

The broken

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So this is Christmas?

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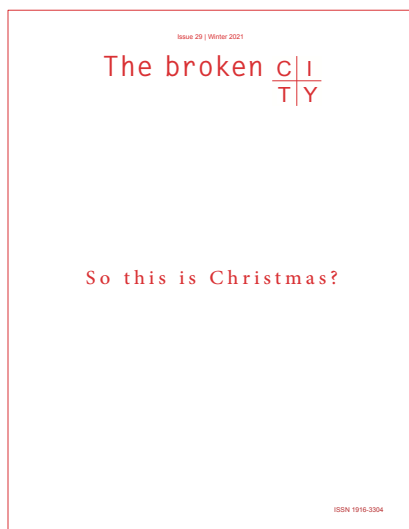
Correspondence:

thebrokencitymag@yahoo.com

On Twitter:

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In this issue:



Welcome to *The Broken City's* latest holiday issue.

There's a little more naughty than nice in these pages—Santa better watch his step!

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The Broken City is currently accepting submissions for its summer 2022 edition: Twinkle, twinkle.

It's an outer space issue! Stars; planets; black holes; comets; Goldilocks Zones—if it has something to do with “the final frontier,” we want to hear about it. We may even let a little sci-fi slip in.

Send poetry, fiction, essays, illustrations and photography to thebrokencitymag@yahoo.com.

Deadline is: May 1, 2022. Submitters will be contacted after that date, with news of acceptance or rejection.

Unalloyed

Anne Myles

Every year my mother would stack up the *Messiah* on the turntable at Christmas; I'd crank it louder when "He is Like a Refiner's Fire" came on—those swooping runs of voice, longing and terror both. It thrilled me, believer without belief: the thought of some great burning that awaited, its purging and afterwards its bliss—what would endure revealed as hard and lucent, entire at last, less than itself and more. And back at school, in chorus, the mass of voices poured through me until I felt my mind departing, senses wholly merged with the flare of sound, its rising, its hallelujah—while outside, light struck the river as ice floes drifted southward, white and silent. I'd stand against the window, forehead on cold glass, that bright remoteness firing me beyond myself and the whole muddled future I still had to make. At home, the red- and green-wrapped presents waited, and our plastic tree, fetched down from the cold attic. On the mantelpiece a garland and brass reindeer kept watch by our menorah; bulging stockings disgorged a gift each evening; I waited for the night my father would drive us around to see the lights and we'd cry "Supergoy!" at the tackiest displays, delighted with ourselves. I was happy then. But still I waited for some power to appear, reducing the blur in me to ash. I didn't know its name, just that it would be merciless and I must love it. I looked out for its flicker at the edge of things—biding its time beyond our mingling, melted life, past the suburban woods where we went walking, snow stamped into earth and leaf-mold by our tread.

Anne Myles's poetry has appeared in the North American Review, Split Rock Review, Whale Road Review, Lavender Review, Ekphrastic Review, Early American Literature, and other journals. A recent transplant to Greensboro, NC, she is Professor Emerita of English at the University of Northern Iowa and in 2021 received her MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. She is a 2021 Pushcart nominee. "Unalloyed" first appeared in Autumn Sky Poetry Daily.

Breakfast with Santa and Baby Jesus

Claudia M Stanek

The Lutherans invite us to visit
the Christ Child seated on St. Nick's
scratchy woolen lap.

Would the mother of God attend
a shrine to plastic spending,
in this land of crystal milk
and bitter honey?

(I hear John Calvin's bones
shudder in the grave.)

Will lighted or living sheep
greet us at the five-dollar-
per-adult-kids-free narthex?
Will shepherds kneel
before Wal-Mart gift cards
waiting to be raffled after all
syrup-coated plates are removed—
proceeds to benefit
the replacement of crumbling brick
and a stained-glass pane or two?

We will be the wise ones,
curious, prostrate
before the king and his charge.
We will approach
with useless presents wrapped
in purple velvet bows,
their price as yet unpaid.
(What could a Sovereign
of any age need?)

We will seek the hope of blessings:
our credit lines expanded,
our deadlines extended
and our own returns few.

The radiator hisses, Claudia M Stanek

sputters multiple bubbles
before it settles to cool again.
A rush of heat fills the room.
Condensation beads
coat the windows. In the dark
you cannot see the plume
from the explosion of silence
in the park. The gazebo
is complete—LED lights, blue
spruce garland, red velvet bows.
Mary and Joseph are lit. All
hollowed bodies weighed down.
Salt will keep their plastic
holinesses from escape.
No one rushes past them. No
one lingers. It's Christmas Eve.
The village is both sluggish
and bustling. Wood smoke twists up
dirty, expectant chimneys.
The radiator hisses.

Claudia M Stanek's work has been turned into a libretto, has been part of an art exhibition, and has been translated into Polish. Her poems have been published in her chapbook Language You Refuse to Learn, as well as in Atticus Review, Rust + Moth, Aji, Inscape, and The Homestead Review, among others. She holds an MFA from The Writing Seminars at Bennington College. A founding member of Just Poets (Rochester, NY), Claudia lives in Tennessee.

Winter Solstice

Terry Allen

Lanterns and fireworks
are not allowed at Stonehenge.
Silly robes? Oh yeah!

Terry Allen is an emeritus professor of Theatre Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, where he taught acting, directing and playwriting. He is the author of the chapbook Monsters in the Rain and the full-length poetry book Art Work. His newest collection of poetry, Waiting on the Last Train, will be published in 2022. His poems have appeared in many journals, including I-70 Review, Popshot Quarterly, Cloudbank, Into the Void and Main Street Rag.

Skeleton

Wilda Morris

The skeleton sitting on the swing in my neighbor's tree on Halloween holding a jack-o-lantern is still there in December. Now his lap is empty. He wears a floppy red velvet cap with a fluffy white ball at the end. Part of me laughs and part of me responds with horror at the idea of a skeletal Santa, a dead Santa, entombment of traditions which bring joy to children who rise early on Christmas, retrieve gifts from festive stockings. I ask myself if this is just another Christmas elf who didn't make it through the year, a tribute to the helpers who brighten holidays for others. I smile and walk on with visions of sugarplums, decorated trees and holiday lights in my head, scheming to sneak out after dark and provide the skeleton with candy canes to hand out to those who walk by.

January Wind

Wilda Morris

**Beginning with one line from
"The Snow Man" by Wallace
Stevens**

Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
of the whimper of the wind in the woods
where oak and beech leaves cling
against all odds to swaying branches,
of the whine of wind through cedar
and pine, I say, Listen. Hear the echo
of ancient forests whose floors housed
the woolly mammoth, disperser of seeds
of honey locusts, Kentucky coffeetrees,
and the Osage orange. Of the whistle
of wind across fields of winter wheat,
the air moving over a prairie,
I say, Harken. It is the breath of bison
longing to live as they once lived,
unfettered and free. Attend to the sounds
of the wind, eavesdrop on the ancients
and learn the lessons they teach.

Wilda Morris, Workshop Chair, Poets and Patrons of Chicago and past President, Illinois State Poetry Society, has published over 700 poems in anthologies, webzines, and print publications. She has won awards for formal and free verse and haiku, including the 2019 Founders' Award from the National Federation of State Poetry Societies. Her second poetry book, Pequod Poems: Gamming with Moby-Dick was published in 2019. Her poetry blog wildamorris.blogspot.com features a monthly contest for poets. "January Wind" first appeared in The Avocet.

Happy Holiday

Mike Wilson

She's been daydreaming about the North Pole,
making a nice naughty list.
She's dressed in red. He's a little green
but there's brandy in the punch.

She smells like cinnamon and pine.
Light from the fire she built
reflects from her eyes
like baubles on the tree.

The sway of her sugar plums,
the aroma of her Christmas pie
promise them both
sweet and salty treats.

She is ageless, whatever age he wants
in the indirect lighting of his imagination,
shadows of serendipitous touching
softer than cotton balls.

His toy soldier is winding up.
Her ballerina tippy-toes.
They pull on the ribbon
and begin to unwrap presents.

Mike Wilson's work is published or upcoming in magazines including Cagibi Literary Journal, The London Reader, Amsterdam Quarterly, The Ocotillo Review, and in Mike's book, Arranging Deck Chairs on the Titanic (Rabbit House Press, 2020), political poetry for a post-truth world. Mike lives in Central Kentucky, USA.

Unexpected Presence on Christmas Eve

Catherine Lee

How do you date the onset of union?
A first kiss wetting on West Paterson NJ
jazz bar stair? or before? —
the poetry foretold itself, somebody else's poem.

Prior to that private reading we bought each other drinks
ambiguous, in the Christmas spirit
with just a hint of icebreaker.

Our eyes met before that, even
across the piano, six candle-lit, calico tablecloths,
and the shoulder of an unsuspecting
Scotch-and-soda drinker.

Haven't I seen you someplace before? Boston, perhaps?
Your gait was familiar
the tune—love for sale indeed—
but I could barely place the name
put finger on a place.

Funny you should ask
did I see
 Lee Morgan's piano player
 Max Roach's, Freddy Hubbard's,
 Dexter Gordon's, Woody Shaw's, Johnny Griffin's
but that night Bobby Hutcherson's
piano player's shortish, deft, delicate, and
elegantly sensual bi-toned hands.
That time I thought
I was sitting close enough!

But my dear good man
to date the onset of our union, to chart the conception —
when an initial date would be in fact reunion —
I regret
anticipate
to admit
I don't yet know you well enough.

Catherine Lee is a widely published neo-Beat who reads solo and with improvising musicians "on poem." Joint gigs (1986-87) with her mentor, poet/hipster tedjoans, got her juiced on this journey. Lee is working on a poetic drama, a musical about senior citizens mentoring public school students. Find multimedia projects archived on Soundcloud and VIMEO. Lee's artistic profile is located at GetCreativeSanAntonio and she can be reached at Jazz-Ovation-Inn.com. "Unexpected Presence on Christmas Eve" was previously published in Spillwords and Eidos.

The Motor Mouth Boy at Christmas

Tom Barlow

The boy with the motor mouth spews out words like a chain saw to anyone who cannot gracefully silence him. He tends to forget what he has been taught about diplomacy, and in his household the boy repeatedly talks himself onto the blacklist of Management. Sent to his room, sent to his room, sent to his room, there he plays king, his audience face cards—queens and jacks—who listen stoically. He gauges the strength of his reign by the depth of their genuflection, ruining a deck by bending the royalty in half.

On Christmas morning, the motor-mouth boy holds his peace in return for his share of the plunder, until a coughing jag across the room breaks his tongue loose, and he questions the wisdom of gift-packaged Marlboros. Management disapproves of his opinion and sentences him to his room again where, head hanging over the edge of the bed, he ponders the joys left unopened under the tree, joys Management has threatened to return to the store.

He shakes his head to knock aside the thoughts that continue to strike his brain like hail on a skylight, until he is forced to set his cards up in a row and share with them, in detail, his grievances. One by one, they bow to his righteousness.

Tom Barlow is an Ohio author of poetry, short stories and novels. His work has appeared in journals and anthologies including PlainSongs, Ekphrastic Review, Voicemail Poetry, Hobart, Tenemos, Redivider, Aji, The New York Quarterly, The Modern Poetry Quarterly, and many more. See more at tombarlowauthor.com.

Simple Decoration

Bob Thurber

It was all Jack that Christmas. On the drive across town I thought of nothing else. Not my ex-wife, whose car I had begged to borrow, or my daughter experiencing her first Christmas without me. My headlights carved tunnels in the slanting snow. I found a clear spot in a tow zone and bumped up onto the curb. I left the engine running, headlights on, not caring if I ever saw that car again.

My key still fit. I let myself in, stomping snow from my boots. It was late. I was embarrassed. All the real work had been done.

Phil was there. Arthur, too. They had repositioned the bed, set its angle, laid Jack out neat and cozy. On a pedestal table, dead center of the carpet, stood a two-foot tree, some of its branches dripping wet snow.

"The roads are treacherous," I told the room.

Someone coughed. Arthur, I think.

He was huddled by the bed, holding Jack's hand as though it were a tiny bird. Phil was behind him, sipping from a mug with my name on it.

"So what's the word?" I said. "What do they say?"

I reached under my scarf and fingered the collar of my coat.

"They? They don't know anything," Arthur said.

Phil rocked, and shrugged. "Tonight. Tomorrow. Who knows?"

"I do. I know," Arthur said. "He'll die in the morning. He'll die on the day Christ was born."

My nerves burned cold as I approached the bed. Someone, probably Arthur, had stacked Jack's prescription bottles into a useless pyramid. I had to tuck my elbow to avoid knocking them over. No one said anything as I kissed Jack on the forehead and slowly backed away.

"That's new," I said, nodding at the tree.

"Fifteen minutes old," said Phil, tilting his watch to catch the light.

"Phil stole it from the side yard." Arthur said.

"Roots and all," Phil said.

I started to smile, then thought better of it. I leaned my face into the tree. I touched a pine needle with my nose.

"Tell me," I said. "Either one of you uncomfortable with my being here?"

Phil shrugged. "You have a right," he said. "I guess."

He was staring at Arthur, at Arthur's back.

"I don't care," Arthur said. He was studying Jack's hand as though something were written there. "Though I used to. I used to care very much. Enough to hate you both." He turned his head a little; his eyes were closed. "I suppose none of that makes a bit of difference now."

I shrugged out of my coat.

"Let me help you with that," Phil said.

It was in a hallway closet, a closet meant for coats, that we found the wicker basket full of garland and tinted-glass ornaments, and some embroidered things Jack's mother had made.

Hers was a story we'd forgotten to remember.

She'd been dead almost forever but in her last days had crocheted tiny stockings, little candy canes, macramé angels, a few fat-faced Santas with cotton balls strategically placed.

Fine needlework!

All with a loop of yarn so you didn't need hooks. Just snatch up a branch and slip the thing on, easy as a ring.

Like fools we used it all.

We emptied that basket, crowding every-

thing in, overlapping when we had to.

Then we settled back, sipping cocoa and admiring our handiwork.

The air grew hot with our breathing and the thick smell of pine.

I sunk into a fat chair, closed my eyes and fell asleep—for a minute or an hour.

When I woke the windows were full of light, and the tree looked gaudy and cheap—far too flashy for our friend who hated glitz.

I complained out loud. And first Phil, then Arthur,

agreed.

And with fresh cups of cocoa in one hand we stripped that tree bare, except for the garland and a single yellowed angel whose yarn had snarled.

God, we were tired. Each of us needed a shave. The three of us yawned like lions as we circled that tree, planning to start again, to keep it dignified and simple.

But then Jack fluttered an eye, turned his head on the pillow:

“Perfect,” he whispered.

So we left it that way.

Bob Thurber is the author of six books, including Paperboy: A Dysfunctional Novel. Over the years, his work has received a long list of literary awards and citations, appeared in hundreds of publications, including Esquire, and been anthologized more than 70 times. He resides in Massachusetts. Recently, a 50-word story was nominated for a Best Microfiction 2022 anthology. Visit his website, www.BobThurber.net.

Donner and Blitzen and Erzulie

Mark Thomas

It was a little past midnight—the very beginning of Christmas day—and Bob was preparing to kill his Grandma Sterling. Statistically speaking, December twenty-fifth was the deadliest day of the year, in terms of negative hospital outcomes, and it was probably the only day the deed could be accomplished without suspicion.

The old lady had changed her will again, leaving her townhouse and mutual fund portfolio to her current favourite grandson... Bob. That was certainly fortuitous, but Bob knew it would only be a matter of time before Grandma Sterling staggered into her lawyer's office and altered it once more. A few days ago, his obnoxious cousin Karol had been the beneficiary. A few days before that, his sister was the lucky one and she had been insufferable, measuring the bay window for new drapes and pulling up corners of the carpet to check for hardwood.

There would be nothing left

of the estate if things continued like this. The lawyer was an unscrupulous dirtbag who charged nearly a thousand dollars every time the old lady walked through his vestibule.

It had to be done today, that much was obvious. The method of death was also obvious: Bob would kill Grandma Sterling with a Voodoo curse. The family had crammed into the old lady's townhouse living room to drink rum egg nogs and watch holiday specials. One of them had been a cross-character abomination called “Have a Happy Haitian Christmas, Charlie Brown.”

For Bob, that had been a life-altering half hour.

Bob learned that you didn't need wax to make a voodoo effigy as most people believed. The magic could easily be delivered through a doll composed of tightly-bound Christmas ribbons. One loop served as the head, a tangled mass formed the torso and

trailing strands were symbolic limbs. The figure had to be purified with caustic alcohol (which was no problem), presumably to remove cast-off DNA, and a single strand of the victim's hair had to be sewn into the trunk while the supplicant quietly mumbled a hate prayer.

Bob pretended to fall asleep on the couch, waiting for his relatives to lurch off to spare bedrooms or inflatable mattresses in the basement rec room. As soon as he was alone, Bob fashioned the decorative weapon. Obtaining a hair sample was no problem; the withered crone shed like a Maine Coon. The sticky maple syrup bottle they had been passing around at brunch, the bathroom sink, and the toilet seat were all plastered with long white strands, but the eggnog in Bob's stomach rolled at the prospect of collecting DNA from those sources. Luckily, there were a lot of alternatives. His uncle Devin had pounded

three-inch spiral ardox nails into the fireplace mantle to hang stockings, and the old lady had snagged herself multiple times while stuffing them full of underwear and breath mints.

Bob walked over to the fireplace and selected one particularly robust thread and carefully unwrapped it from the galvanized nail head. The hair was glistening white along most of its length, but had bits of disgusting yellowish discoloration near the end. Bob swallowed hard, then used a swizzle stick to knit the hair into the entrails of his Voodoo doll. Bob clicked his Zippo open and purified a metal skewer lying on an appetizer tray. Then he closed his eyes, silently expelled the most fervent Christmas wish of his life and plunged the slender metal sword into the doll's thorax.

* * *

Bob was awakened from a nightmare-filled slumber by a pounding on the front door. He rolled off the couch, quickly checked to see if he was wearing pants, and stumbled down the hall to the entranceway. Bob pulled the door open to witness utter chaos on the tiny front lawn. Two ambulance attendants were administering defibrillator shocks to a blanketed figure on a stretcher. Bob could see a swath of yellowish-white hair, and a patch of red bathrobe. The sky above this little tableau was full of roiling black clouds as if a winter thunderstorm was ready to punish the planet.

A policeman in Kevlar body armor addressed Bob. "Sir, it appears that someone was taken ill as they left your residence." He leaned forward aggressively. "Did you folks have a Christmas party here, last night?"

"Well, yes," Bob said thickly. He looked over the policeman's shoulder at the ambulance attendants' frenzied activity. "Is that my Grandma Sterling? I've been a little worried about her lately. She's frail and her mind hasn't been...well, you know..." Bob was already practicing not speaking ill of the dead, and now that his body had metabolized some of the residual alcohol, he was quietly amazed that his drunken voodoo plan had actually worked. It really was a Christmas miracle; soon, he would be able to move out of his crappy basement apartment and drive Granma Sterling's Hyundai to work instead of taking a bus with two transfers.

The policeman furrowed his brows. "The victim is an elderly male, sir."

Grandma Sterling suddenly appeared behind Bob's shoulder. "What's going on?" she asked. "What are you doing on my lawn?"

"Someone collapsed outside your unit, ma'am, must have been several hours ago. A neighbour noticed and called nine-one-one. Did anyone at your party dress up as Santa Claus?"

Bob and Grandma Sterling looked at each other briefly. "Of course not."

"The victim doesn't appear to have any conventional identification. He's wearing a fur-trimmed red suit and the only things in his pockets are some baby carrots, a handful of sugar cubes and a laminated address card reading North Pole." A stubby finger jabbed Bob's chest. "Can you have a quick look at the gentleman to see if you recognize him, before they slide him into the ambulance."

Bob tip-toed down the icy sidewalk and paused beside the stretcher. There was an oxygen mask stretched across the broad, bearded face. The man's cheeks were feverish red spots, but he was alive. For an instant, their eyes locked and Bob felt intensely uncomfortable.

"No," Bob said uncertainly.

Granma Sterling hobbled down the steps to have a look as well. "I've never seen him before."

The policeman activated his radio. "Negative, Cap. The residents don't know who he is. We'll continue to canvas the neighbourhood." Bob helped Grandma Sterling back up the townhouse steps. Several other relatives had been awakened by the commotion and were crowding the doorway.

The sky continued to darken and rumble as ambulance doors slammed shut. "Merry Christmas," the policeman said as he touched his cap in a perfunctory salute, and crunched violently across the lawn.

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