The broken CITY

Issue 38
Summer 2026

Abracadabra

ISSN 1916-3304

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The Broken City, ISSN 1916-3304, is published semiannually out of Toronto, Canada, appearing sporadically in print, but always at: www.thebrokencitymag.com.

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Lynn Wolfe is a writer, artist and educator in Southern California. Her work has appeared in *Calliope*, *Brief Wilderness*, *The B'K Magazine*, and elsewhere. You can see her work at lynnwolfe.wordpress.com.

Contents:

Poetry, etc.

Donna J. Gelagotis Lee 3
Byron Matthew Dyck 4
Jennifer Clark 5
Maureen Clark 6

Fiction

Olivia Cohen 7

In this issue:

Welcome to a very magical issue of *The Broken City*. The magazine was expecting a deluge of Harry Potter submissions but it was true (ish) witch tales that dominated our inbox. Boo!

The Broken City is currently accepting submissions for its winter 2026 edition: "Down the rabbit hole", an exploration of dreams and dreaming.

We're looking for nightmares, daydreams, hallucinations and absurd tales that are from, or relate to, the realm of dreams.

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

Deadline is: December 1, 2026. Submitters will be contacted after that date, with news of acceptance or rejection.

Donna J. Gelagotis Lee

When the hour moves back,

and I'm stuck in the dark,
in the day, I wonder if God
made the mistake or if we,
so tangled in pushing life past

its time, stretched the day too
far, held morning like a golden
egg. Now night comes before
me, like a matador with a cape. I

keep seeing red, want to charge
forward, but it's so dark I can
barely tell the difference between
night and movement. When

the hour moves back, it's as if
I had given in, when I hadn't.
It's as if the dark were a different
face that I ignored. I'm counting,

of course. I'm keeping to a schedule.
And so are you. Neither of us wants
to, but it's so easy, the slow-falling hand
like a magician's. It's night. It's day.

Donna J. Gelagotis Lee is the author of two award-winning collections, Intersection on Neptune *(The Poetry Press of Press Americana, 2019), winner of the Prize Americana for Poetry 2018, and* On the Altar of Greece *(Gival Press, 2006), winner of the 2005 Gival Press Poetry Award and recipient of a 2007 Eric Hoffer Book Award: Notable for Art Category. Her poetry has appeared in numerous journals internationally, including* The Dalhousie Review, Existere - Journal of Arts and Literature, Feminist Studies, The Massachusetts Review, *and* Vallum: contemporary poetry. *Her website is www.donnajgelagotislee.com.*

As Before In Beitou

Byron Matthew Dyck

Beitou's urban hiking paths,
Well bricked and hygienic,
She hurls herself across.

Riding and making wind,
Stitching spells from sulphur.
Producing.

Yangming Shan,
From a lonely witan,
Grants permission.

Death clauses are superfluous
For those of the sluicing silk,
As is the face paint or lava.

Some magic barely hangs on,
Leaves skulls on necks,
Even in lost valleys.

Hurled,
Arrived,
A line of harvest
For mosquito protein
And for ancient times sake.

The wind she made,
Blows in her many eyes,
Misunderstood as witches.

Back
Beckons
As before
In Beitou.

Byron Matthew Dyck is an expat educator. He runs local paths, for often the muse whispers there. When not writing or collaging, he can be found buying groceries in the wilds of wet markets or getting the dishes done. His works have been featured in the weddings and funerals of friends and family, often to moist praise. Portions of his poems have also been highlighted by the TPC Review. *He lives in Taipei, Formosa.*

Superstitions in the Age of Lumber

Jennifer Clark

Any jack worth his weight in wildcats knows it's bad luck to board
in a bunkhouse built from poplars; those trees bore the crucified Christ.
Sleep with your head pointed downriver and a man will drown.
Never grind an axe on Sunday or you'll cut yourself on Monday.
Woodpeckers bring rain.
If you find an owl in a tree, let it be. Might be a sign the trees a snag.
Like Panicky Pete, tuck a file in your left boot to kick the rheumatism away.
Before cutting, hug the tree so it falls in the right direction.
Pick your teeth with splinter from a lightning-struck tree. Your teeth will never ache.

Jennifer Clark's fourth poetry collection, Intercede: Saints for Concerning Occasions*, was recently released by Unsolicited Press. Clark is also the author of three more books, including a memoir,* Kissing the World Goodbye*, which blends family stories with recipes. You can find her at jenniferclarkkzoo.com, @jenniferclarkbooks, and at writingwithoutanet.substack.com.*

Alizon Device
Maureen Clark

the story goes like this
at the edge of Pendle Forest

Alizon saw the peddler
and asked for some pins

but he refused and she
pointed a finger at him

cursing under her breath
and he chose that moment

to have a massive stroke
which wouldn't be a problem

if it wasn't 1612 but it was
and she came from a family of witches

when asked by the magistrate
if she could make him well

she said no then by correction
said she didn't know that kind of magic

but her grandmother might
giving two confessions for the price of one

Maureen Clark's This Insatiable August *was released by Signature Books and won the AML Award for Best Poetry Book. Her memoir* Confessions of a Once Upon a Time Mormon Girl *from Hypatia Press was released in June 2026. She was president of Writers @ Work. She received her MFA in Poetry from the University of Utah where she taught for 20 years.*
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What Survived the Noose

Olivia Cohen

The rope scratched Sarah's throat. Blades of grass squished between her toes, bare feet sinking into cool earth. The mob of men who had brought her here shouted in spit-spraying curses. "Gospel witch!" Their torches waved close to dry leaves and Sarah hoped they'd all burn. "Hang, you gospel witch and take your black magics to hell with you!"

They held their crosses at their chests like steel shields. Sarah smirked, knowing their wooden trinkets couldn't protect them.

High Sheriff Gregory Corbin gripped the end of the rope and flung it over the mighty oak's thickest branch. Sarah gagged when he tugged it, pulling the noose tighter than her corset.

Corbin never wanted to act as executioner, but he couldn't refuse the reverend who had taken him in after his mother's death. The one who cared for him when he fell sick, fed him when he was hungry. So when Reverend Francis asked Corbin to carry out his duty of ridding the world of sorcerous sin, Corbin conceded.

He wasn't the largest man, nor the strongest. But Sarah was all flesh and bone with pale skin thin as paper, webbed with dark veins left by black magic.

"Look at me, Corbin." Sarah's tongue wasn't that of a woman about to meet death's end. Its power was palpable, each word landing like an order from a strict parent.

Corbin didn't look. He didn't like the sight of her. Frail as a woman twice her age with hair red and wild as fire.

"I said *look* at me."

Sarah's voice darkened with an echo-like ripple. As if fingers reached from Sarah's vocal cords and wrapped around Corbin's head, his gaze snapped toward her so fast his neck strained.

Torch flames reflected in Sarah's dark irises as she peered at Corbin with an arched brow. "Do you think this rope is strong enough to kill me?"

Corbin fought her magnetic force and dropped his stare to the ground. "Don't talk to me, *witch*." He tightened the cloak around his neck as shivers slithered down his spine. The seasons had yet to change, but the wind stank of death. Trees bled crimson leaves and some of the branches were already bare. Autumn never waited its turn in Salem. It dug its nails into Summer and clawed its way in.

Sarah's laugh screeched and once again Corbin's eye was drawn to her. "The rope may steal my breath, but I will not die."

Corbin wanted nothing more than to dodge her gaze. Still, hard as he tried he could not break from her spell.

Her words hissed like a snake on the forest floor, slipping through weeds in secret.

"I will live on in the creak of your door. In the smoke of a snuffed candle. God will steal your wine, and my blood will fill your cup.
In your hair. In your bones.
I will crawl beneath your skin and you will need to *cut* me out." Sarah's stare bore into Corbin's and beads of sweat dripped beneath his cloak. "Perhaps then you will see darkness lives closer to your heart than you think."

While Corbin's lips remained a straight unbothered line, his pulse crashed against his throat. He released a heavy exhale when Reverend Francis emerged from the horde and broke the trance tethering him to the witch.

Reverend Francis clutched the bible to his breast when he stepped toward the condemned. A heated stare passed between the two of them, Sarah glaring at the Elder with a knowing eye. Reverend Francis sneered back. Clenching his jaw, the veins bulged under his preaching bands.

After a beat too long, Reverend Francis cleared his throat. "Sarah Newson, you stand convicted of witchcraft and the use of prohibited black magics. Thou shalt not suffer a sorcerer's sin and so you, Sarah Newson, are hereby sentenced to death. When your darkness is made to perish, only light will prevail."

"Oh Francis," Sarah squinted at the reverend, then the corner of her mouth crept upward. "Without darkness, the world burns under scorching light."

Reverend Francis tore his gaze away from the witch and glanced at Corbin, dropping his chin with a curt nod. The mob of men spat at Sarah's feet and an uproar of bitter prayers rose like the curling smoke of blazing wood. Corbin shook off the words the witch had cursed him with. He widened his stance and with all his might tugged on the rope. The cord found a groove in the branch, carving a ridge into the bark, and Sarah Newson levitated. Her feet dangled as her body convulsed—gurgling as the rope strangled her. Dark eyes bulged. Then all at once, her body stilled, and the rope grew heavy with dead weight in Corbin's grasp. Sarah's lifeless eyes remained open and like the power still held, Corbin couldn't look away.

"Cut her down," Reverend Francis shuffled beside Corbin, shifting his robes into place. "Throw the body in the pit with the others."

* * *

Corbin returned home that night with stiff muscles. The chatter of men was a welcome distraction on the journey home from the ledge. But now as he was alone, the silence seemed to cave in on him. The door creaked with a grating pitch, lingering in the air long after the knob locked. And the witch's words returned to Corbin's mind with a gulp.

He hung his cloak on the hook and loosened his neckband. Inhaling the scent of damp wood and stale ash,

Corbin crossed the room to the basin. Water stung his hands where the rope had scathed him but the cool droplets washed the dirt from his face. After he dried himself with a rag he looked at his reflection in the water.

He stumbled back, crashing into the bookshelf behind him. The bible landed on the ground with a thud. He struggled for breath with a pounding heart. He struggled to shake the image from his mind. For when he stared into the water it was not his pale green eyes that stared back, but dark flaming irises.

Once his pulse returned to a normal rhythm, Corbin shook his head and laughed to himself. “Just a trick of the mind. That’s all.” But when he wiped his brow his hand was greased with cold sweat.

A frigid wind slipped through the diamond paned window and Corbin shivered. He staggered to the hearth and built a fire. Sparks cracked beneath the cauldron where his stew cooked. Though Corbin lacked an appetite, he sat at the table as if it were any other night, as if the day hadn’t held such horror.

He poured himself a glass of light red wine. He only drank on nights he hanged a woman and now the bottle lay half empty.

Creeaaak.

His front door glided open on its own. Blood chilling in his veins, he swallowed hard. With a croak of his chair, he slid out from under the table and drudged across the room. Placing a delicate hand on the wooden door, Corbin leaned out of the frame, hunting for anyone who could have freed the latch and loosened the hinges. But at such a late hour, the streets were deserted.

A pit of dread sank into his gut. He shut the door, making sure the latch was secured properly.

His boots landed heavy as he walked back to the cup he’d left on the table. He brought it to his nose, inhaling the sickly sweet perfumes of crushed grapes. He tipped the glass back and spilled the contents into his mouth.

Metal. Iron. Thick fluid sat on his tongue.

Blood.

Coating the wooden table in dark red blood he spit the sip where he stood—gagging and choking. He spit and spit. But no matter how dry his mouth became, the metallic flavor lingered on his tongue and his stomach turned with bile.

Sparks in the hearth cracked loud as a whip. The cauldron rocked back and forth on the hook. The door flung open. Then with a mind-numbing screech, it shut.
Open.
Shut.
Open.

Shut.
Creak. Creak. Creak.
The cauldron flipped from the hearth and boiling broth covered the floor. The flames of the fire climbed higher until it raged and the house swelled with heat so hot Corbin thought he might burn.

Leaving the puddle of blood on his dining room table and broth melting the dirt-packed floor, he bolted toward the door and ran through it before it shut again. Dust clouded in the moonlight with every rushed step and Corbin didn't slow until he reached Reverend Francis's house. Even then his energy didn't wane. He balled his hands into fists and pounded. "Reverend! It's me, Corbin. Please, open the door."

Bang. Bang. Bang.

With each passing moment he spent alone, the taste of blood returned. Just when Corbin thought he might vomit, the door flung open. Reverend Francis was dressed in his sleeping shirt and his white hair was an untamed mess.

"Corbin, what is it at this hour? I had already retired to bed."

Corbin risked the consequences of not being polite as he pushed inside. "Reverend, I must tell you something. Sarah—the witch—before she died she cursed me. She said my wine would turn to blood and—"

* * *

Reverend Francis watched Corbin pace across the room, his candlewick flickering. "Sit, boy." He placed a hand on Corbin's shoulder and led him to the armchair, taking a seat across and laying his chamberstick on the table between them. "What's happened?"

"My-my wine turned to blood in my mouth. The door opened and shut, all on its own. My eyes—they were my eyes but they weren't. Reverend Francis, they were *hers*."

Reverend Francis sat back in his chair with his lip pinched. Then as if Corbin's night hadn't held enough terror, Reverend Francis *laughed*. "You've had a long day. What you need is rest. Your wine has soured. Your eyes are tired."

Corbin shook his head and banged his hands on the table, the pool of wax in the saucer rippling from impact. "No. I am telling you what happened. That witch cursed me with black magic."

Reverend Francis clicked his tongue. "You sound as if you are mad, Corbin. You come to me in the dark hour and speak nonsense?"

For a moment, Corbin had no words. The room, the home, in which he was raised seemed to spin around him. Corbin cleared his dry throat. "Forgive me reverend if I speak out of turn, but if you believe such black magics are nothing but nonsense… then for what purpose was Sarah Newson sentenced to hang?"

Though Corbin felt not even the slightest of breezes, the candle blew out, and Reverend Francis was bathed in blackness. Corbin's breath carried the smoke from the wick and his cough echoed in the silence.

Reverend Francis staggered to his feet and Corbin winced as nails dug into his shoulders and pulled him from the chair. "You must go, boy." Reverend Francis pushed Corbin to the door and silver light cast shadows onto his face. "A day like today is never easy. Rest. Come to me when you're better."

Corbin's breath was mist in the grey hue of early morning as he froze at Francis's slammed door—his body sinking like the dead weight of Sarah's corpse. Dark smoke rose over the town from the direction of his home and he feared he had nothing but ash to return to.

The witch had ruined him. She'd taken his home. Soiled his perception of the man he'd worshiped. And while Corbin wished for blind rage, it was tears his body shook with.

He didn't need it. He didn't need *lies*. It was the truth he was starved for.

Corbin sniffed and wiped his nose with his shirtsleeve. He ran in the direction of the jail, the place from where they had dragged Sarah just hours before, to the rhythm of a woman crying. The wind whistled with the sound of Sarah's voice, every corner holding her ghost. When he arrived, salty sweat shined on his face and he pushed past the guard and into the jail. The pungent smell of urine and rotting waste caused Corbin to buckle back, covering his nose with his arm. But it was no use, the air was inescapable.

Corbin wrapped his hands around the cell bars and leaned forward, peeling his eyes for the one they left behind. "Mary." Rats scattered at the sound of his voice, little paws tapping over his boots. "Mary, show yourself."

Mary's pale skin shifted in the shadows. Then out of the darkness, a figure appeared. Oozing sores marked her face, bones protruding from the thin flesh. "Is it time?" She coughed, as if speaking was too much for her dry throat. "Is it time for me to die?"

Corbin dipped his chin and stared at the rat gnawing at his heels. "Not yet."

"What then?"

"I-I need to know why—"

"Why?" Mary's brows furrowed, the dark circles around her eyes creased as she squinted at him.

"Why did Father Francis want you and Sarah dead?"

"Hah." Mary's sharp laugh clawed at the walls of Corbin's brain. "Because we're *witches* of course."

Corbin kissed his teeth, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the bars tighter. "But—*that* is not why."

Mary propelled forward, shaking the bars where Corbin's grip landed with her own. "Francis." She spit on the ground, grey saliva blending with the other stains. "He couldn't handle Sarah's rejection. He couldn't handle the fact that she loved me and *not* him."

Corbin swallowed the lump in his throat. "That's—that's why?"

"That is why."

Corbin's blood thickened like tree sap. He had done it. He had done Francis's bidding for years without ever questioning the man who'd raised him.

"But—but you're a witch? Aren't you Mary?"

"No." Her eyes glossed over as her stare fell blank. "I'd only loved one."

Corbin nodded. The metallic flavor of blood still pricked at the back of his throat. "Her power was real? Wasn't it? The darkness."

Mary shook her head. "That is what you don't understand. Sarah's power was special. But the darkness lives in us all."

Something cracked inside of Corbin's chest, like the fibers which built him were being ripped open.

Rushing footsteps shuffled outside the jail's doors. White horror struck Mary's face. "They're coming for me."

Her wailing voice echoed and Corbin scoured the bars for a weak point. "I'll free you. I'll—"

"Get away from the witch, boy."

Corbin turned on his heels, raising his arms at his sides, blocking Mary from Francis's view. "She's not a witch and you know it, Francis. She has made no use of black magic."

Francis's nostrils flared, his face reddened, eyes bulged. "Magic or no magic, they are vile women with weak morals and the world is better without them."

Corbin's skin began to crawl and his arms were raised with wormlike creatures squirming just under his skin. His throat burned as one of the critters slithered up his neck. He wrapped his arm around his neck, gasping for air. "You are the one who is evil, Francis." Sarah was testing him, making it harder than it had to be. He choked on saliva and his spit soiled the ground as he spoke. He struggled for breath and collapsed to the floor. But he would not fail her now. "You have made me evil as well."

Behind Francis the mob of angry men piled into the small jail. The stink of sweaty man was pungent against the wafting reek of rotting innocents. "Take her!" They screamed and Corbin's blood boiled underneath his

flesh.

Mary shrieked as the men drove nearer. “Corbin, don’t let them take me.” She shuffled away and hid in the shadows.

Corbin gripped at the knife he had tucked away. The critters traveled up and down his body, Sarah’s curse weakening his muscles, crawling beneath his skin. Making him fight. But as Francis came toward the woman he wished to murder, Corbin found his last ounce of strength. He lunged at the only father he’d ever known and plunged the dagger into his gut. Blood spilled. Men shouted in the background. Corbin’s vision blurred.

Francis had raised Corbin as an extension of himself—and Corbin had cut him open.

Francis fell to the ground and the creatures trapped beneath Corbin’s flesh vanished. He held the knife to the others, dripping with their leader’s blood. “If any of you come near me, you will find Francis’s fate all the same.”

“Murderer,” they shouted. “You will hang for this. You will hang for this display of darkness and evil.”

Corbin laughed to himself like a deranged man. “Hang me then. Perhaps we could all use a turn at the rope. ”

The men lunged at Corbin and while he attempted to make use of the blade in his grip, they struggled it away. They pulled at his arms and held them behind his back as they tied them together and carried him to the ledge. And there, the noose was waiting.

Corbin didn’t scream. He didn’t beg for the mercy he didn’t deserve. All he did was look at his execution with certainty in his eyes. “This rope will not kill me.” The line scratched his throat as they tightened it. Chips of wood fell around him as the rope found the groove. “The darkness lives in us all.”

Corbin’s body hung from a branch too bare for the season. Then he was cut down and buried with the others.

Olivia Cohen is an emerging writer from the Pocono Mountains in Eastern, PA. She is currently working as an event coordinator. She spends her days walking in the park, reading in her hammock, and perfecting her fantasy novel. This is her first publication.

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