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THE
LAUREL



THE LAUREL

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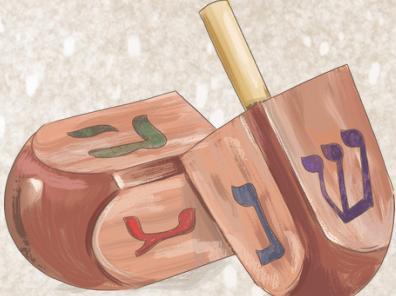


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by Joshua Cervantes (Assistant Editor)





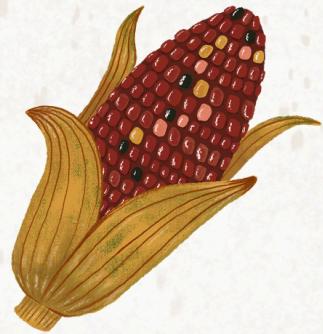
Canker Sore



by Donovan Dougherty (Poetry Editor)



You left me a canker sore
When I think I'm over you
My mouth fills with blood



I can't eat anything except cafeteria goo
Gurgling with salt doesn't make it easier
My tongue grazes the wound
It stings to the touch

The pain-free moments only loom

Before I see you again
And like a canker sore



Right when I'm getting better
I get pain I just can't ignore





Letter to a girl I no longer know



by Donovan Dougherty (Poetry Editor)

I'm two jagerbombs down and kissing ceramic tile
I can see her mirage in spinning snapshots

Pulled from my floor lover, my lame legs are cured by her worried smile
My callouses cling to her soft hand, refusing to let me unknot

My hands grip stone, staring at an imposter
She strikes the handle down, like Moses striking the rock
The water flows endlessly, I am baptized underneath chlorine filled tap water
My midnight prophet grabs my hand, our fingers interlocked

I try to memorize her face, its crevices and peaks
She lays me down like a sacrificial lamb, but my Abraham leaves me be
I don't see her sneak away, but I smell her sweet scent begin to cease
I am alone without my guardian angel, filled with regret and a stomach filled with tweas



What Comes with Age

by Rily Rzepka

I never wanted to grow old.

The brittling of bones (that have carried me for so long).

The aching of muscles (that I've pushed to the brink).

The sagging of skin (that I've spent years perfecting).

I used to say I'd never let myself get passed 40.

I'd leave with the appearance of my first wrinkle.

But I've caught myself wondering what our life could look like.

I wonder what your bright eyes will look like after years spent laughing (with me).

And how long it will take for your hair to grey (and if you'll mind).

I wonder if you'll develop a taste for coffee (as your youthful energy fades).

I've started to wonder if I will too.

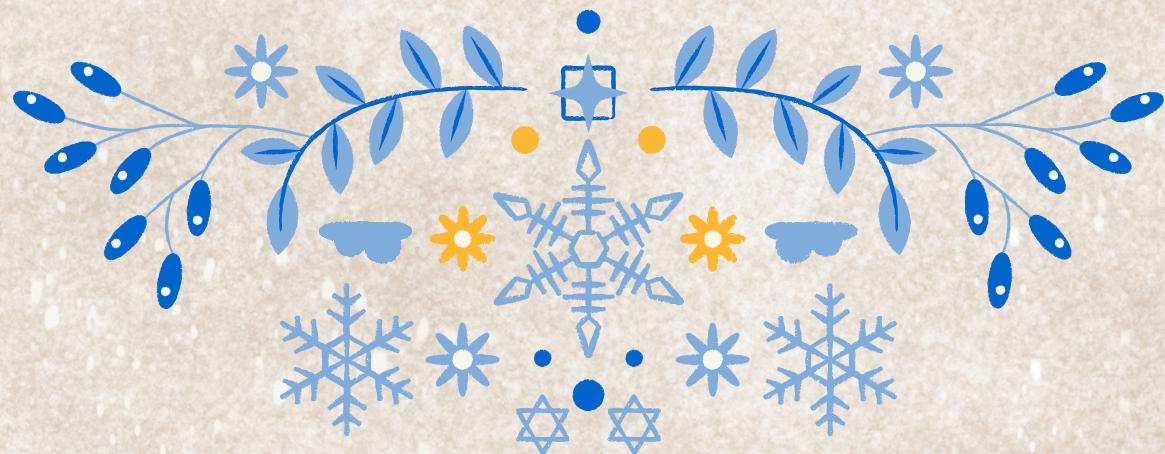


Photo
by Joshua Cervantes (Assistant Editor)



Photo

by Joshua Cervantes (Assistant Editor)



The Conductor's Christmas Carol

by Rose Pfeiffer (Poetry Editor)

Abner Lockles, aka Blue Bolt, had been tracking the Conductor. Conductor was often followed by an electric current—given he worked with robots, and had a robotic arm. That was Blue Bolt's key to finding him. But... perhaps the Conductor wanted to be found—the supervillain was like that. Abner was well aware of Conductor's love of hogging the spotlight. The Conductor was a skilled thief—but furthermost a showman.

It was a dark winter night; he always preferred the summer—it drowned out the heat, but never the darkness. Abner's pursuit of Conductor led him to a department store. It had already closed for the night. Fortunately, Abner had other ways of getting in.

The moonlight was lazing away in the skies. Until its peace was cut through by a streak of blue lightning. It whizzed past the darkened windows of the department store, crackling. Then detoured towards the power lines, hitching a ride on the electrical currents. When it reached the cables connecting it to the department store, it vanished as if it had never been there.



Abner, fully equipped in his Blue Bolt outfit, stood in front of this deserted department store. It had a sort of apocalyptic feel. Like everyone had just vanished. His outfit didn't help. He wore his hood up, lightning bolt

marks run down from his eyes like electrified tears. It was mainly black, with streaks of blue here and there. It was like a scuba diver's suit, the effect enhanced by the pack on his back that resembled an oxygen tank.

Normally, people would be milling about this time of year, scrambling to find that last-minute gift. Mobbing the aisles, chatting, fighting.

But there was no one.

It was dark and empty. Toys unclaimed by families and their children seemed to wait in anticipation, leering down at Abner.

The only light came from the emergency exit lights, softly glowing electric blue light emitted from him and his suit. It allowed him to see the general area around him. But the light from the street lamps seeped in through the windows, which intensified the eerie feel.

He walked forth in a deserted aisle, looking for any signs that he was on the right track. He was about to call it a lost cause when he was proven wrong.

Suddenly, music started softly playing, a festive, piano chime. First Abner thought he'd bumped into a Christmas display, or something like that. But his guard went right up as the music grew louder. "Crap." Abner breathed, hurrying to the main part of the department store. A railing overlooked the aisles, with lights and ornaments, and a wreath hanging down from it.

All of the lights went on.

The holiday lights were flashing in an odd way, in sync to the music. Like a holiday concert. "Well, they don't normally do that..." Abner thought

to himself, gaze darting across every aisle and display. The main lights flashed too, different colors as well. He was definitely certain that normally didn't happen either. He knew one thing was certain—the Conductor loves a show.

Abner glanced around, hoping to find where the music was coming from as a start. The lights continued to flash, and in an instant, the department store toys seemed to come to life. "The hell—" Abner blurted as they proceeded to lunge at him in attack, eyes glowing red and green. Dolls, teddy bears, toy cars, nutcrackers, all the toys you could think of, turned robotic and synced to music.

Abner tried to hold them off. He occupied himself with a forced laugh—trying to dismiss the absurdity of the situation. Little nutcrackers stabbing at him with their needle swords, dollies trying to bite off his appendages, toy cars trying to run over his feet. Abner took a breath, as he threw one of the dollies off of him. He sent a surge of lightning through the area, temporarily stunning the robots. They buzzed and twisted.

The music hit a climax and the lights synced to it. Abner's gaze snapped to the overlook at the top of the grand staircase to another floor. The lights flashed and fixed on a figure on top. A wreath hung from the balcony, trimmed with garlands and holiday lights. It was the nearly unmistakable form of the Conductor. Mischievous grin, eyes twinkling from beyond a broad-brimmed hat with a feather. He wore a black mask that covered his upper face. A robotic arm extended out, holding an antenna made to look like a conductor's switch. He was sharply dressed—a suit and a red fur-trimmed cape. Smirking there, watching.

So, Abner darted towards the figure to stop them, they appeared to be trying to escape. Abner knew he was faster, but he found himself crashing into cold, hard steel.

As he tried to gain his bearings, he realized this was a robot made to appear as the Conductor. Before Abner could act it grabbed him and sent him flying into one of the upper floor shelves in an aisle. Abner hurriedly tried to gather himself as it began charging at him.

He was a moment too late as it hurtled into him, grabbing him. Abner tried to grapple with it, but his speed rendered useless as it grabbed him with a cold, lifeless hand. He tried to shock it once. The robot didn't falter. It just threw him again into another shelf. Abner was sure he was seeing stars by now and dizzily tried to shock it again.

Once again, the robot resisted. The robot wasn't too fast, so even disoriented Abner managed to get himself up in a speedy movement. When he tried to dodge the robot it simply caught him. Abner tried to escape its grip, but it was too tight to escape. To make matters worse the smaller robots, the fake toys, were snapping out of the paralysis. The robot's glowing green eyes seemed to twinkle with a look of smugness as if the Conductor himself was watching from behind the robot's eyes with amusement.

Abner was left with no choice but to take it up a notch. Lightning flashed about him, escaping with the feeling of a tug in his stomach. Lightning flashed about, and the lights now flickered. Blue lightning wove through the smaller robots, like an electrical snake slithering between them. It gradually reached the main robot. Its grip faltered and Abner slipped out. The robot's

eyes flickered then went dark. It crashed down to the floor, and laid now motionless.

Blue Bolt had begun to tire of these games. They weren't fun anymore. They were a bore. He was growing less and less amused- no- no- he was dreading all the harm the Conductor could be doing while Abner fell just behind the villain, time and time again.

It was like chasing a merry-go-round or the sun. Around and around, but only managing to grow dizzy and leaving you more lost than before. Blue Bolt zipped between the fallen robots, scavenging for any clues that might give any idea of the villain's whereabouts.



"Joy to the world, the lord has come- let Earth, receive, her king-"
Carolers' voices ring out, swirling like wind through the falling snow. Their voices are beautiful, united.

They are all bundled up in their winter gear, hoods, scarves, hats, and gloves. The winter was normally bleak; streets coated slick with ice. But now color filled the streets, brought to life by neighbors chatting with one another, families laughing and talking, and the carols ringing through the air.

"And heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven, he-e-e-avan and nature sing-"
The carolers are before a house, singing of promised love and wintertime. Among them stands a vaguely familiar individual with dark hair and shining green eyes, veiled by a hood, singing beautifully with the others. Their voice almost rose above the other's voices, gorgeous.

He wore a slightly smug expression as they carried on. Seemingly enjoying himself, comfortable, as if the music was a warm blanket around him, a shield against the winter cold.



Photo
by Joshua Cervantes (Assistant Editor)



Photo
by Joshua Cervantes (Assistant Editor)



A PIT CREW SHORT STORY

#3 – A FRENCH HOLIDAY

by Brooke Johnpier (Fiction Editor)

Jack: The mint-flavored smoke hit my lungs, and I sighed. Tonight was the night. Tonight was the night that I would confess my love to the woman who changed my life, who made me see that there's hope in the world, and that it's okay to not go through with things. Allow me to explain.

Last night, I was supposed to get married to the Princess of Spain, Sofia. I was all dressed up in my military uniform with full-glam makeup on. Sofia was in her wedding dress that was made of chiffon and silk with Swarovski crystals all over it. It truly was a beautiful ceremony with the poinsettias all around us, the lights sort of dimmed with the snow falling outside, and the choir singing "Auld Lang Syne" as we walked down the aisle.

We were standing up there, holding hands and listening to the chaplain rattle off the formalities when I happened to look out into the crowd and saw her walking down the stairs. I'm pretty sure I drooled. She was absolutely beautiful.

I watched her as she finished her descent in the most beautiful black lace dress I've ever seen. Her hair was swept up off her neck, exposing a ruby directly over her breastbone. Her makeup was done perfectly, and her facial features were accentuated to the fullest extent. I saw her look around hesitantly, and then her eyes fell on me. It was in that moment that I knew that I couldn't go through with this.

"Mr. Johnson?"

"What?" I snapped back to reality. "Yeah?"

The chaplain looked over his glasses at me. "Do you take Sofia to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"Oh. No," I said. "No, I don't."

The entire room erupted in gasps and half the women fainted.

"I'm sorry," I said to the room as I turned and looked at them. "But I just can't do this."

I ran off the stage and to the back of the room with one thing in mind. But when I got back there, the woman of my dreams was gone.



Bridget: I stared at the note in my hand. *My dearest Bridget* it read.

Last night was a mistake, and it should've never happened. Please meet me outside the front doors at eight o'clock. I would like to explain myself.

Yours truly,

Jack.

It was signed by him below the final line with a burgundy lipstick kiss mark next to it, his signature color.

I put the note down and looked in the mirror. I could understand why he wanted to explain himself. Hell, I did too. Last night was not my best performance either, by any means. Especially because I ran off.

When I saw her hands clasped in his, and the way she was looking at him, and just how the whole thing was playing out, I felt extremely

overwhelmed. The straw that broke my 5'2 back was when I locked eyes with him and saw how perfect he looked. I felt my heart skip a beat and knew in that moment that I couldn't stand to see that event occur any longer. Without a second though, I hitched up the sides of the gown I had on and ran as fast as I could.

Disregarding the guards' yells telling me not to go out into the woods at night, I ran with tears streaming down my face into the harsh, crisp night. I made it to the woods and kept running, not realizing that the branches on the bushes and small trees were ripping my dress apart and leaving scratches all across my bare skin. Finally, I reached a clearing and collapsed on my knees, sobbing.

Each sob sent a wave of convulsions through my body, until I was shaking like a loose tire on a stock car.

"Bridget?"

I whipped around and quickly wiped the tears from my face. "Yeah?" I looked up into Jack's concerned face.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," I snapped. "I'm fine."

I got up, brushed off my dress and aggressively wiped my cheeks. Just as I was going to march past him to head back into the palace, he put his hand on my arm and started dabbing it with the sleeve of his jacket.

"Let go!" I exclaimed as I tried to tug away from him.

"You're bleeding," he murmured.

I looked over and saw that the arm of my dress was slashed open and that there was a massive gash on my arm that was oozing blood fairly well.

I looked up at Jack and swallowed reflexively. The moonlight was shining on his jet-black hair, and he looked absolutely stunning. I opened my mouth to say something about how good he looked when my mouth was slowly shut by Jack putting his thumb on my chin. I hitched my breath as he drew his thumb across my face, resting it on my cheek. He brought his thumb away and it was bright red. Using his jacket sleeve, he dabbed the wound while not breaking eye contact with me. His brown eyes were boring into my blue-gray ones and something was coming over me. But I knew that I couldn't let that happen.

I forced myself to tear my gaze away from him and I looked at the ground.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't do this right now. I'm sorry."

I pulled away from him and started running again while feeling the tears leak from my eyes again.

"Bridget! Wait!"

I wanted to turn around with all my heart, but I knew I couldn't. I had to keep away from him for my own good.



Jack: I checked my phone. 7:58. And she still wasn't here. What was I thinking? Did I really think she would show up after what had happened last night? Hell, she ran away from me for Christ's sake. Why the hell would she want to meet up with me willingly?

I sighed and went to pull out my pack of Newport's when I looked at the stairs and saw her coming down them. She wasn't in a dress, in fact, quite

the opposite with a T-shirt and jeans, but she was still beautiful. I smiled and turned to face her.

"Hi," I said. "How are you?"

She looked up at me. "Good," she said. "How 'bout you?"

"Good," I said. "Very good. Shall we?"

I offered her my arm and she gingerly took it as we began our stroll.

As we stepped outside, the soft, fluffy snow hit us in the face and we both laughed. We ran to the limousine I had at the end of the driveway and climbed in. I told the driver in French to take us to Le Cinq for dinner, and we were off as Bridget and I started chatting about things.



Bridget: Jack took me to one of the most expensive restaurants in Paris, and we had a lovely time. The steak dinner was exquisite, and the cognac was even better as they got it from the monks on Mont Saint-Michel. And then afterwards he ordered us both creme brulee that was glazed to perfection. I hardly talked because of how much I enjoyed it, but I could tell that Jack was happy.

After dinner, we walked the streets of Paris holding hands looking at all the Christmas lights. It was beautiful and I could see why it earned the nickname the "City of Light." It certainly lived up to its name.

"Bridget," Jack said.

I stopped and looked up at him. "Yes?"

"I have a surprise for you. Close your eyes for me."

"Okay." I closed my eyes, and I felt him grip a higher part of my arm

as he guided me throughout Paris.

We had been walking for about 10 minutes when I felt everything around me start to move. I screamed and Jack chuckled.

"It's okay, babygirl," he said. "We're just going up."

"Going up where?" I asked.

"You'll see."

Finally, the world stopped moving and Jack took my hand and led me some more. Finally, he let go of my hand and said, "Okay, open your eyes."

I opened my eyes and gasped. I could see the entire city of Paris in all its winter beauty from up here. Which I deduced was the Eiffel Tower, considering I couldn't see it anywhere. Somehow, Jack had gotten a private showing for just us at the tippy top of this thing.

"Jack," I sighed as I whirled around. "This is beautiful."

He smiled. "Good. I'm glad."

I turned back around, and I looked back out over the city with my heart extremely full.



Jack: Bridget looked absolutely stunning with the city behind her and her neck-length hair blowing in the slight breeze. I knew she was happy and didn't want to ruin that, but I had to explain to her why last night had happened. I took a deep breath, shook myself, and began.

"Bridget, I would like to explain myself," I said. "Last night, I...I acted rashly. I'm sorry about that, and I just want to make it known that that wasn't me."

Bridget turned around and met my eyes. "Then who was it?"

"In-love Jack."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"Bridget, I couldn't go through with the wedding last night because I'm in love with you. You're the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with, not some chick from Spain. When I ran after you in the woods and we met and I saw you bleeding, my love for you came over me and some feelings flared up. I'm sorry. I should've suppressed them, but I didn't. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that and explain myself."

Bridget just stood there staring at me. I started to become worried.

"Bridget...?"

She walked towards me until she was directly in front of me and had to strain her neck to look up at me.

"Thank you, Jack. I really appreciate it," she whispered.

"You're welcome."

Before I knew what was happening, she grabbed my hand and let me over to the edge of the viewing deck. We held hands as we watched the fluffy snow cascade down over the city. After about twenty minutes, Bridget shocked me.

"I love you too."

I choked on the cold air. "What!?"

"Yes," she said simply. "I do."

"Well, well, I..."

"And I'm going to prove it to you."

She got up on her tiptoes and jumped up to kiss me passionately. It was brief because of our height difference, but it was perfect nonetheless.

"Merry Christmas," she said as she turned back to the city and grabbed my hand again.

With my other hand, I checked my phone to see it was 12:01 on December 25th. I smiled. Best Christmas gift, ever.



Artwork
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Photo
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Photo
by Noella Policastro (Social Media)



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by Joshua Cervantes (Assistant Editor)



A Special Thanks To...

*The Laurel staff,
Dr. Joseph Hall,
the English
Department,
and to everyone who
contributed their
work.*



Happy
Hanukkah



FROM,

THE LAUREL

MERRY
CHRISTMAS

JOYOUS
Kwanzaa