

Chera Hammons

TORNADO ALLEY

It's a house-shaker, cellar-thumper,
the sort that we are warned about,
but not all of us have basements
so we fit into our closets when it comes,
just widened-out eyes and elbows while
the outside air boils and sings with electricity.

We grow up with it, always know this might
happen to us, that we will sit in our groaning box
in a sea of wind, and will wait under pillows
that must stop whatever pieces of cars pierce the walls,

so we have planned ahead, know the safest room.
We know that while we wait
the rebar will be ripped from the concrete,
the studs will be stripped, sand-blasted with topsoil,
hail will beat the nearly-wild roses flat.
The bells at the non-denominational church
will clang like mad yelling saints, the power will flicker,

the lights may go out, the garage door thrown off
so the house is a vacuum, but the warning sirens
are always a thrill when they start up,
the way that families freeze to listen at first.
They pause in their meals, or their small talk,

and suddenly hear tree branches already
slapping the dust off their houses, and the spitting rain
that saturates the brick red like when it was new,
the windows rattling, and the mile-long rumble
that might not be a freight train.

We know more about meteorology than most.
A ridge of low pressure, straight line winds,
gulf moisture were in our bedtime stories.
The storm will pass soon, the worst ones
wear themselves out fast with their violence,
and the morning will sparkle with dew and bent metal,
the roots of the cottonwoods like old fingers
finally holding the sky like something they'd hoped for.

We have rebuilt now so many times that nobody thinks
it's unusual if you never find some of what blew away.
We will go outside to see what still stands,
meet our neighbors assessing the storm,
and what the new day is like, preening in its calm;
we'll call it a good day for repairing the damage,
a good thing that things were not worse.
The weather is our culture, what we have in
common, all we really know how to talk about.