

Charles Webb

THE DEATH OF SANTA CLAUS | 149

He's had the chest pains for weeks,
but doctors don't make house
calls to the North Pole,

he's let his Blue Cross lapse,
blood tests make him faint,
hospital gowns always flap

open, waiting rooms upset
his stomach, and it's only
indigestion anyway, he thinks,

until, feeding the reindeer,
he feels as if a monster fist
has grabbed his heart and won't

stop squeezing. He can't
breathe, and the beautiful white
world he loves goes black,

and he drops on his jelly belly
in the snow and Mrs. Claus
tears out of the toy factory

wailing, and the elves wring
their little hands, and Rudolph's
nose blinks like a sad ambulance

light, and in a tract house
in Houston, Texas, I'm 8,
telling my mom that stupid

kids at school say Santa's a big
fake, and she sits with me
on our purple-flowered couch,

and takes my hand, tears
in her throat, the terrible
news rising in her eyes.

Phillis Levin

THE BLIZZARD | 156

Now that the worst is over, they predict
Something messy and difficult, though not
Life-threatening. Clearly we needed

To stock up on water and candles, making
Tureens of soup and things that keep
When electricity fails and phone lines fall.

Igloos rise on air conditioners, gargoyles
Fly and icicles shatter. Frozen runways,
Lines in markets, and paralyzed avenues

Verify every fear. But there is warmth
In this sudden desire to sleep,
To surrender to our common condition

With joy, watching hours of news
Devoted to weather. People finally stop
To talk to each other—the neighbors

We didn't know we were always here.
Today they are ready for business,
Armed with a new vocabulary,

Casting their saga in phrases as severe
As last night's snow: *damage assessment*,
Evacuation, emergency management.

The shift of the wind matters again,
And we are so simple, so happy to hear
The scrape of a shovel next door.

Wesley McNair

GOODBYE TO THE OLD LIFE | 124

Goodbye to the old life,
to the sadness of rooms
where my family slept as I sat

late at night on my
island of light among papers.
Goodbye to the papers

and to the school for the rich
where I drove them, dressed up
in a tie to declare who I was.

Goodbye to all the ties
and to the life I lost
by declaring, and a fond goodbye

to the two junk cars that lurched
and banged through the campus
making it sure I would never fit in.

Goodbye to the finest campus
money could buy, and one
final goodbye to the paycheck

that was always gone
before I got it home.
Farewell to the home

and a heartfelt goodbye
to all the tenants who rented
the upstairs apartment,

particularly Mrs. Doucette,
whose washer overflowed
down the walls of our bathroom

every other week, and Mr. Green,
determined in spite of the evidence
to learn the electric guitar.

And to you there, the young man
on the roof turning the antenna
and trying not to look down

on how far love has taken you,
and to the faithful wife
in the downstairs window

shouting, "That's as good
as we're going to get it,"
and to the four hopeful children

staying with the whole program
despite the rolling picture
and the snow—goodbye,

wealth and joy to us all
in the new life, goodbye!

Katha Pollitt

SMALL COMFORT | 114

Coffee and cigarettes in a clean cafe,
forsythia lit like a damp match against
a thundery sky drunk on its own ozone,

the laundry cool and crisp and folded away
again in the lavender closet—too late to find
comfort enough in such small daily moments

of beauty, renewal, calm, too late to imagine
people would rather be happy than suffering
and inflicting suffering. We're near the end,

but O before the end, as the sparrows wing
each night to their secret nests in the elm's green dome
O let the last bus bring

love to lover, let the starveling
dog turn the corner and lope suddenly
miraculously, down its own street, home.