The woods are lovely, dark and deep
    But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
    -Robert Frost

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Table of Contents

1 After August Afternoons...............................Christina Cass
2 Red Delicious..........................Marshelle L. Dawkins
3 Tides..................................................Christina Smith
5 Message From a Bottle.........................Melody Layne
9 Isle..................................................Chris Burkhardt
10 How Can You Say...............................Joel R. Elliot
12 Dead Birds........................................Charles Sutphin
16 Just When You Thought..........................Christina Smith
17 Bedlam Boys.......................................Deborah Rinker
19 Rosary Beads.....................................Chris Burkhardt
20 All My Brothers..................................James Snodgrass
22 At Rest, In Indianapolis........................Joseph Hunckler
25 Grandfather's Song................................Sarah J. Gardner
26 Regretting the Loss of a Dud..................Christina Cass
27 Tongues Tiresome Yumbling....................James Snodgrass
29 Lauren..............................................Sarah Neal
32 Thinness............................................Christina Cass
33 I am the Insect....................................Chris Burkhardt

Cover Art by Arianne Michalek
After August Afternoons

After August afternoons that begin in twinkling brightness at ten o’clock and end at six in a heavy, damp glow, we race each other through the aroma of grill-darkened hamburgers and over ground made spongy by water and spilled lemonade.

Our feet clatter to the end of the dock and tear a hole in the surface of the lake. We sink, rise again, and reach for the bottles of shampoo we carried with us that now dive slowly to swim among the weeds.

Water, soft like gold silk, whips a fluffy lather. We are white-headed buoys bobbing, bobbing, and finally emerging to smell of No Tears and fish and baths taken in a lake at the end of an August afternoon.

Christina Cass
Red Delicious

Huge and inflated and a
Deep bloody crimson red I
hold you firmly within my hands
which are dry and cool and trembling
slightly when I notice that
You are perfectly shaped sized and colored
Which is when I chance to bring you to me
licking my dry lips wet
Opening my mouth wide to take a bite only to be crushed to find
That you are nothing
but an overly ripe tasteless red apple.

Marshelle L. Dakwins
Tides

The waves roll in and crash on the sand,
   but what do they leave behind?
Nothing but sand remains on shore;
   sand is all one will find.

Occasionally the ocean tide deposits
   a lonely shell or two,
But who wants the broken carcasses of creatures lost?
   With them what can one do?

I long for the ocean to drop a clam
   with a pearly treasure inside.
And with that one prize I will start a chain
   that I can add to the more pearls I find.

I may only have one, but that's all it takes
   to begin my hopeful quest.
For one must start somewhere—why not with one?
   And later add the rest.

The waves roll in and crash in my head,
   but what do they leave behind?
Nothing but gray remains in my thoughts;
   gray is all that I find.
Occasionally my mental tide might leave
a lonely thought or two.
But who wants the remnants of poems lost?
With them what can one do?

I hope my mind might leave glowing insight
with a tiny thought inside.
And with one thought I will start a chain
that I can add to the more thoughts I find.

I may only have one, but that’s all it takes
to begin my hopeful quest.
For I must start somewhere—why not with one?
And later compose the rest.

Christina Smith
Message From a Bottle

She is sitting in the semi-darkness, pen raised expectantly above the paper, as if at any moment the ink will run out on its own to form magic pictures in words there. Music flutters soft and light from the stereo in the corner and hovers over her shoulder to watch. She always fights writer’s block with Enya and candlelight.

I am stationed precariously at the edge of the dresser, a primitive beacon. A light-bearer, I hold aloft the candle which illuminates the blank page before her. She scratches her head, puts down the pen, and holds out her hand to catch the river of liquid wax which is dribbling down my neck. Purposely distracting herself from the task of writing, she lets the wax begin to collect and settle into a solid mass, then smashes it between her thumb and forefinger. She twists it into a delicate curlicue and lays it down on the desk beside several others.

I don’t mind the heat. Heat has always been a part of who I am. In my last lifetime, I was the peak of a dune in the Arizona desert. The sun beat down on me by day, and the moon cooled me by night. Humans complained about me. I rose in the wind and filled their lungs, making it hard to breathe. I settled heavy over anything they left outside. I filled their shoes and the cuffs of their pants. When they tried to walk over me, I let them sink.

Then one day, I was leveled off, poured into the back of a truck, and taken off to a large factory, where they cast me right into the heart of the fire. I melted, and I died.

I rose up out of the fire in a new incarnation, glass. They had blown me into the shape of a bottle. I had many brothers and sisters. Some were clear and heavy like myself. Some were tinted green and light. The sun shining through them made spots on the cardboard boxes of the factory warehouse that reminded me of the desert lizards.
and cacti of my past life. The clear bottles, they packed in crates and shipped out. I don’t know what happened to the greens.

When the light of the sun hit me again, I found myself in a new place. Lush with vegetation and just as warm as my desert had been, the sounds and smells in this new place were different. Instead of the rattle of the snake or the shrieks of the vultures, I experienced, for the first time, the roar and crush of the ocean, the scent of brine, moisture. Spots of perspiration appeared across my base. I was taken out of the crate and deposited in the lap of a dark woman. She began to weave straw around me. I noticed several other of my brethren already seated and clothed on the grass beside her. When she had finished with twelve of us, we were put back in new cartons and driven away.

In the next place, over a dark, sawdusted floor, men poured a dark burning liquid into me. I glanced down at myself to see if I was in the fire again, but I saw no flames. Gradually, I grew accustomed to the strength of this liquor and enjoyed this new full feeling. They packed us into crates again and loaded us onto ships. On the first night of our voyage, the sailors, who knew their cargo well, decided to have a party. One reached into the crate and grabbed me by my neck. He uncorked my mouth and began taking long gulps from me. I had only been filled a few days, but I resented this loss. The liquid, (he called it rum) had been warm and comforting. I felt as if my life’s blood were being drained, as if his abrasive whiskers had put cuts in me and I were bleeding from them. When I was almost dry, he noticed a stray seagull in the night sky. He bragged to his friends that he could peg it off, recorked me, and flung me into the air. He missed, and I landed in the sea, a lucky thing. As I bobbed further and further away from the ship, I saw many of my brothers and sisters smashed against its sides.

I bobbed for what must have been several days,
enjoying the sun and the warm salt water. If I looked down through myself, I sometimes saw a shark below, a dark ominous shadow. One curious fish took an interest and swam closer to investigate, but upon finding me inedible and harmless, did no more than butt me gently to change my direction. It didn’t matter. I didn’t care where I was going, since I didn’t know where I’d been.

One afternoon, I was up on the shore of a white sandy beach. Since I was reeling with deja vu, I hardly noticed a white-haired woman approaching until she called out, “Hey Harold! Whadda ya know? An old bottle—too bad there ain’t no message in it.” One moment, whom was she calling old? She picked me up and carried me over to where an elderly white man in striped swim trunks was sunning himself on a worn beach towel.

“Ah, geez, Bea,” he whined, “can’t we leave here just once without someone else’s garbage?”

“Whadda ya mean garbage?” she protested. Yeah, Harold, whadda ya mean garbage, I thought. “This is a perfectly good bottle. We can still get a lot of use out of this. We’ll fill it up with good old Florida sand and have a memento of our last trip here.” They argued. Harold lost, and I got filled again, this time with memories of my last life.

Harold and Bea had been traveling to St. Augustine every winter for years. They had owned a trailer, but recently, upon the advent of Harold’s seventy-eighth birthday, they had decided to sell it and begin wintering permanently in Indiana. Bea hated the idea, but she couldn’t drive, and she wouldn’t be able to make the trip by herself if anything happened to her husband. This was to be their last trip to the beach before heading home. The trunk was already loaded. I became part of the baggage.

Indiana is cold, especially in the winter, and I was not prepared for the shock. When Harold flung open the trunk and, for the first time, the frigid air held me up for examina-
tion, I turned to ice and lost consciousness. When I came to, I was a semi-permanent fixture on Bea’s nightstand.

What can I say about my life there? Bea and Harold spent so little time in the bedroom. From my perch, I often heard sounds of the television in the next room. I knew when the grandkids had come to visit because the table I sat upon shook with the fury of their clomping. One evening, little Laura entered the room. The window was open and the air, which I had by then grown barely tolerant of, was taunting me with predictions. She picked me up and waved me in the air. I was her club. “She-Ra! Princess of Power!” she sang with zeal. The cork came loose, and all the sand poured over her brown bowl of a head and into her eyes. I was empty again. She flung me onto the bed and ran screaming for Grandma Bea, who cleaned her up, promptly vacuumed the bedroom carpet, and set me in a box in the closet. I was dropped off at the local high school’s trash and treasure sale with some old costume jewelry and neck scarves the next week.

That’s where this one found me, the summer before we went to boarding school. We’ve been together now for three and a half years. I must admit I was rather surprised the first time she corked me with a candle, but I’ve grown used to it now, and since she uses me only for writing and for special occasions, I’ve come to view it as a sort of spiritual calling. I’ve seen her through four roommates, two schools, five relationships, twelve English classes, and eighty-seven candles.

Oh, she must have made some headway in her story. She is shutting her notebook. She is clicking off the radio. She is climbing into bed. She must have decided to let this candle burn all the way down. She sleeps.

Melody Layne
Isle

On the February shores of this remote island,
I come across an empty bottle.
Willing to put it to my mouth,
I invert myself and feel the trust
pour like lava, full of energy,
into the hull.

In the dawning hours I launch the carafe
into your open seas,
watching the turbulent rise and fall of the tides carry it away.

Endlessly, it seems, I pace the shores

Months pass by,

I am waiting for your glass in return,
or mine to come back,
so I can leave this isle.

Chris Burkhardt
How can you say you’ve loved when you’ve never had ferrets\(^1\) in your pants?

The Beastmaster kept ferrets in his pants.
This was true love.
Other concepts of love, more ethereal
do not come close
to carrying ferrets in your pants

Undying devotion, roses and candy
carried in a lover’s heart and hands
are all benignly uncourageous when compared
To carrying ferrets in your pants.

Consider, I beg you, the inherent dangers of
Carrying ferrets in your pants:
little razor-raw teeth and pin-point pricks for claws
both in such close proximity
to what made him the master (and not mistress).

No worry for chafe,
not to mention rash or lice
the Beastmaster, every day,
lovingly tucks his ferrets into his pants
and goes about his business of killing and maiming
and saving other animals,
so that they may too, one day, take up space in his pants.
So when the devotion has faded away
along with the flowers and candy,
it might help to think of the long-suffering Beastmaster
Carrying ferrets in his pants.

And for those of you who think I jest,
I ask you do one thing, perform one small test:
Rent the movie, and the proof is plain
for the love is apparent, when every time,
after putting ferrets in his pants,
The Beastmaster smiles.

1 The ferret image comes from the classic B-movie The Beastmaster. In this movie, the Beastmaster carries two pet ferrets in velvet bags around his waist. I have taken the liberty of twisting the image, instead inserting these loving ferrets into the Beastmaster’s pants.

Joel R. Elliott
Dead Birds

Where are the dead birds?

Can you tell me where the dead birds are? Take a minute and look around your yard. What do you see? If you don’t own a yard, go to the park. What do you see? Trees, grass, a few bushes, one or two squirrels, and a sky full of birds. Am I right? Isn’t that the way it is?

Everywhere you look you see and hear birds, even in the middle of winter. So tell me, where are the dead birds? Where are their corpses? Where in the world could they be? Are they stuffed in the trees? I don’t think so. How could they be? Gravity would pull them to the earth. Are they lying on the ground or in the bushes? I never see them there. The only time I happen upon a dead bird is by the roadway after it’s been hit by a car. Dead birds seldom appear in the backyard. And if they were devoured by insects, their tiny bones would litter the ground like an elephant graveyard. So there you have it—no bones, no feathers, no birds. They’re not there. They don’t exist.

Squirrels present a similar dilemma. Besides finding them by the roadway in a puddle of blood or with their guts squished against the pavement, you rarely ever see a dead squirrel. So what’s going on?

I started looking into the cause of this phenomenon last week and am here to tell you that there is no explanation for the missing animals. But I think the mystery runs deeper than that. I think something else might be going on. Sometimes at night before I go to sleep, I hear voices that hint at unsolved mysteries and nefarious deeds.

Take gasoline, for instance. Where do you think that much gas comes from? There are over ten million cars in the United States consuming more than 100 billion dollars worth of gasoline a year; not to mention trucks, vans, and campers. Now think about the other combustible
engines. With a straight face you're going to tell me that a few countries in the Middle East along with Alaska, Mexico, and some areas in Russia have that much oil underneath them? It doesn't seem possible.

And what about electricity—where does that come from? I flip a switch and a light goes on because of some invisible power plant on the outskirts of town. Does that seem sane to you? Can you explain it?

And plumbing? Am I to believe the entire country is connected by underground tunnels that I can neither see nor understand?

And World War II? Does it seem explicable by any leap of imagination that our enemies systematically eradicated six million people in the course of a few years? Or Rwanda? Given your knowledge of the world around you, is it possible that over half a million people were slaughtered in a month's time by their own countrymen? Do you think that happened? Does it make sense? Does it seem plausible?

I think it's a conspiracy—a cosmic ontological conspiracy unified in the minds of men. The only question is "Who's at the center of it—you or me?"

Let me explain. Reality is ephemeral, here today, gone tomorrow. When the lights go out for good, so does reality. We know there's only room in the universe for one of us. You can be certain only of yourself. I can be certain only of myself. And since I'm certain of me—well—I think you see where this is headed. I think you understand my intent.

A few days ago I said to my psychiatrist, "Are you an alien? You sit there in your leather chair without moving a muscle or saying anything with your mouth, so you must be a right strange fellow." He tried to deny it, but without proof, who can tell? So I fired him; who wants to be analyzed by a foreigner?
Manuscripts

This isn’t going well.

My reality is exclusive of everything else, correct? Only what I perceive exists; nothing else is real. As I’m writing these words, there’s no one to read them but myself. But the situation is worse than that. Not only are there no other readers, there’s no earth as I understand it—no Africa, Antarctica, North America. They’re not there.

I can purchase a ticket, board a plane and fly to Paris—and Paris will be there. But before I land at DeGaule International, it won’t exist! No Paris, no France, no nothing. Do you understand? Outside of my perceptions, there are no perceptions. The world is a conspiracy I can neither prove nor disprove. As Descartes said—who needs Descartes—I think, therefore I am. Beyond that, there is nothing but the illusion of you and me.

The above solipsism is quite simple, I understand, except for the aforementioned flaw—the dead birds. Figure it out for yourself. There are holes in the theory—flaws in reality—that command an inevitable conclusion: reality is not real. If it were, you would see the dead birds, modern conveniences would not exist, the carnage in Germany and Rwanda could not have occurred.

What’s going on you ask? Why do I consume food in the morning and sleep at night? Who are my mother and father if not my mother and father? What in God’s name are you talking about? What in God’s name is happening?

Everything I perceive around me is the manifestation of a study. My psychiatrist, who is sitting there staring at me with his beady eyes and malevolent talk that I can neither hear nor understand is a projection of those who are scrutinizing you.

Do you get it? Do you finally understand? You’re the one. This story, this paragraph, this sentence is your revelation. This is your wake-up call. Do you feel the recognition pinching at your soul? Can you not feel your
heart accelerating as the doubt moves forward to paralyze? Is it not what you’ve suspected all along? Is it not what you’ve known to be true?

The reputed author of this rant does not exist. He never has. No parents at birth, no food in the morning or sleep at night, no urination or defecation, nothing. Only you have substance, reader. Only you are real in the field of illusion surrounding your senses. Only you. Only you and me and neither one of us is really here.

As a matter of fact—since we’re being brutally honest—I can see you sitting there right now. I can see your face—your nose, your hair, your lips. I can hear your breathing, feel your warmth. I can smell your sweat. I’m right behind you as you’re reading this sentence, but you’ll never see me until the analysis is complete; and by then, what will it matter? By then, what will be left?

Charles Sutphin
Manuscripts

Just When You Thought It Was Safe

The perfect accomplice witnessing all,
His omniscience could be your doom.
He gets the dirt on everyone
Who enters that fateful room.

He could easily blackmail, sell his thoughts,
But he never speaks a word.
He wouldn’t, he couldn’t attempt to reveal.
The concept is too absurd.

As you near him, you’ll dismayingly find
He deforms and misshapes your face.
Just a small warning to watch your step
When you invade his private space.

He knows what you do behind closed doors
Those distorted faces you make.
He hears venomous phrases you choose to utter
When others’ reputations you rake.

But despite his knowledge, he’s used and abused
By you who should treat him the best.
You twist him and turn him and squeeze off his air
And with dirty hands foul up his crest.

So watch what you say and do in his room.
Treat him well though your privacy he’ll rob.
You’re never alone, nor are you safe
From your nosy, omniscient doorknob.

Christina Smith
Selection from *Bedlam Boys*

When Craig left, Tony turned on his radio and fell asleep. His mother never even knocked on his door.

Tony woke to the smell of fried eggs. It was almost six o’clock. He shut off his radio and went to the kitchen. His mom and dad were sitting at the table eating dinner. Fried eggs with Tabasco and ketchup, toast, and beer.

“Fried eggs, again?”

“Actually no, there are no more eggs. If you want something to eat there’s toast or cereal. I thought you might have been gone for good.”

Tony walked over to the refrigerator and removed some bread and the jar of peanut butter. He could tell he didn’t want to start a conversation with his mom tonight.

“They’ll be going out soon enough,” he thought to himself, and so would he.

“Anthony, when are you going to start working after school? Your father and I think you could at least get a job cleaning barns on weekends. You need to start earning your keep.”

“My keep. What am I, Mom, a boarder?”

“Don’t get smart with me. It’s just time you figured out what you are gonna do with the rest of your life. I think you should enroll in the career center and learn something useful, like mechanics or carpentry.”

“Right, I wanna clean other people’s shit, fix their cars, and build their homes. Well, forget it. I am not staying in Bedlam for them.”

“Well where do you think you’re gonna go? If you’re no good here, you’ll be no better anywhere else.” She looked at her husband and back to Tony then, as she scraped her fork across her plate. Almost in a moment of self-reflection, she growled, “You’ll never amount to shit.”

Tony put the jar down next to the sink and turned
toward the table. His father hadn’t stopped eating. He
didn’t join her to come down on Tony; he just kept out of it,
content that she wasn’t turning on him. Tony just shook his
head. He wasn’t sure which one of his parents repulsed
him the most. “You can stop worrying about my future.
I’ll be out of here soon enough, so you can find another
boarder.

“Worthless. Your son is worthless.”

Tony left through the back door and walked around
the house toward the street. He stood in a puddle of water
as he opened the trunk of his car and removed the backpack
with the beer and whiskey in it. He shut the trunk and
walked west down Logan to the river. Less than a block
away, he stepped over the barricade and sign that read
DEAD END.

Deborah Rinker
Rosary Beads

I do not know the rosary, yet I have rosary beads. They are made of wood and smell like warm cedar mixed with the delicately lotioned skin of an elderly woman's soft hands those of my grandmother, who held these beads tight. Towards the end we would find her blind and incoherent sitting in the hallway at 2:30 a.m. Who will come and find me now that I cling to these beads?

I understand the emptiness she felt on those lost nights, share her loneliness. Praying to my grandmother's soul to show me how to live, I am left with the smell of gentleness, in cedar and soft lotioned hands wiping away my salty tears, telling me it's okay.

I believe now is the time to learn the rosary.

Chris Burkhardt
All My Brothers

As I sit
And I dream
   And I ponder my soul
   And lament of this hideous curse

I am still
And I listen
   To others that say
   You must do unto others, but first

Do they sit
   Do they worry
      Do they spend sleepless nights
      Regretting their inexorable actions

Can one know
   And if so
      Would it matter a bit
      To the sparks of their flickering compassions

And if not
   Pay it heed
      Is that what I'd do
      To silently strangle convictions

Like a robber
   At night
      Should I stalk through my heart
      Carefully murdering its well-meaning victims
But if so  
   What am I  
       This horrible beast  
       No thought but of stating my hunger  

Would I be  
   But a mongrel  
       No longer a man  
       If I gave not a thought for another  

I think so  
   And with that  
       I’ll accept this great curse  
       Denounce those who deal kindred profanely  

For their thoughts  
   I care not  
       For at least I will know  
       That I treat all my brothers humanely  

   James Snodgrass
At Rest, in Indianapolis

Back then, in Indianapolis
I stood for days and looked
Eastward
toward Richmond, Dayton
and beyond.
Youthfully solid and fearless
I ventured many feet
beyond city limits
blazing new trails
across Interstate 70
toward those grand palaces and mermaids
and soft, sighing evenings
and lush, dew-drenched mornings
that filled my imagination.

I asked her to show me the way
to guide me
deliver me—she
newer than I.
And we walked.

We were quite encouraged
by the marvelous exoticism
of Pittsburgh
but the endless walking
burdened me.
Perhaps, in Baltimore
I would discover a superior guide.
I never shared these thoughts aloud.
And she guided.
And we walked.

Throughout New York and London
I felt less pedestrian.
In Vienna she spoke
of Omaha
and I
of Zion.
She guided.
The Gobi was so dry
it burned my eyes.
Near Mogadishu we rested for a moment
and I could not remember
Pittsburgh.
And we walked.

Now blind, I followed
her voice through Bangkok
denying to some
that she was my guide.
As darkness cooled
one Santiago summer eve
I heard her sigh
and reached in hope
and touched her eyes
closed
that night
her body
lifeless
gently
in my arms
on my lap.
Rising with the sun
I lifted her
body out of the wet grass.
And I walked.

Wandering again
I felt burdened by my load
and remembered Indianapolis
and stopped to rest
here for now.

I’ve not the strength to carry her
body with me
any further.
My eyes cannot see
but my thoughts
sometimes drift
Westward
toward Terre Haute, Peoria
—and I rest here
holding my guide
close to me.
Grandfather’s Song

Over grassy hills an’ meadows
Larks’ songs bless m’ ears!
With th’ hymn of angelic triumph
Loosed fro’ earthly fears.

Long I’ll be workin’ in m’ fields
Thro’ sun an’ rain an’ sun
B’fore th’ harvest’s in m’ hands
And the toilin’ done.

From dust t’ dust I’ve worked the land
An’ bein’ of earth, I’ll die
Then free fro’ endless work a’ last
I’ll join ya’ in the sky!

Sarah J. Gardner
Regretting the Loss of a Dud

I let a Milk Dud fall out of the box
on purpose
but the kick I gave it was accidental.
I heard it wobble away from me
down the sloping, sticky floor of the movie theater,
gathering speed
as it made its chocolaty way toward the screen
where a giant two-dimensional woman
was pensively brushing her hair in front of a mirror
and exchanging glances with her reflection.

I told myself that she was a projection
and fictional
and hopelessly vain,
but I couldn’t deny that she was so huge and beautiful
that the Milk Dud had rolled to her without pause.
Reminding myself of the sloping floor
and the accidental kick
was no comfort
for the Milk Dud could have stopped if it had wanted to
and now I could no longer roll its roundness between my fingers
and press its sweetness to my three-dimensional lips.

Christina Cass
Tongues Tiresome Yumbling

Is that, could that, could that be
Could that be her approaching me?
Could I, would I, would I dare
Perchance approach that one so fair?
Yes I am, yes I was right.
There she is, her gliding flight
Coming closer, coming near;
Must not succumb to growing fear.
I’ll walk real slow, that’s what I’ll do,
Delay my bumbling ineptitude.
Not slow enough; she still approaches.
Heart to my throat, how it encroaches.
No escape now, just act cool.
Fly is zipped. Don’t think I’ll drool.
Here it comes. I got a glance.
Now’s the time, must take my chance.
“Hello,” she says and knows my name.
Can’t believe I have such fame.
Raise my arm and start my wave.
How is it that the ground just gave?
Here it starts, I knew it coming,
My awkward steps, tongue’s tiresome tumbling.
In my excitement, I kept from seeing
Those real steep steps just plainly being.
There I go, head over feet,
And with the hedge I squarely meet.
Well, that was that. I’m pretty slick.
I’m sure my yowling did the trick.
Now I’ll just lie in green cocoon,
My best impression, a big buffoon.
Oh, now that angelic sound!
Could it be that I’ve been found?
Hands came in and pulled me away.
Was her, what could I think to say.
There she was and still just grinning
At my leafy foliage and hair that’s thinning.
“I saw you plunge across the mall.
   Was quite an acrobatic fall.”
Shucks, was nothing, I did imply,
Though mouth not moving, I don’t know why.
“Was quite a leap, but you look all right.
   Perhaps we’ll talk again some night.”
That’s quite all right, I vigorously shook.
   My elusive voice I’d still not took.
She grinned and laughed as she walked away.
   I need to bumble more often I’d say.

James Snodgrass
Lauren

I could see the figures whizzing past the narrow entrance to the ice. I approached the glass doors that opened into the rink, and I saw the girls’ heads bob up just above the sideboards. Then, I didn’t see them; they had moved down the ice, and I couldn’t see them anymore. I inched forward to the double doors, leaned in close to the glass, and looked to the right. I don’t ever remember seeing the kids from that perspective before—I was looking through the far corner of my eye, a sort of distorted peripheral vision. That view was not close or honest enough, so I slapped my hand around the door handle—the familiar metal was cold against my bare palm, making me cringe—and pulled the door open.

The damp, chlorinated air refreshed my senses as I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. My stomach turned over as I imagined I was striding out to skate again. The cold froze my throat and lungs as I breathed, causing a head pain like one I know from ice cream. This taste was much sweeter, though, and the pain was much sharper. I floated through the aroma toward the ice until I heard the loud clinking of steel and the cries of “Sarah’s here!”

As soon as I opened my eyes I felt a spray of snow rise up my leg, and I saw little hands waving at me. “Thanks, Brad,” I said sarcastically, as my friend stepped off the ice. “‘Preciate the snow.... Come here and give me a hug! I’ve missed you!” I threw my arms around his neck, stood on tiptoes, and squeezed his broad, strong shoulders. His heat felt good against my chest and arms, as I wasn’t used to the chill of a rink anymore.

Brad has been a great friend of mine for years. We trained together, skated in shows together, and competed together. He and Heather and Maggie and I always hung out, as we thought the rest of the skaters at our home club,
who were younger, were too fickle and vengeful. Now Brad is skating pairs with a girl whom I cherish and look after as my sister because she reminds me so much of myself.

Brad asked, “How are you? Where have you been?”

“Good,” I answered. “How are you?” Brad nodded a quick “OK,” and I immediately continued. “How is Lauren? I haven’t seen her in a while.”

Brad turned around to face the ice and scanned the picture in front of him—from the right, to the left, back to the right, and to the left again. I followed the direction of his head with my eyes.... Finally, it stopped and faced one direction. Slowly turning my eyes toward the ice, I saw a strong skater in a familiar red and blue checkered outfit—one that I had once worn—form a perfect, elegant arabesque. As Lauren curved around the corner, I noticed that I didn’t see her blonde ponytail hanging to the side as it usually does. I glanced at Brad as he stepped back onto the ice, then looked back at Lauren, who was doing a beautiful layback spin—perfectly centered, arching her back, and curving her arms above her chest at just the right angles—and I noticed her big, white, plastic head.

The chill made my bones ache, and I shivered. My chest tightened, and I tried to breathe. I tried to follow her figure across the ice, but it was blurred by the tears filling my eyes.

I hadn’t seen Lauren since the accident, and no one had told me that she had to wear a helmet now. The accident was a few weeks ago; she and Brad were in an overhead lift when his blade hit a rut. He fell, and she fell further, crashing her face against the ice. She spent the night in the hospital and wasn’t really able to eat for a week. After a year of dieting, she lost ten more pounds that week, much to her parents’ dismay (and to our coach’s
pleasure). Lauren dropped to sixty-eight pounds, and she thought it was a blessing.... This time she couldn’t eat, and no one could make her. It looked as if every reed-like bone on her body would snap in two if she were to fall. Yet I knew she was thinking, This will help our lifts, because that’s what I had told myself years ago.

She finished her spin, and I heard our coach yell, “Gorgeous!” She continued skating. As she skated by me, I saw the yellowish-green remnants of the bruise on her left cheek, and she blankly smiled. She knew what I was thinking about her because I had warned her about losing weight before, and she thought I was wrong. Lauren, you are only making yourself weaker.... I knew that I couldn’t convince her she was thin enough because no one could ever convince me that I was. So I wanted to yell at our coach and say, Look what you’ve done to her! She’s only twelve years old!

I looked at Lauren again: a tiny frame topped by a big, white head, and I wondered If only that helmet could protect her spirit, too.

Sarah Neal
Thinness

You are too thin,
they tell me,
ankles too like
uncooked spaghetti
and arms
like pieces of straw
that would splinter
and float away
in a strong wind
to be carried who knows where.
What’s wrong
with you?
for under the hypnotism of talk shows
they have come to equate what I look like
with something I am not,
their malicious desire for there to be
something wrong
ill-concealed behind concern

And would it be a bad thing,
I wonder,
to be splintered and blown
farther than they can imagine
if in the journey I could collect what I do not already house
in a body that is not too thin,
a soul that would not be too skinny
to hold what I desire?

Christina Cass
I am the Insect

I am the insect
that crawls
to its Queenly Mother
ready to give her my kiss
although it is I
that am dying of thirst.

Chris Burkhardt