

Facsimile in Boots

by Marsha McSpadden

There she is. A paper doll of me. The dress, the lilt, the self-hatred.

The crowd thins and swells in want of a scene. Conversations begin, pretend, then halt. My gin and tonic sweats into my hand and I lick at the moisture. Brows furrow with tension. I listen to leaves fall in a forest far from here.

Handsomely, he steers her around the room. The way he puts his arm around her, tries to fold her into approval, I measure his devotion. I know the weight of that hand, the shape of the fingers. The deep crevices. The cold it carries. It traveled my pale shoulder, my hand, the small of my back. It traveled me first.

My arm twitches a little, homesick for that touch. I've never known a crowded room to be so empty.

The way she leans into his hand, the click of her boots against the floor, I measure the depth of his love. Her boots are a worn shade of black, shining buckles glint like razorblades, sutures of laces along the side. A deep chocolate, mine are higher heeled and sharper toed. Zippered with knowledge. She steps deliberately, with an ease I wish weren't there.

He hasn't gotten to her. Yet.

I know the words he whispers to her in the dead of night. When no one else is there to hear, I do. I know the heat of his breath, how the words warm with innovation. I know too, they'll leave her alone and misshapen. The way he folds and creases us, bends and shapes us.

We are napkins into swans, paper into flowers, two into one.

We talk, she and I, in the corner, under a blanket of watchful, nervous eyes. We gush, anxious to dance around any acknowledgement of him. Her mouth is larger, thoughts smaller.

He is perfecting this.

Has she seen the jelly jar beneath his bed? I don't ask. Has he shown her how he bottles his love? I can not tell.

Eight loves so far. Eight souvenirs. From eight paper people. Sameness swimming in a pink pickling solution. Not unlike the jar of olives in the kitchen. Not unlike those at roadside stations fat with briny eggs. Knotted pig knuckles.

Surely, she's seen the knives. Used them to cut fruit for breakfast.

I know the way he will lay her down, wear her down, hold her down as he finally declares his love for her. She'll close her eyes, lean her head back, each limb a moccasin against a writhing other, until she doesn't know her body from his. She won't feel the slice. Not at first. He loves her. Confusion will come at the sight of sheets soaking red. But he loves her so. When the pain arrives, she'll bear it, she'll marry it, she'll try to become worthy of it.

A part missing becomes such a small thing.

She'll make nine. Just one away from a perfect ten.

Nothing else between us, she says she likes my boots. I smile, knowing time will be marked from the day of severance. She'll believe the relationship is a thing to cleave.

I reach out. Touch the soft of her arm. Affirm how lucky she is before I hobble on. My boot hardly pinches—not anymore—the place my toe used to be.

