

Thawing Out

By Frederick William Schroeder IV

When the ice-glazed track's perils
forces the runner indoors, he trots along
for months without commitment, passing time
until spring's merciful thaw.

As the bitter season approaches its final stretch,
a new girl, nameless, runs beside him.
Another running buddy, keeping up with ease,
until her neon sneakers reject
his comfortable, plodding rhythm.

Her explosive strides resound
across vulcanized rubber. Icicles
outside the arched stadium windows
tremble, recognizing a challenge.

Even without a crowd cheering,
or anything tangible on the line,
the runner feels he can run miles more
when the finish line approaches.
She stops there, seemingly satisfied.

Aching, wanting for more, the runner
collapses onto the sweat-soaked ellipse;
its bumpy texture will leave a red imprint,
like a tattoo, beautifully misunderstood
in its abstraction.

Before the runner can pull himself up,
the girl drops a medal, a consolation prize
whose ribbon crumples in lacy rainbows
on the track. She disappears,
leaving a name that the runner can't forget,
and even as the pink azaleas begin to bloom,
he can only think of Autumn.