

Albert Bender
Spring, 1989

Ballad of a Modern-Day Snowstorm
for R.W.S. (1874-1958)

You can talk of the cold in days of old
When winters were cruel and bleak,
And snow piled high from a sinister sky
That rendered the sun pale and weak.
And you can brag of the great storm of '88,
That held the Northeast in fear,
But I'll tell you a tale of a comparable gale
With a "19" in front of the year.

It was February of '83, a winter both calm and benign;
The days, one by one, had been kissed by the sun; the snow--not even
a sign.
So when it seemed true the month would slip through with no threat
imminent from the skies,
A self-proclaimed sage of considerable age proffered reasons for
winter's demise:

"I strongly suspect the greenhouse effect and all of man's modern
inventions
Have messed up the gears in the earth's atmosphere and ruined
Mother Nature's intentions.
And one thing is clear," he said with a sneer, "when you're as old
as I am;
We'll never see snow like in storms long ago--we've turned a wolf
into a lamb."

Meanwhile, as he spoke, an arctic front broke from its hold far to
the northwest,
And folks in the know at the weather bureau recognized an "Alberta
Express."
They knew that, at least, cold air would pour east and drop tem-
peratures like a stone,
But the satellite's screen showed an even worse scene that made
all the forecasters groan.

Far to the south, in the wide-open mouth of the Gulf of Mexico,
Air pressure was falling as clouds, black and squalling, announced
a sub-tropical low.
And if, by chance, the system advanced and followed a track to
the north,
The soggy air mass and Canadian blast would combine with ferocious
force.

Of course, odds were slim of a forecast so grim, or so the computers thought,
Since all information from every location spewed out the same report;
So the data collected strongly suggested the way it was going to be:
The storm off the coast would unleash most of its fury out over the sea.

But to the trained eye a mackerel sky and a wind shift from west to northeast
Portended ill will as a deepening chill was about to turn lamb into beast.
And those who relied on a feeling inside looked up and knew all too well;
An ominous dome meant they'd better get home; by nine the first snowflakes fell.

They were wispy and light, and their feathery flight was beautiful to behold.
One would never glean such a peaceful scene hid treachery yet to unfold;
But unfold it did as temperatures slid and suddenly wind started gusting,
The snowflakes flew, and forecasters knew the Northeast would get more than a dusting.

So they went on the air and said to beware: the storm with all that Gulf rain
Was changing its trek and would greatly affect the coast from Delmarva to Maine.
They couldn't yet call how much snow would fall, but one thing they didn't doubt--
There'd be lots of troubles for folks without shovels next morning to dig themselves out.

By midnight the plows and salt spreaders aroused from blissful hibernation
And set out in droves to make major roads safe for transportation;
But all through the night they lost the fight with a wind snarling in defiance
As it focused its wrath on the neatly blazed paths of feeble modern science.

Thus, the battle raged on till snow-blinding dawn, with the road
crews giving their all,
For they'd just been apprised of a forecast revised; no letup from
the squalls.
The storm and its might would last day and night: then the sirens
sounded;
All schools would be shut, and kids whooped it up--for once they
were gratefully grounded.

Offices, too, closed down so the crews could have a clear shot at
the highways,
But funds were depleted and so left untreated were all the streets
and byways.
Yet some, staunch and stout, bravely set out while the wind howled
like a hyena,
And their cars and trucks slid like wayward pucks on the ice of a
hockey arena.

Soon snow banks were littered with cars that skittered in crazy
directions all morning,
And while tow companies earned lucrative fees, police issued forth
a stern warning:
"Don't try to compete with the snow and sleet unless your vehicle
is sound,
For you'll never survive without four-wheel drive or snow chains
all around."

And most people took heed since whatever they'd need they could buy
at convenience stores
Located nearby, well-stocked with supplies, and they never close
their doors.
So staying inside turned out to provide two ways to wait out the
storm:
The kids had TV's, VCR's, and CD's, and other A.V. forms.

But their moms and their dads would be just as glad to be safe
and snug from the blast,
And seeing the snow at their bedroom window, they felt a warm surge
grip them fast;
The look in their eyes, like that mackerel sky, was about to set
the tone,
And they spent the whole day, as the storm whirled away, embraced
in a world of their own.

And so ends the tale of that formidable gale,
The blizzard of '83,
A storm with the power, those twenty-four hours,
Of any that century.
And those who, with haste, brag of snow to their waist
Back in days when the drifts covered all
Should remember this verse: things always seem worse
When you stand only four feet tall.