my very last visit. He had clutched it to his chest for an hour while we talked. It was a typical student composition book with a mottled black-and-white cover, bound with glue along the spine. At one point he had lowered it and fanned dozens of pages filled with his small, neat script. He said he was writing about "whatever I'm feeling . . . things that piss me off." He lifted an eraserless pencil from a pocket in his scrubs, and I studied the lead

tip. I imagined he was making progress if they allowed him such potentially harmful objects.

He may have noticed me studying that pencil. He was quick, hyperintelligent, and he knew me better than I knew him, but he didn't know everything. He didn't know the most important things. I never told Eric how I understood why we hide sickness, why it sometimes feels most urgent to keep it from those we love best.

"Eric was an action guy," a friend offered later. "You were visiting him. You were calling. You asked him to eat more—that's an elemental expression of care." But what I see now are the clouds that skewed his perception of himself and others, how truth spun and lifted into dark condensation. Didn't he need to hear what reality was every day and every hour? The answer, it seems to me, is yes, he did. He needed to hear each day all over again what was real and what was vapor. A week after my last visit, as Eric lay in a coma, a neurologist leaned inches from his ear in the twice-daily and always unsuccessful effort to wake him. "Eric!" the doctor shouted. "Eric, can you open your eyes? Can you squeeze my hand? Eric!"

When I was a boy I tried to imagine the shape and depth of "forever," a child's idea of God's lifespan soon giving way to a young boy's conception of the universe, then an adolescent's nightmare of death's endless spooling dark. Now I measure forever by Eric's absence, the immutability of his death. Nonnegotiable. No second chance. I can write no scenes to change the outcome, though I imagine dozens of conversations that never happened, gratifying for us both, redeeming and potentially lifesaving. Could one revelation have made a difference?

In composing a forecast, meteorologists understand that any unaccounted-for element in the "initial conditions" can alter the outcome entirely—simplified chaos theory. The thinnest layer of dry air at two thousand feet sparks a tornado outbreak where there might have been clear, muggy skies. And Eric was unstable at the time, his mind in chaos, so who can say what would have changed the equation? No forecast has a chance.

When my mother suffered a toxic reaction to the drug Heparin after bypass surgery, I imagined no point of intercession to keep the poisonous medicine from her system. I wrote no scenes to change the world. But suicide is a volitional death, the victim's choice, and for survivors, each memory returns as a lost opportunity. With Eric, there are an infinite number of moments when I could have said more, acted more kindly, begged him not to hurt himself or explained

With Eric, there are an infinite number of moments when I could have said more, acted more kindly, begged him not to hurt himself or explained how much he meant to me. And there was one thing I certainly should have told him.

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When my father died in 1998, we buried him back home in Binghamton, New York, in a graveyard overlooking the Chenango River Valley. After the service, my mother and I climbed the steep hillside to the car, hurrying to escape the January wind.

“Amos,” she called from behind me, “are you having some weakness in your upper legs?” The answer was yes, for years now, and the unusual gait I was developing could not escape the eye of a lifelong nurse, especially one whose only brother had developed the same trait forty years earlier. But all I knew on that day was that my mother was thinking of her dead brother, the Uncle Billy I’d never met, and having just buried her husband, she needed no more disquieting news. Besides, I thought, I was only a little out of shape, a few pounds overweight. Nothing a jogging regimen couldn’t fix.

“No,” I answered. “There’s nothing wrong with my legs. What makes you say that?”

“You walk like Billy did at your age. I hadn’t noticed it before.”

In 1951, my uncle had been diagnosed with progressive muscular atrophy, a catchall term common before the discovery of the dystrophin gene, and as his mobility deteriorated over the years, all the doctors could say was take plenty of vitamin E. Enjoy brisk evening strolls. Billy died in gall-bladder surgery the same way most Becker’s muscular dystrophy patients go: sudden cardiac failure. A year after my father died, two muscle biopsies confirmed my own diagnosis: the same as my uncle’s. In the womb, I’d had a fifty-fifty chance.

Eventually I told my mother and wrapped the news in promising discoveries—gene therapy and myostatin inhibitors—that I hoped would compete with

her memory of Billy's deterioration. She wept on the phone but tried to hide the guilt she felt for having passed along a bad gene. "It could be worse, Mom," I said. "Those kids with Duchenne's." Those are the ones you see on television. Unlike them, I had enjoyed a normal childhood, running and playing sports with my friends, just like Billy, who pitched a no-hitter for the Deposit Lumberjacks when he was seventeen.

And this is how I would have told Eric, if I had ever revealed my secret to him. It's the scene I imagine most: a brief preamble and then the hard news, with the offer that now he knew someone else, someone he loved and trusted, who understood about hidden illness and the aversion to being seen as sick or broken or doomed. You're not alone. It could be worse.

On the first Monday in August, he told me his own diagnosis. I thought, *Tell him now*, but then, *No, don't make this about you*. I had just resigned my position as a lecturer at the University of North Texas, and when he answered the phone I had said, "Guess what I just did."

"You quit your job."

I was amazed. "Wow," I said.

"I know you."

We talked about why it was a good idea to invest time in finishing my novel. Then he gave me his news, and we talked about what his doctor had said about the medicines and their side effects. I was stunned but humbled by his confidence—things he might have felt if I had had the courage to reveal my own illness. I didn't know yet about his suicidal impulses or the hospitalization two years before. And I did not tell him later, after he was hospitalized, because I thought the information was too heavy. I would wait until he was stronger. I borrowed against the time I thought *Tulia* had granted us.

Now I understand my ungenerous silence as a resistance to my own disease, an instinct to preserve in Eric's eyes the reflection of who I was when we'd met ten years before. In this way we were the same. His sister would later tell me how much he feared that I'd stop chasing with him if I learned of his suicidal impulses.

One day when I was visiting Eric, a poor woman lost in deep schizophrenia approached us in the hallway. She wore a hospital gown tied loosely in back and nodded toward Eric's comparatively fashionable scrubs. "Can I have your clothes?" she asked.

"I think they have some at the nurse's station," he said. He pointed in the direction he wanted her to walk.

“I don’t like the clothes up there,” she said. She studied his face. “Can I have your education?” Her hair was short, and she was thin as a prisoner, with needy, searching eyes.

“I left my diploma at home.”

The woman cocked her head in confusion and leaned into him. “What are you doing here?”

Eric pointed to me. “I’m visiting him. He’s the craziest guy in the place.”

“Tomorrow is a new month,” Eric wrote at 3:00 P.M., three and half hours before we spoke for the last time, four hours and fifteen minutes before he mortally wounded himself. “Let’s hope it’s a good one.” I often wonder how far the ambulance traveled to arrive at the psychiatric facility, only to carry him just across the intersection to Arlington Memorial Hospital. From that night until September 9, the nine days he lived in a coma, I would pass that intersection each day; it can’t be more than three hundred yards from the front door of the psych ward to the emergency room entrance.

Six weeks after Eric died, I appended to our last phone call, then playing over and over in my head, the sequence of events that must have followed. During our talk, I had mentioned to him that my contact at a magazine, for whom I’d written an interview with a novelist, no longer worked there, and the new editor wanted a formal query letter. But I was still confident the magazine would take the interview. I was upbeat about the prospects and even my small chance to make the cover. He was glad to hear it. I thought it was important to share something from my own day and offer evidence that I was still working, that his crisis wasn’t a burden to me. I wanted to say that I loved him like a brother—but I was afraid to imply that things were somehow worse than they seemed to me. It would have been abnormal, and I wanted him to feel as though his normal life was waiting for him. Perhaps I wanted so much for things to be normal that Eric played along.

He had forty-five minutes of consciousness left.

He ended the call abruptly: “They’re going for a smoke break,” he said. (He’d started a cigarette-a-day habit in the hospital, Marlboro Light 100s.) We agreed I would visit over the weekend, on whichever day his mother didn’t come. He reminded me of the visiting hours on weekends. The last words I ever said to him were, “I’ll see you tomorrow or Sunday.”

“Okay,” he answered. Then he hung up the phone.

If he went for a smoke, he would have reentered the ward about 6:45 P.M. The next thirty minutes are unaccounted for. What we know for sure is this: at

7:15 P.M., visiting hours started with the normal commotion as family and friends entered together in a group. Eric's wife, from whom he was separated, was stuck in traffic and would arrive twenty-five minutes later. In the bustle, Eric slipped from his "line of sight" supervision into an empty, unlocked and apparently unmonitored room. He stripped the bed of a single sheet and walked into the bathroom.

Before we reached Tulia on April 21, Eric and I saw a tornado near the town of Olton, a beautiful laminar cone. It approached the road ahead of us, and the funnel lit up like a bulb when the sun peeked from under the shadow of the anvil, a magical translucence. Filaments at the base swirled like dancers. I planted my tripod in the dirt beside the shoulder of the road. Eric ran to the fence line and began shooting stills. "This is awesome," he said and hopped a little, overcome with joy. I locked my camera in place and stepped away to take in the view. Tiny hailstones fell in spurts and stung my arm. From the back of the storm, rain curtains rippled across our vehicle. I cleaned my lens with the bottom of my shirt.

"It is awesome, man," I answered. And it was.

When the tornado crossed the road to our east, we chased it. It swung north, away from us. Having watched it form to our south, mature to our southeast and continue to our east, we knew without saying so that our strategy was perfect. We'd waited inside the bear's cage—the center of a thunderstorm's rotation—but we'd kept the wall cloud in sight and noted all the signals of tornadogenesis. We readied our cameras, cool and quiet, Tom Petty in the background. We'd been here before.

As we drove up behind the tornado, I joked, "Let's not drive right into it. Exciting as that might be."

"I know," Eric said and chuckled.

The tornado scraped a row of houses and peeled shingles from the rafters. We held our breath, hoping those inside were huddled underground or in interior rooms or closets. Our invincibility made us generous, freed our spirits for unconditional empathy. There are necessary illusions all storm chasers hold: the sense of control, of risk calculated to such a degree that they can boast of how it is safer to hunt tornadoes than to drive to work in the suburbs. The walls of those houses remained intact. The people inside, the victims, would survive. The tornado moved on. In ten years it would be a story for family reunions.

When it was well off the road, we pulled up alongside. Eric shot photos from the driver's side, and I leaned over with my camcorder.

"Can you see around me?" he asked.

I said that I could.

Eric pointed. “Look at that debris in the air. There’s debris way up in the air, lofted debris. It disappeared in the funnel.” I lowered the camcorder to look. There were roofs and trees and cars, none bigger than your fingernail, floating into the upper reaches of the storm, higher and higher until they slipped from view as if they were weightless and would never crash back to earth in a field covered with fresh rain and hailstones, into softened dirt vulnerable to their terrible impact.



Amos Magliocco

Amos Magliocco lives in Denton, Texas, where he taught creative writing at the University of North Texas. His fiction has appeared in *Oxford Magazine*, *Iron Horse Review* and *Southwestern American Literature*. His weather-related nonfiction has appeared in *weather.com* and New Dehli's *India Today*, among others. He holds an MFA from Indiana University and is currently revising his first novel, *Remedy Wheel*. The late Eric Nguyen's work can be seen at www.mesoscale.ws, and his book of storm photography, *Adventures in Tornado Alley: The Storm Chasers*, is forthcoming from Thames and Hudson in April 2008.