

Winter Fast Offerings

Lance Larsen

When no one was faking sick, we were nine—
just enough to cover the routes if someone
doubled up. We argued over the packets,
weighing thickness against distance,
then fumbled ourselves into old coats,
our breath already measuring the cold.

And those stiff blue envelopes, dog-eared,
banded together, with smeared addresses
and dangly strings that wrapped back and forth—
you weren't allowed to look inside them,
but you could feel the money. A check.
A wad of bills from the wealthy.

We smiled and thanked them, carrying with us
a face, a smell, the heft of an old sofa,
until we almost knew them. The Hearing Aid Family.
Sister Coffee and Toast. Or the Clock Man.
If you went exactly on the hour, you'd hear
twenty-seven cuckoos and gongs go off at once.

And Old Lady Allsop, with her mangy black cats
and baby grand, who always took so long at the door.
Everyone wanted to cut her from the list.
We passed her envelope around till every deacon
had felt it. Two quarters. Might keep
a starving cat alive, but no one else.

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