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Bad News on the Dan Ryan

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My friend Michael is loosening
his tie as he zigzags across
seven lanes of holiday traffic when
he tells me. Only, I know
before the first words leave his mouth.
I know in the silence after I ask
about Paul. I know when I hear
that kind of hard choking sound
people make when they're trying
not to cry, a little boy running
down hallways slamming doors
keeping away from the monster,
until it's the last room, and he must throw
all his weight against the heat of the beast
breathing fire on the other side—I know,
just as sure as the black possibility
I've kept tucked in the furthest corner
of my mind knows its cue to march in
and throw itself down in the most comfortable
chair, dead center, in front of the fireplace,
blocking out all of the heat and light,
so by the time Michael catches the first
snuffled sob, it's already hunched over,
greedily unpacking
its interminable baggage of bad news.

Priscilla Atkins served for a number of
years in the Poet-in-the-Schools program
in Hawai'i and is currently the Arts
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