

These Shoes Strangers Have Died Of

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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Nineteen forty-two was the first summer of the war bond campaign. After the newsreels and before the feature, a government clip showed a Japanese soldier bayoneting a Chinese baby. The voice-over said again and again, "Buy a bond. Kill a Jap. Buy a bond. Kill a Jap."

The rifle with its bayonet rose and fell. People coming out of the theater later would look at me, a young man old enough to shave. Some of them asked me outright why I hadn't enlisted.

"I'll be old enough in September," I'd say.

After the theater was empty, I'd sweep the aisles and then sit in one of the middle seats, the popular ones even on slow nights and matinees. I'd close my eyes grip the wooden armrests. Beneath my palms the joy and fear and anger and relief that others had felt in this theater moved in the wood grain like a nest of animals, stirring.

Buy a bond. Kill a Jap.

Feelings like a knot you can't begin to untie.

* * *

"Kill a Jap. Be a Jap," I said to the curtained screen.

The house I live in now was built to my own design on the north-facing slope of a canyon where the trees grow dense and dark. The first floor is half buried so that the second floor won't rise above the trees, won't too easily reveal the house. To drive here, you must follow a pair of wheel ruts that turn off from the gravel road five miles distant. Unless you know where to look, underbrush hides the way. I stay put in winter. For five months of the year, the snow between house and road lies undisturbed.

On the second floor is a corner room without windows. There's a deadbolt on the door to that room, and a padlock. Inside, a Nazi battle flag hangs on one wall alongside photos of the camps. Black and white photos of the living and the dead. The far side of that wall is devoted to wartime posters of buck-toothed Japanese. There's a photo of me as I was in 1943, a new-minted soldier, posing with fixed bayonet and glaring at the camera as if the lens were Tojo himself.

Buy a bond. Kill a Jap.

The war, my war, is limited to that wall. The other walls are papered with photographs of skulls stacked in Cambodia, bodies swelling in the sun of Burundi or Rwanda, mass graves opened like ripe fruit split wide to spill their seeds. Some of the newspaper images have yellowed. Some are fresh.

Nina, my agent, has seen the locked door, but has never asked what's on the other side. She has other things on her mind. "Build a studio in Boulder or Denver," she says to me twice a year. "You'd be close to the galleries. All of this would be so much *easier*."

She wants me out of the mountains. If I had a heart attack, a stroke, no one would know unless I radioed for help myself. Park County Rescue would have to travel the same pair of wheel ruts that Nina's hired truck negotiates, spring and fall, when it comes to take my work to the galleries.

"I can hunt deer from my front porch," I tell her. "Could I do that in Denver or Boulder?"

In the closet of the locked room, I keep the shoes, the boots, the uniforms.

The shoes are flattened, sun-cracked-- a right shoe hidden among high weeds in El Salvador, a left

shoe I stole from Bergen-Belsen, a right that I dug from the rotting mud of Cambodia. Shoes strangers have died of. Shoes that fit me. I only keep the ones that do.

Some of the boots are like the shoes-- dry-rotted, split-seamed. The others go with the uniforms, patent leather boots hand-polished until they gleam like black glass.

A full-length mirror hangs on the inside of the closet door.

Several of the uniforms are simple: fatigues of the Ugandan security forces, the Khmer Rouge, Brazilian or Chilean troops assigned to domestic duty. Khaki is interchangeable with tan, with gray, with blue.

It's the black uniform that I prize above the others. It's the black that I dress in to stand before the mirror. On the World War II wall, young men in dress uniforms like this one smile easy smiles.

I smile their smiles for the mirror, feeling what is natural to feel in such a uniform. Invincibility. Pride. The twin lightning bolts on the collar have everything and nothing to do with history. The death's head in the band of the cap is timeless.

To my smiling reflection, I say, "What are we to do with you? What is to be done?" The question is no abstraction. It's a practical matter. It's the question I must ask each day before I begin to carve.

Today, though, it's more practical than ever.

Downstairs on my couch is a young man, bound and gagged.

What am I to do with him?

The silver skull insignia gleams.

I hang the uniform and dress for work.

* * *

Snow covers the studio skylight. The shadows are soft, deep, and blue. Before turning on the lights, I run my hands over the rough-hewn block.

When I begin a new piece, even when I can feel into the wood and know exactly what I'm cutting down to, the first hours of work are always a struggle. The wood resists. Chisels skip off, and saw blades twist out of shape as if I were trying to cut my way through granite. I have to prove myself each time, coax the echoes from the grain.

Then, once I have the shape roughed out, the heartwood softens, yields, invites me in. My blades melt through crosscuts as if I were carving butter. The wood guides the tools, and the face, the shoulder, the hand emerges.

For the piece I am working on today, the early stage lasts a long time. The wood is green. Ordinarily, I cure the wood before I work, but in this case, I don't have the time. Resin sticks to my tools.

After two hours of work in the studio, I brush the sawdust from my coveralls and come downstairs to have a look at him. His eyes are wide, but it's hard to say if what I see in them is fear. He's young. Young, but old enough to shave.

Hanging near the stove where I put them out to dry are his black jeans, black t-shirt, and motorcycle boots. He wears the jeans and work shirt I dressed him in, a size too large.

His hands, tied together, rest in his lap. The knuckles of his left hand are tattooed with F-U-C-K, and the right with K-I-L-L. Though his feet are tied together, he has kicked the books from one of my shelves, the only damage he's been at liberty to do. Shirer, Arendt, Camus. History and philosophy in a little pile at his feet.

I say, "If only you had a match, right?"

He glares. I watch him breathe.

It seems to me as if the wooden faces in the room are watching him too-- the teak faces locked in screams, the anguished expressions in pine or spruce or ebony. All the hollow wooden eyes take him in.

Untying the gag is like breaking a dam. Obscenities flow from him like water.

"I wouldn't have to gag you," I tell him, "if you could keep a civil tongue."

"Fuck you."

I remind him that I saved his life.

"Fuck if you did," he says. "They'd have come back for me."

"I told you. There have been no new tracks in the snow. They haven't been back."

"Fuck you," he says, but he must know his confederates, must understand the truth as I tell it to him.

"You'd be frozen solid without me," I say, "so whatever I do to you now, it's better than that, right? It's better than being dead."

I force the gag back into his mouth before he can answer. If I don't, he'll shout his lungs out and I won't be able to concentrate.

I go back to work.

* * *

I earn more for Nina than all of her other clients combined. If she worries that I will have a heart attack, it is only because of the money.

She is not without compassion, but some of the things she has done for me have hardened her. The Auschwitz crossbeam was one.

I grant few interviews. Shouldn't the work speak for itself? But sometimes an interview brings its surprises. I once regretted aloud that there was no wood from Auschwitz for me to carve. A month after my words were in print, Nina had a call from the Israeli government. They'd have preferred a Jewish artist, but no one else achieves my effects.

The crossbeam came from one of the barracks torn down after the war. It had, for a time, supported the roof of a Polish barn.

When they flew me in to inspect it, I did not ask how the beam had come to Israel, to a warehouse where it lay in a military truck bed like a missile.

The Deputy Minister of Culture, standing before the truck, waved some documentation under my nose. I stepped past him and touched the wood. Even after forty years, it was alive with ghosts.

"We will give it to you," he said, "on the condition that you cut it in half and produce two finished works, one of which you will return to us. For the memorial."

I agreed.

They could not know how dense the wood was with tortured faces, with gestures of pain and despair. Back in the States, I cut the beam in half, as agreed. Then I split each half lengthwise and carved four pieces instead of two. Let the Israelis imagine that I'd had to carve deep to find the images I gave them. Let them think the missing wood littered the floor of my studio as chips and dust.

All four finished pieces were a tangled knot of victims.

Nina told me, "You can't sell the extras. You'll give yourself away."

"We will sell them," I said. "Sealed bids. Secret bids. We'll give slides for Hauptmann to circulate among likely buyers."

Nina's arms were crossed. "Not Hauptmann. I won't go through Hauptmann again. Even talking to him on the phone, I feel dirty."

"So write him. Mail him the slides."

"But the bidders he will bring us...."

"It's what I want, Nina."

"This is the last time I go through Hauptmann."

I said nothing. No one else knew the people Hauptmann knew.

A month later, Nina flung the list at my face. "Do you see where these bids are coming from? Do you see?"

I picked up the loose pages from my floor, looked at the names and offers. "Here," I said, and pointed at a bid from El Salvador. "This can only be Rosado himself. It's not the highest bid, but I want you to sell it to him."

"If we weren't using Hauptmann's list, I could find someone else," Nina said. "A collector. An investor who would put it away in a vault for his heirs. The money would be better, and-- "

"Sell it to Rosado."

"In God's name, why?" Nina said. "Why do you want someone like him to have it?"

"If I'm lucky," I said, "he'll install it over his bed."

Nina's face was pale.

"Sell it to him, Nina. In a way, it's his already."

Then I picked another bid, one Nina liked no better.

The last carving we sold openly to the Museum of Modern Art.

* * *

Once or twice a year, I look for trees in the killing fields. Some are old fields. Some are fresh. I walk around the tree trunks, touching them, feeling for the echoes. Then I direct the cutting of the logs that will be shipped to the States, trucked from Denver to the house and studio in the mountains.

Usually, the freshest sources are the hardest to get to. Not always, though. Not always.

* * *

A logging road runs parallel to my canyon, on the other side of the ridge. If I have unwelcome visitors, that's usually where they come from.

The night I found my guest, I was reading. I heard the crack of a rifle shot.

I turned my lights off, shut down the generator.

Snow was falling. It had been coming down for hours in a fine powder, the sort of snow that continues, steadily, all through one day and into the next.

When I stepped outside, I could hear their voices at the top of the ridge.

There was another shot. Youthful laughter. Raised voices.

Then silence.

When at last I heard one of the voices again, there was no mirth in it. Indistinct words. Then another voice, pleading.

Again, silence. Enduring silence.

I waited a long time before getting the kerosene lantern out and putting on my boots. Ordinary boots. Sorels. I had no way of knowing that something special would be waiting for me at the top of the ridge.

Lighting my way with the lantern, I found my way up the slope to a small clearing. Fresh snowfall hadn't yet covered the shell casings and beer bottles that appeared in the lantern's circle of yellow light.

A shadow caught my eye, and I extended the lantern toward it. Stretched out on bloody snow was a body. The bald head was uncovered. Vapor clouds of breath rose from the face. The eyes were closed.

An old man, I thought. Lantern light is tricky. It took a moment for me to see that, no, his face was unlined. He was young. Stepping closer, I saw the swastikas tattooed on his arm.

When I leaned to see his face, my hand fell upon the trunk, and I paused, taking it all in.

* * *

I got my first taste of fighting in the fall of '44, in the Hürtgen Forest. The trees of the Hürtgen were still just trees to me then. I had the same feelings for them any infantryman would. When they gave cover to my unit's advance, I loved them. When German shells exploded among the branches over our heads, they rained down limbs heavy as stones, splinters sharp as shrapnel. We grenade-felled trees to clear booby traps, to build an instant bridge over tangles of barbed wire. Trees were obstacles, trees were useful. The tang of fresh resin filled the air.

I paid more attention to the Germans.

Up close, as I stepped over them, the German dead in the Hürtgen could have been my cousins. Even after news of Malmèdy, I didn't hate them. I understood what had to be done. I did it.

Buy a bond. Kill a Jap.

Kill a Jerry. A Nazi.

* * *

The swastika tattoos on the kid's arms are sharp-edged and very black. He hasn't had them long.

"Do you know what I think?" I say to him. I haven't removed the gag this time. His eyes bore into me.

"I think," I tell him, "that when a victim isn't handy, one needs to be manufactured. Am I right?"

His eyes narrow. His gaze shifts to the deer rifle by the door, but even if he unties himself while I'm upstairs, he'll find that it's unloaded.

"I'm lucky that you and your companions didn't know I was here-- an old man living alone. An artist with shelves of history books. I'd have been a more interesting victim, don't you think? I'd have been perfect. You might be drinking a beer with them right now, remembering, laughing. Instead, you had a little surprise. Like Röhm's surprise. You know about Röhm, of course, about what happened to him. You know all about the turn things can take."

His lips work around the gag, but he's only trying to swallow. There's no question, no understanding in his eyes.

"Ah. Never heard of Ernst Röhm. Well. It's an old, old story. Your friends, your compatriots, they really did surprise you, yes?"

He doesn't nod, but emotions play over his face like shadows. He was surprised. He still doesn't understand it.

"Your strength is that you might do anything." I lower my voice, lean toward him. "Anything." I smile. "But that's the danger, too. Do you understand? Hitler purged his lieutenants. You should know that. You should know what history can teach you about yourself."

From the books on the floor, I select Shirer's *Rise and Fall*. "We could start here," I say hefting the thick volume. "Shall I read you a chapter? Shall we begin at the beginning?"

Oh, the hate in his eyes.

"No," I say. "That's not the right sort of history for you. You need something tailored to you, yes? Something more personal, more relevant to your present situation. In fact, let's not call it history at all. Let's call it a crime story, set in the winter of '44. A crime story. A puzzle. I'll give you the crime. You tell me the motive."

* * *

The snow was deep, and in places the wind was piling it deeper still. Here and there, it came up to my belt.

I held my rifle at port arms and kept a good ten feet between myself and my prisoner. I doubted that he'd try to jump me for the gun-- his own lines were far away, now, melting back into Germany-- but SS soldiers were a cocky lot.

I wished for tire ruts to walk in. Even with the prisoner blazing the trail, wading through the snow was wearing me out, and we were still a long hike from Battalion HQ.

I heard, like an answered prayer, the sound of engines. A couple of jeeps emerged from the forest below and turned toward us. The paths left by their churning wheels invited me, and I thought, *Hallelujah!*

Planning to wait for the jeeps to pass, I said to the prisoner, "Hold up. Halt."

An explosion belted my gut like a sucker punch. I hit the deck, but the German remained standing, hands still clasped calmly behind his head. He smirked at me. "*Nur eine Landmine,*" he said in a voice that might be explaining thunder to a child. "*Nichts befürchten.*"

Memory is tricky. That probably isn't exactly what he said. I did not learn German until after the war.

One of the jeeps was upside down, and the snow had been blown clear for ten feet around it.

I stood up and let my rifle point more emphatically at the German while I brushed snow from the front of my jacket with my other hand.

Around us trees swayed in the wind.

"Okay," I said as deeply as I could manage. "Now march!"

A third jeep had pulled up behind the other two, then turned around to go back for medics. Running down the opposite slope of the valley, churning snow before him like a plow, was some GI who must have popped out of a foxhole. He was shouldering an aidman's bag.

I didn't have to hurry my prisoner. He waded forward resolutely, as if eager to draw closer.

One of the jeep's passengers, an infantryman, was lying face down in the crater. He had no legs. Another guy was lying beside the tree trunk he'd been thrown against, and nothing but his mouth was moving. He said, "Jesus, sweet Jesus," again and again.

The third man, a lieutenant, lay on his back with the jeep pinning his chest. The aidman leaned close to see if he was breathing.

He wasn't.

Clicking his tongue as we passed, my prisoner said, and this I'm almost sure of, "*Daß ist also das Kriegsglück.*"

The aidman looked up. There was an 82nd Airborne patch on his shoulder. "What did he say?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't speak German."

From the other jeep, a man said, "Thinks he's clever, don't he?"

It was true. The German was smirking as he surveyed the scene.

The dead lieutenant looked asleep, eyes half closed, mouth slack. He was young, a ninety-day wonder.

"You take that Jerry son of a bitch into the woods," the aidman told me, "and you shoot that grin off his goddamn face."

The prisoner shook his head very slightly and clicked his tongue again. I prodded him with the gun barrel. "Stop that shit. Keep moving."

The aidman crouched beside the man who'd been thrown against the tree, but over his shoulder he said, "If you were Airborne, you'd take my advice."

It was easier to walk in the tire ruts.

A while later, the jeep that had gone back for help came rolling through the snow, ferrying medics to where the mine had blown the first jeep. They drove slowly, staying in the tracks, wary of another mine. We stood aside to let them through.

Very quietly, the prisoner started singing, bobbing his head in time with the song. It was a march. It was a true believer's song.

"Knock it off," I said to his back.

He stopped, but before long he had started it up again.

"Come on," I said. "You've made your point."

He stopped singing, but he still bobbed his head from side to side, and he turned slightly, awkwardly because his hands were still clasped behind his neck. I saw enough of his face to see the smirk again.

"What is it with you?" I said. "Halt!"

He stopped and turned full around to face me.

We stood, watching each other.

His eyes were the color of ice, of winter skies.

"Let's take a detour. Up there." I gestured with my head, up the slope, away from the tire ruts.

He unclasped his hands and pointed, tentatively, over his head.

"You got it," I said. "Let's go."

As we walked, wading again through deep drifts, he began once again to sing. Loudly. This time, I didn't shut him up.

The further we went, the more densely the pine trees crowded around us.

Remember, this is a mystery. Why was I doing this? I can tell you, it wasn't the Malmèdy massacre. And all the rest, all the rumors, smacked of propaganda.

I made him stop, then turn to face me.

The trees circled us like witnesses.

I brought the M1 to my shoulder and pointed it at his chest.

"Doctor's orders," I told him, "courtesy of the 82nd Airborne."

I watched where I was aiming-- the center of his chest.

The rifle report echoed from the surrounding hills.

He pitched back and hardly kicked. It had been a clean shot, a hunter's shot. His back arched for a moment, then fell.

Then, when it was too late, I wanted to know what his face had been like before I had shot him. Was he surprised? Was he smirking?

I couldn't tell. Dead, his face was a mask.

My knees got weak. I knelt next to him in the snow.

There was a secret here.

The smell of blood was like copper in the cold air. I thought of hunting again, of killing and dressing out deer, spilling their steaming guts onto the snow.

I detached my bayonet, opened his coat and shirt, unbuckled his belt. A bayonet is not a hunting knife. It's made for stabbing, not slicing. The blade is too long for good leverage. But I made it do, opening him up, spilling him out, looking for clues. Blood up to my elbows.

Months later, when we began to liberate the camps, I told myself that there was justice in what I had done. But the killing preceded the motive. Even though I had heard the rumors, I only believed in the camps when I saw them myself.

* * *

"So," I say to him, "it's a mystery, isn't it? Why did I kill him?"

He had listened intently. I pat his leg, and he doesn't try to kick me.

"And here you are, another mystery. Another Nazi, delivered into my hands. But things are different. I didn't kill you, I saved you. What for? What happens next?"

His eyes are wide.

* * *

There is more. After I dressed out the SS trooper and strung his unreadable entrails across the snow, I pulled off his boots.

My hands were sticky. I washed them with snow, then undid my laces with numb fingers.

I had to stamp down hard to get his boots to fit my feet.

I walked around him, in his own boots, searching. Then I happened to rest my hand on the trunk of a pine tree.

And I felt him inside.

If the bayonet was a bad hunting knife, it was even worse for carving. At best, I could only strip the bark in the place where my trembling fingers detected him. But he was there. If I could free him of the wood, I would know what his face had looked like in his last moment.

But I lacked the tools.

For the rest of the war, I kept finding other faces in other trees. At Stavelot, where the SS had shot Belgian children, I found a face in a garden birch tree. In broken French, I explained. A farmer lent me his hand ax, and I did the detail work with another man's pocket knife.

The farmer, watching me work, watching the face that emerged, shed quiet tears. The face, I was made to understand, was his niece's.

Many times since the war, I have searched the Ardennes forest. I have never been able to find the spot where I killed the trooper. I have never been able to find the tree.

* * *

I remove his gag.

He says nothing.

I say, "That's better. That's much better."

He is looking at the wooden faces, shaking his head. "It's bullshit," he says at last. "I don't fucking believe you."

"What part don't you believe?"

"Ghosts," he says. "I don't believe in ghosts."

"Not ghosts," I tell him. "That's not what they are."

I go back to the studio to work, to finish what I have worked on all the time that he's been here.

* * *

Really, it is necessary to wear the uniform, to pull those shining boots over your calves and pose and smile. I have the Luger that matches the uniform. It is not a heavy gun, but without the weight of it in its glossy holster, the uniform and its truth are incomplete.

The commander of SS troops at Malmèdy, at Stavelot, was Lt. Col. Jochen Peiper. Sentenced to hang, confident of reprieve, he called the war "a proud and heroic time. Wherever we stood was Germany, and as far as my tank gun reached was my kingdom."

The boots are proud and heroic.

The holster is proud and heroic.

The insignia gleam.

* * *

When I come downstairs again, he has freed his hands and is working at the ropes that bind his feet. He hears me coming, but seems unconcerned until he looks up and sees the uniform.

I unholster the Luger.

He hardly seems to notice the boots and canvas bag I carry in my other hand. All his attention is on the gun.

"Isn't it beautiful?" I say, but I mean the uniform, not the gun. "Go on." I wave the muzzle at him casually. "It's time for us to go. Finish untying yourself."

He doesn't move.

"Come on," I tell him. "I haven't got all day."

"What are you going to do?"

"Shut up," I tell him, "and get those ropes off your feet."

When he has freed himself, I tell him to stand. He grunts and holds his side where he must have taken a kick to the ribs. I make him strip and dress in his own clothes. All but his boots.

"Wear these," I say. I toss the boots-- very much like the ones I am wearing, only these ones do not shine. They are boots that have seen the battlefield. They are scarred. The leather is cracked.

I say, "You can't get them on by staring at them."

He had no coat when I found him. I tell him to bring the blanket from the couch. It's an old woolen one that I won't miss.

"Now out," I say. "Back to where I found you."

"I'm thirsty," he says, "and hungry."

"If you had the gun and I were the one who was hungry, would you feed me?"

He thinks about it. "Yes."

"All right." I herd him into the kitchen. Without taking my eyes from him, I get down a box of crackers. At the sink, he drinks water from his cupped hands. Then he eats a handful of the crackers.

"That's enough," I say. "Take the box. Eat them later."

The snow has gone on falling almost all the time he's been with me. I can find no tracks. The snow is up to our knees.

We need a tune for marching. I whistle the regimental march of the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler.

Very quietly, he says, "Please."

I stop whistling.

We march.

He says, "What will happen?"

I say, "What are we to do with the killers, with the people who are filled with hate?"

"I never killed anyone," he says.

"But you have hurt people. Don't ask me to believe that you haven't done that."

I start to whistle the march again. Then I stop to say, "Do you know that in Germany, that music is illegal? They'll throw you in jail just for carrying the tune. There's a long list of forbidden music. What do you think of that?"

He says, "I don't understand you. Who are you?"

By which he must mean, *Whose side are you on?*

* * *

Once I was at a gallery opening of my recent work. This set of sculptures had been especially demanding. Like the Auschwitz crossbeams, each piece incorporated a score of twisted faces, a hundred twisted limbs. Drawing them out had exhausted me. I could hardly stand to look at them.

The wood had come from Cambodian trees.

The gallery was full. Patrons had wine glasses in their hands as they went from one piece to another. Sometimes an art opening is noisy as a cocktail party. Mine tend to be subdued. This one was silent.

Nina and the gallery owner had already seen the pieces, and I was relieved to find, as I stood in the middle of the room with them, that they, like me, were in the mood for something else, anything else. We managed to hold a conversation in the middle of the room, focusing on each other, ignoring the little wooden hells that were all around us. And it worked. Before long we really did forget ourselves.

The gallery owner said something that struck me as funny. I laughed. I put my head back and roared.

A woman wheeled from one of the sculptures and shouted, "How can you laugh in here? How *can* you?"

* * *

It is easy for me to find the spot on the ridge where I had found him. There's the stump of the pine tree that I felled while he was still unconscious.

"Stand there," I say. "Right where I found you."

He doesn't move.

I wave the pistol and say, "Come on."

He looks at me, hesitates, then steps sideways to the spot.

"I don't know about you," I say. "I don't know how far gone you might be, how you got started down this path."

"You won't-- "

"Shut up," I say. "It doesn't matter whether I know or not. I only have one answer. There's only one thing for me to do about you and others like you."

I toss him the canvas bag. Catching it, he drops the box of crackers.

"Open it up," I say, and he does. He takes out the sculpture of the hand, and he doesn't know what to make of it until he turns it the right way, can see the meaning of the outstretched fingers, the unmistakable gesture.

Please. I'm hurt. I'm down. No more. Please.

"I took it out of the tree," I tell him, nodding at the stump.

With his free hand, he touches his side where his ribs still ache. His expression seems more angry than sad, more vengeful than softened with wisdom. But who knows?

He opens his mouth, begins to form a word.

"No," I say. "It doesn't matter. We're finished already."

He looks at the boots on his feet. The boots strangers have died of. When he looks up, I'm pointing the pistol at his chest. I watch his face. His expression is impossible to read.

I turn away, begin to retrace my steps. I, too, wear boots. The lustrous leather clings to my calves like a second skin, and melting snow beads up on the blackness to glint like the stars coming out. One point of light. Then another. Then one more. Soon, they will be numberless as the dead. And as cold.

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