



adapted from "Union Station in the Rain," courtesy of artist Harlan R. Bonar

Midwestern Storms Roar Through New Book

by Barbara MacRobie

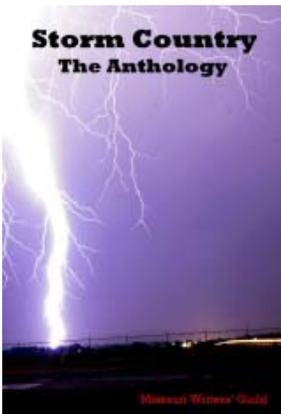


photo on book cover
courtesy of John Hacker

The screaming wakes us,
like a woman turned inside out,
torn limb from limb,
but it's the house,
groaning, shaking, splintering,
and the furious tornado,
sucking away our home.

- from *Screaming Woman*, by Niki Nymark, St. Louis;

Branson, Fort Leonard Wood, Hurley, Kirksville, Joplin, Monett, Novinger,
Robertsville, Rolla, St. Louis City, St. Louis County, Sparta, Springfield.

All slammed by tornados. And that's "just" in the past three years, and
"just" tornados.

Even as Missouri Arts Council staff were working on this story, two Sunday afternoon hailstorms pummeled St. Louis where our offices are located—smashing windshields, uprooting trees, leaving dozens of people injured and one man dead.

Hail storms, tornados, thunderstorms, ice storms, blizzards, floods...To be a Midwesterner is to live in storm country.

A new book published last November, *Storm Country: The Anthology*, takes that aspect of our lives and turns it into literature—and what's more, for a cause. All money from sales of this book go to replacing books, furniture, and equipment lost from the libraries of the Joplin School District when, on May 22, 2011, one of the deadliest tornados in U.S. history ravaged one-third of the city and killed 160 people.

As the one-year anniversary of the Joplin tornado approaches, we're taking an in-depth look at *Storm Country*—giving you excerpts from the poems, short stories, and creative non-fiction that fill its 170 pages, and talking with some of the key people, including several writers, whose talents made it possible.

“How can we help?”

Like so many other people with friends or family in Joplin, Deborah Marshall of Florissant, a northern suburb of St. Louis, made urgent phone calls the day after the tornado to track people down and find out if they were all right. As she was the president of the Missouri Writers Guild, Deb was looking especially for guild members living in and around Joplin. She learned that everyone had survived. She also learned that the libraries of four Joplin schools, as well as the Teacher Resource Center, had been pulverized.

So Deb’s next moves were to put together a book drive (eventually more than 38,000 books were collected) and to ask Claudia Mundell, head of the Joplin Writers Guild chapter, how else the statewide guild could help.

“Claudia said to me, ‘The libraries have other needs besides books. Wouldn’t it be fun to put together an anthology?’” Deb recalls.

The Missouri Writers Guild and the Joplin chapter sent out the call for “poetry, fiction, and nonfiction on the theme of storms and severe weather in the Midwest.” Some writers learned about the project through their local Missouri Writers Guild chapters; there are 17 throughout the state. Some learned via literary e-newsletters and list serves. Some learned from colleagues, teachers, or friends.

The team of editors thought they would receive, maybe, 100 entries. They got 337.

The moods of the 70 final selections are as varied as their authors. The poems and prose are elegiac, surreal, frightened, angry, hopeful, grieving, and even streaked with humor. The authors range from Missouri and Kansas Poet Laureates to sixth-grade students at Fair Grove Middle School.

How to get a copy

Every penny of the \$10 printed book or \$6 electronic edition goes to the Joplin School libraries.

Printed copies

- [Amazon.com](#)
- [CreateSpace.com](#)
- Send a check for \$13.95 (which includes postage) per copy to MWG Joplin Book Drive, 1203 Spartina Drive, St. Louis, MO 63031.

Electronic versions

- [Kindle edition](#), Amazon.com
- [NOOK Book](#), Barnes & Noble

Six months after the first conversations between Deb and Claudia, *Storm Country* was published. The Missouri Humanities Council provided funds. Mozark Press of Sedalia printed the book. In December, the Guild presented the school district with a \$3,000 check. “We’re hoping to be able to give them another \$3,000 check at the first anniversary,” said Deb.

As Claudia put it in *Storm Country’s* Foreword, “Not everybody can carry steel and lift walls, and not everybody can cook, so everybody does what they can, and writers write.”

Storm Country authors: conversations and selections

Prairie Wolf Wind

– DeAnna Quietwater Noriega, Fulton

The prairie wolf wind howls outside my door.
He thrums signboards and snaps off the branches of trees.
He pries at roof tiles and knocks over trash cans.
He huffs and he puffs and says he’ll blow my house down.
It isn’t built of straw,
Nor made from sticks and twigs.
But I hope he doesn’t start circling round and around,
Cause this old trailer home might take a notion to fly,
It has no wings or landing gear.
It would be much the worse for its flight,
When it comes on back down.



Marshall, photo by Heather D.

DeAnna Quietwater Noriega first heard the howl of the wolf wind when she lived in a mobile home on the western edge of the Great Plains. “It seems like tornados and high winds love mobile homes!” she said. “I’d wonder if I needed to find my ruby slippers. I’d listen to the wind banging and tossing the trash can lids down the road. That’s what set me off to write the poem.”

“Prairie Wolf Wind” was originally published in 2007 in *Behind Our Eyes: Stories, Poems and Essays from Writers With Disabilities*. When DeAnna learned about *Storm Country*, she realized the weather she had experienced in Colorado stretched across all of Tornado Alley.

DeAnna is half Apache and a quarter Chippewa, and like many Native Americans, “I was an Army brat,” she said. “A lot of Native American men went into the military. Back then in pre-casino days there wasn’t much work on the reservations, so there were basically two avenues for men that were considered very brave, respected, warrior-type employment: high-rise construction and the military.”

In 2006, DeAnna closed her fair-trade gift shop in Colorado Springs and came to Missouri to be a stay-at-home grandmother when her youngest daughter took a job as a veterinary technician at the University of Missouri in Columbia. That worked for a while, “but we wanted to raise the children in the country with animals and 4H.” So DeAnna found a job as an independent living specialist in blindness and low vision services with Services for Independent Living in Columbia, and the family was able to buy a small place just outside of Fulton. She herself is totally blind and has been since she was 8.

Now DeAnna, her retired husband, her daughter, and her three grandchildren live on five acres with four horses, four dogs, three cats, rabbits, rats, hamsters, fish, and a bearded dragon lizard. “It’s a virtual zoo!” she said. “Part of it is because my daughter works at the vet school. The animals tend to just show up at our house.”

DeAnna has published “here and there, but I’m better at writing than I am at marketing. I’m just not good at finding places to put my stuff. It doesn’t matter. Writing is my safety valve and my sanity.”

Storm Chaser

– Linda O’Connell, St. Louis

Wind whips, gusts howl, sirens shriek.
Thunderhead barrels and swerves up interstate.
Tornado drops, streaks across prairies, into towns,
flattens flora and fauna, peels roofs like sunburned skin,
splinters treetops wishbone-fashion.

Relinquishes its bully grip, roils the river and heads East.
Reverberating trees and strangled hearts, still.
Night air thickens, blackness sizzles with electrified ions.
People search for their candles and wits, survey the damage.
Worried loved ones contact each other.

My cell phone plinks a text received.
I read the message and gasp. My granddaughter,
the photography major, sends me a just-snapped image,
the swirling wide-mouthed monster bearing down,
chomping faster than her boyfriend can drive.

Her message: Safe. Isn’t this a grt shot?
I stomp and storm up the basement steps,
shake the wrinkles out of my wadded up nerves,
send a silent prayer, “Protect those affected and this kid, too!”
I calm down and realize, I used to be young and invulnerable.



St. Louis, photo by Bill Keaggy

This incident really happened just as Linda O’Connell recounts it. “Though I didn’t put the response I texted her into the poem!” she laughs.

Linda is a lifelong resident of St. Louis, except for two years in rural Alaska, when her first husband was stationed there with the Army. “The stars appeared to be so close you could reach up and pluck one,” she remembers. In 2010, Linda published a book, *Queen of the Last Frontier*, about a pioneer woman she met in Alaska. “I asked her to share one incident about her life. At the end of one year, she had written me enough letters to write her story.”

Linda’s poetry and prose have appeared in many anthologies, periodicals, literary and mainstream magazines, and 15 *Chicken Soup* titles. She is working with Publishing Syndicate, an independent publisher in northern California, on developing an anthology. Staying busy is never a challenge, between her writing, her job as a preschool teacher—“I am completing my 36th year and still consider working with young children my dream job”—and her blended family of her husband, three daughters, one son, and nine grandchildren.

Linda belongs to the St. Louis Writers Guild, the Missouri State Poetry Society, “and a very fun, supportive critique group that meets twice a month. We call ourselves the WWWPs, Wild Women Wielding Pens.”

“I try to evoke emotions through the use of strong verbs and sensory detail,” Linda said. “I like to weave humor and surprise into my poetry and stories.”

- You can read more of Linda’s writing on [her eclectic blog](#), *Write From the Heart*.

A Joplin Tornado Experience

– Brett Holcomb, Joplin

“My brother, Josh, was a bit of a storm chaser and was out on our deck watching the developing weather. He came from outside and told us that it was looking bad, but he wasn’t sure why the sirens went off. I was still eating dinner, foolishly thinking that it would be another near miss that we have become accustomed to over the years living in Tornado Alley.” [To read the entire article, click here.](#)



Joplin, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers removing debris on July 4, 2011,
photo by Chris Gray-Garcia

Brett Holcomb had just finished his freshman year at Joplin High School, and was eating Sunday dinner with his family, when the tornado smashed into the town.

Soon afterwards Brett wrote about his experience for *Storm Country*. “There was really no way to process it fully,” he remembers. “I wrote my piece in 30 minutes at the most. I just started writing and I couldn’t stop until it was done.”

Born and raised in Joplin, Brett has been writing creatively for years, and has a completed manuscript for a novel under his belt, though he said he found the process more valuable than the

result. “I have all these ideas for characters and plots in my head, and I don’t feel satisfaction until I write them down, but when I started writing it was pretty poor quality!” he said. “By the time I got to the end, I’d improved greatly.”

As the one-year anniversary of the tornado approaches, Brett said, “You can go around town and still see debris and just how empty parts of town are. People are still clearing things up with insurance and construction companies. At the same time, it’s amazing to see things coming together this early.

“Last May when I walked outside to our driveway and saw across the street that there was nothing left, that’s an image that’s forever burned into my brain. Looking out there now, I see houses going up and trees getting planted. I think the town as a whole is going to be better than ever, thanks to the tons of support that we got, that we’re so thankful for. There’s something new every day.”

Night Scene

– Phillip Ronald Stormer, Canton

It is night:
the ghostly gray foil of mist preserved
the fading freshness of the farmlands;
a gibbous moon short fuses the purpling clouds:
they wrestle across the southern sky
as two tomcats tangle in a time-forgotten alley.
The clouds are kneaded, twisted, their very quick
squeezed out in bursts of long, white spears
dashed against the earth and broken.



Osage Beach, photo by Aaron Smith

Dr. Ron Stormer reached deeply into his Midwestern past for the burst of poetry he sent to *Storm Country*.

“I wrote ‘Night Scene’ clear back in high school,” he said. “I grew up on a farm in Iowa. I was outside one night watching a storm, and the images in the poem came from that.”

He still lives and works in the path of Midwestern weather. He lives in Illinois, across the Mississippi 30 miles from Culver-Stockton College in Canton, where he is an associate professor and the chair of the English Department. He writes poetry “as a hobby,” he told us, “but I’m more serious about fiction. I’m trying to break into print with a novel. I like supernatural fiction and apocalyptic fiction.”

Considering that the apocalyptic sub-genre of science fiction deals with catastrophic scenarios for the end of the world, Midwestern weather isn’t all that far off.

Silver Storm

– Bill Hopkins, Marble Hill

“The old man—now he called himself Virtue Longtime—hunched his shoulders against the bitter wind. He chain-smoked, watching people inching their way through the mass of trees felled by ice onto the road. Several of the people carried chainsaws....Such storms, called silver storms by old timers, were common in some years in the Ozarks. The sound of trees breaking reminded Virtue of armies firing black powder rifles, the reports booming in the distance off the hills and down into the valleys...” [To read the entire story, click here.](#)



Marble Hill, photo by Bill Hopkins

Bill Hopkins’ eerie yet tender fantasy, which takes place during the aftermath of a freezing rainstorm, was inspired by back-to-back ice storms he and his wife, Sharon, experienced a few years ago. “We live way out in the country, and it was nearly impassable,” he recalls. “But by nightfall, volunteers just appeared. They were cutting branches off the road and cleaning up everything. They were mostly young people. As I watched them I thought, nobody’s going to pay them anything, and they have to go to work the next day...there’s hope for humanity.”

Bill knows every type of Midwestern weather, as he was born in Cape Girardeau and has spent most of his life in Marble Hill, where for decades he was an attorney and a judge. But his writing is not a new project taken up in his retirement. “The very first poem I got published in a commercial magazine was when I was going to law school at Mizzou in 1968,” he said. He has had many poems, short stories, and non-fiction works published through the years, as well as several short plays produced, and he is a professional photographer (the photo of ice-encrusted twigs is his). Both Bill and Sharon are active members of the Southeast Missouri Writers Guild, which is how they learned about the plans for *Storm Country*.

Bill is drawing on his law career for his first novel, *Courting Murder*, slated to come out this October via Southeast Missouri State University Press. “It takes place in Marble Hill, and my protagonist is a judge who’s quite bored with listening to all this stuff on the bench and thinks he’d make a really good detective.” Bill plans a series and has nearly completed the second book, set in Ste. Genevieve, called *River Morgue*.

- For more information about Bill and his works, check [his website](#).

Ice Dragon

– Rebecca Blevins, *St. Joseph*

Red-cheeked and fuzzy warm he
Lifts millions of flakes and
Smashes, crushes into
Artillery

Study Dragon’s wide mouth with
Dagger teeth jut, gape
There’s no going home ‘til
He’s safe

Frozen spheres fire into
Glittering maw, teeth
Break, shatter, fall into
White

She opens door, frowning, not
Seeing Dragon is now
Vanquished—he trudges in and
Smiles.



Frankville, photo by Jonathan Thornton

Storms can fuel imagination and joy, as the little hero of *Ice Dragon* discovers. “He imagines that the icicles hanging in front of his house are the dragon’s teeth,” Rebecca said. “When his mother calls him in, she has no idea what a battle he has fought!”

Rebecca is well-acquainted with boys’ point of view, since she has three sons ages 11, 10, and 2-1/2, plus a 6-year-old daughter. Although home-schooling them doesn’t give her much time for writing, her children also inspire her, such as for her first book, which she plans to publish via either self-publishing or a small press. “I was telling my children a bedtime story and they wanted me to write it down,” she said. “It’s about a pirate named Captain Schnozzlebeard. It’s aimed toward boys—there’s not a lot out there for middle-grade boys. I like whimsical stuff, and I like to write what my children like to read.”

Rebecca was born in New York and lived in many places around the U.S before her family moved to Springfield when she was 16, so she has experienced a multitude of weather systems, but Midwestern weather is in a class by itself. “It’s very temperamental,” she says, “and it’s never boring! But I like it.”

Rebecca has been writing since she was 8 years old. “I don’t write all the time; I go in spurts. If I feel like I need to express something, I’ll just sit down and start writing. It helps me process life.”

***My Foundation* poem becomes music**

Then you tell me life is more than state fair ribbons.
And you fold your muddy fingers over mine.
And like the barn dance when you led me to the dance floor,
You smile and whisper, "We'll take one step at a time."
– conclusion of *My Foundation*, by Bill Cairns, Ottawa, Illinois

The music starts with just a few delicate notes on the piano. Voices enter softly, plaintively asking over and over, "What happened? What happened to the life we built together?" But by the time the work concludes, the choir is singing different words over and over. "One step...One step at a time."

It was the final stanza of Bill Cairns' *My Foundation* that inspired Susan LaBarr to choose that poem out of all the works in *Storm Country* to set to music. "Those last few lines really got to me," she told us. "There's such a spirit of hope. Things are not okay right now. But it'll get there."

Susan's piece, which she comprehensively titled "Storm Country," was commissioned by a unique Missouri organization, Verses and Voices. Founded in 2008 and chaired by First Lady Georganne Wheeler Nixon, Verses and Voices creates artistic experiences that integrate poetry with music and visual art. Major projects include the biannual naming of a Missouri Composer Laureate and the production of the Governor's Verses and Voices Festival Concert at the Capitol Rotunda. Susan is the current Composer Laureate. At this year's concert on March 6, "Storm Country" was given its world premiere, dedicated to the people of Joplin and performed by the Joplin High School Combined Choir.

"Bill's story shaped the song in a very important way," said Dr. David Benz, co-founder and artistic director of Verses and Voices and director of choral activities for Missouri State Western University. "Bill is a carpenter, a 37-year member of a rescue unit, and a poet. He described helping in Joplin as the most difficult and rewarding time of his life. To commemorate the thousands of people who, like Bill, came to help, I asked Susan to compose the song so that it ended with the other five choirs performing in the Governor's Festival Concert to join the Joplin choir halfway through the song."



Combined choirs under the direction of Dr. David Benz: Benton High School Concert Choir, Jefferson City High School Concert Chorale, Joplin High School Combined Choir, Missouri Western State University Chorale, Parkway South High School Advanced Chamber Choir, Savannah High School Concert Choir.

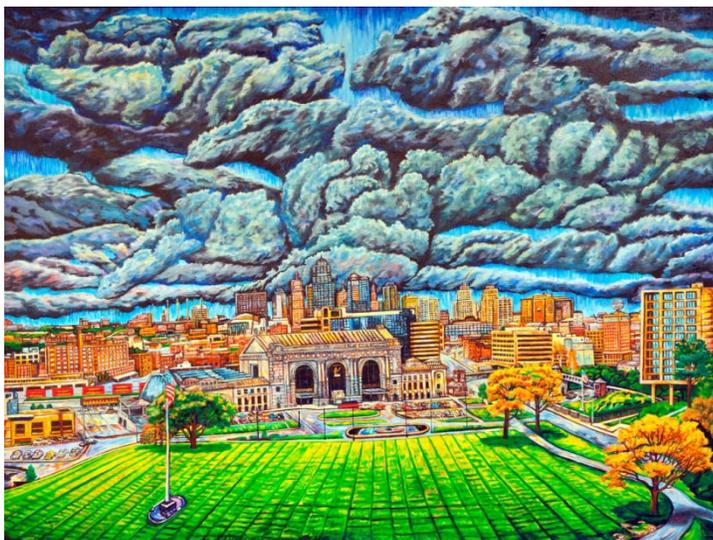
Susan said the poem was of key importance because her music starts to grow only once a poem has become ingrained in her. "I'll print out the poem or prop open the book, set it on a music stand, and read the poem over and over for a month. I have three poems on the music stand right now." When the musical ideas emerge, "I just write what's pretty to me," Susan said. "I love listening to 20th-century strange music, but it's not what I like to write. I want a catchy melody, interesting harmonies, and lush chords."

Susan honed her choral skills by singing with and writing music for the choruses of Missouri State University during 2000-2007 while she studied for her bachelor's and master's degrees in music. At college she also met her husband, Cameron. His own musical career took the couple from their native Missouri to Dallas, Texas, and then to Cleveland, Tennessee, where they now live.

Still, Susan says, "We're extremely proud Missourians. Sometimes our friends tease us, 'Enough of that Missouri stuff!' We are Missourians at heart and always will be."

To listen and watch

- [The world premiere of "Storm Country"](#) with the Joplin High School Combined Choir directed by Eric Eichenberger. "Working with the Joplin singers that day was very special," Dr. Benz said. "They cried much of the time we rehearsed, and all the other singers and directors were honored to share Joplin's journey in pain, hope, and healing."
- [Music video of "Storm Country"](#) sung by Missouri Western State University Concert Chorale directed by Dr. David Benz, video created by Brady McIntosh, Josh Smith, and Bryson Wooden.
- [Bill Cairns reading "My Foundation"](#) at the Governor's Festival Concert. Several other authors featured in *Storm Country* read their poems from the anthology for the program.
- ["The Dream Ship,"](#) poem by Eugene Field, world premiere at the Governor's Concert with the Benton High School Concert Choir, Jefferson City High School Concert Chorale, Joplin High School Combined Choir, Missouri Western State University Chorale, Parkway South High School Advanced Chamber Choir, and Savannah High School Concert Choir. This was the work Susan originally wrote for the concert. "The Verses and Voices committee loved it," she said, "and they asked me to do a second piece with a poem from *Storm Country*." Dr. Benz dedicated "The Dream Ship" to Governor and First Lady Nixon "for their service to Missouri."
- [More music by Susan LaBarr](#) on her website.



About the painting in our lead image

This artwork for the 2012 Missouri Arts Awards was selected by the awards panel from the Missouri 50 exhibition at the Missouri State Fair in Sedalia to be the image for the awards invitation, program, and poster. The oil painting, "Kansas City's Union Station in the Rain," was created by Harlan R. Bonar of Knob Noster. His portfolio includes historical and song interpretations, landscapes, still lifes and portraits for which he has won several awards. To see more of his work, check [this recent interview](#) by Joshua Heston in the State of the Ozarks™ online magazine.

- If you are interested in receiving one of the 18" x 24" posters, signed by the artist, contact us at moarts@ded.mo.gov.