

CRAIG POWELL

*A Christmas Letter*

*for Richard Deutch (1944-2005)*

The time of year for your Bah Humbug party,  
but it's years since you died and I fondle  
a sheaf of working drafts of your poems,  
some never printed. Should I intrude?  
  
You wrote to me back in '85 through an editor,  
liking my own poems. Your letter veered  
through the southern highlands back to my house  
with you ten minutes drive away. Fast-  
forward twenty years. "Hi, this is Richard,"  
blearily on the phone. You begged me to visit  
way up on the lavender farm now. I'd watched you,  
helpless and stupid, sliding back to the booze  
ever since Maria died. "Come for the weekend."  
  
You'd lost your licence, couldn't drive to me.  
My own wife was slowly dying, I kept putting  
you off. "Come for the weekend." I never did,  
just phoned you in the hospital when your heart  
bloated and soaked your lungs,  
then a fusillade of coronaries before  
I got there, with you near brain-dead  
on a respirator. Your son and I kept visiting  
for days, needing our time. "He always knew  
it would happen. He didn't want to be  
a vegetable in a nursing home." When we could bear it  
we asked the staff to pull the tube  
from your wind-pipe, knowing you'd drown

without the suction. And on that evening  
you were almost lucid. You gazed in my eyes,  
still unable to move. But you knew  
I was going to do it. I would let you die.  
“I love you, mate.” Vapid chinks of sound.  
When I came next evening you were comatose  
with a death rattle that went on for days  
and then quiet.

Wives, poems, friendship  
and children who’ll outlast all three  
if we’re lucky. Maria with cancer in her forties  
(that both of you had denied how long?)  
told me once, “Richard writes prose to relax.  
When he writes poems it rips him to pieces.”  
It’s there in your book, the heart “with piano wire  
threaded through the left ventricle” tugging  
your breath. Why write at all  
of waking on a railway bench, some port  
still in a bottle in your pocket, or the skid-  
row brother after whom you named your son?  
Not one love poem for Maria. Of course.  
Those latter years and every poem were for Maria,  
and when she died every light went out.  
The only glow, never enough to live on,  
your poems that bear witness. I knew this  
when my own love died within months of you. Lost  
friend, I still go again and again to your poems,  
the heart shredded, the depths beyond thinking.