So there we were, ex-pat Manhattanites knocking around in two thousand square feet of space, a block from Sophie’s school, down the street from the north branch of the Chicago River with its mallards and herons, and right in the middle of a Christian Korean neighborhood at the end of the Ravenswood El. Jim and Ivan, our landlords, lived downstairs and were gay. Hooray! No hiding necessary.

The day the funnel cloud came ripping up the Chicago River, Mars and I were busy at opposite ends of the apartment. Jim and Ivan had given us the combination to the basement—*Just in case*, they said—promising it would be the safest place. So when it turned pitch black at four in the afternoon and I heard a roar like an approaching jet and the front windows sprang open and drafts of my poems flew around the room, I screamed for Mars and we ran for the basement with the combination in hand, hearts drumming furiously.
What the hell are you doing?
Jim had come down the back stairs to find us fumbling with the lock. We were pretty sure we were going to die.
We need a flashlight, I said, stating what I thought was obvious. We couldn’t see a damn thing.
Come on in and have a drink, he said, nonsequiturially.
Uh, Jim, didn’t you feel the TORNADO go over just now? (This was Mars, and she was controlling herself, believe me.)
That wasn’t a tornado, he said, in a pitying tone. Jeez, you two. You need a drink.
That was our first and last personal Chicago funnel cloud. It ripped down trees along the river then went on to do damage to the flora at a nearby college campus where I would soon teach fundamentalist Christian kids how to write a poem and use the word fuck nongratuitously. I would take them to do a reading at Barnes and Noble in Evanston, and we would be asked not to use profanity because the poetry was automatically pumped into the children’s section, where Mars was engrossed in her favorite kid’s book and missed the whole event.
Everybody Poops! she reminded me later over cheese fries and grilled chicken sandwiches, philosophical as always. Then:
Except in the Midwest!