

The Montana Writers' Guild presents this all-holiday anthology, comprised of fiction, creative non-fiction, memoirs, poetry, and artwork from Montana writers and artists. The written pieces cover a wide spectrum of emotions for all ages.

## **Holiday Voices**

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# **HOLIDAY VOICES**

**The Montana Writers' Guild**

Holiday Voices  
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## **LISTEN to the WIND BLOW THROUGH the TREES**

(A St. Nicholas Eve circa 1932)

By

“Fred” Hilbrand Hofman

Anybody born and raised on that little spot of land whose coast is greeted by the white-capped waves of the North Sea will remember this story, for it could be their own. Even those no longer living in the towns with the brick-paved streets that are swept by the wind and washed by the rain of its endless storms, know “listen to the wind.” It is the overture, the herald angel, the Paul Revere of the event of the year dearest to the heart of most every Dutchman, the fifth of December. That evening, or as in the song, the little “Sinterklaas” eve (the Dutch love diminutives), was the evening before the birthday of the Bishop of Myra, patron saint of seafarers, children and thieves.

Long before the event, we would sing this song in school, and create an atmosphere of almost mythical proportions of anticipation, apprehension, expectation, and yes, a little fear, Fear? Yes, because as legend had it, children who behaved badly would be dealt with rather severely. In some cases they would be put in the sack, brought along and carried by a servant of St. Nicholas. His servant and constant companion was called “Zwarte Piet,” or Black Pete (no political correctness in those days). He was supposed to be a Moor, and dressed in the Spanish style of the time period of the days in which the saint lived: hat with colorful long feather, puffed sleeves, and short pants over tights. To get back to the sack, who knows what happened to anyone unlucky enough to get put in there. Rumor had it that he would be taken to Spain to await a life of who knows what.

Sinterklaas is an imposing and inspiring figure by himself, at least to little children. Dressed in the attire of Catholic bishop, complete with miter and staff, he loves children but insists on good behavior. “Zwarte Piet,” although he is the one that hands out the presents, is a little mistrusted by the children. He throws handfuls of candy and pepper nuts around, which usually are quickly gathered up by those present.

Sinterklaas is seen in many locations during the days preceding the fifth of December, but these are just helpers, as there can only be one real “Sint.” The children are willing to believe that, AND the wonderful stories of him riding on his great dapple grey from rooftop to rooftop. Sometimes he is even seen by grownups silhouetted against the moonlight and wind-driven clouds.

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I always thought that Sinterklaas had to be a hell of a horseman to pull off that stunt, since the Dutch roofs are not flat, and are covered with red clay tiles that are curved and baked. And what's more, how did he get on top of the buildings? Also, considering the Dutch weather, he must have gotten soaked in the rain that usually accompanied our fall days. And what about Pete? We must give the parents a lot of credit for explaining in all those situations, but they did. For a while anyway.

But all the concerns about those matters had been forgotten that "Sinterklaas" eve as we sat round the table: Dad, Mother, my little sister, our closest neighbors with their three kids, and me. The weather was bad. Rain and wind were rattling the windows. And even inside it was drafty to the point that the oil lamp flickered now and then, yet it was cozy. Mother and the neighbor lady had their feet on a small oak box about one foot square with one open side and little round holes in the top. Inside was an earthenware vessel in which a piece of peat lay smoldering, which warmed the top. These little footstools, "stoven" as they were called, were passed around to us children as well. That together with the singing of the kettle on the regular stove would have put us to sleep, had it not been for the pounding of our hearts. Why? Well, the neighbor upon his arrival had excitedly announced that they (he and his family) had seen a shadow on the wall of the house on the other side of the street. We all thought the same thing: "Sinterklaas" is coming.

Pa put on his coat and said he was going to investigate, and told us to start singing. And sing we did.

Listen to the wind blow through the trees,  
Even here inside blows the wind.  
Will the good Sint come and see us.  
Now it's bad weather that he will find.  
Yet he rides in many dark nights, on his horse so very fast.  
If he knows how long we've waited,  
Surely he will come at last, surely he will come at last.

To be followed by:

What's that knocking children, who is knocking children,  
Who is tapping at the window pane?  
It's a stranger surely, who has surely lost his way.  
I will quickly ask him for his name.



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St. Nikolaas, St. Nikolaas, please come and visit us tonight,  
And scatter some goodies in the corner of the room.

The rattling of heavy chains outside the apartment door stopped us cold, and then something or somebody banged on our door so hard that my little sister started to scream and wet her pants. She then kicked over the little “stoven.” The neighbor lady dove under the table to keep the spilled coals from burning the rug. In the process of that, she knocked over the stemmed glasses which contained the grownup’s celebration spirits. The door flew open and a white gloved hand threw a hail of candy and pepper nuts into the room. It was pandemonium. Five screaming children threw themselves on this culinary treasure, clawing and yelling. Even “Sinterklaas” was momentarily forgotten. Amidst all that Dad walked in, looked in astonishment around this melee, and asked, “What happened?” Mother, still busy cleaning up the mess of the spilled drinks and food said, “Oh a dammed old fool and a black kid raised a bit of hell.” She was clearly not very pleased. Dad looked somewhat sheepish and reported that HE had not seen anything, but that he heard a lot of noise and the sounds of hoofs in the distances.

As the evening progressed mother’s good mood returned, and we had a marvelous time, until dad and the neighbor, fortified with gin, got into a heated political argument, (one was a communist and the other a democrat). That ended the party.

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