

Judith Barrington

Ode to Boots

She strides in jacket and breeches, brown boots knee-high,
a ladder of small buttons clinging to each shapely calf.
The grizzled wolfhound at her thigh
stretches out mottled lips in a lupine laugh.

I love this picture of Vita, her head thrown back,
a gust of wind in her wake as she rushes along;
but what I love best, of course, are her boots—
beautiful boots that stride and stamp and kick,
shouting that *yes*, such a female can really belong
in this world. Oh boots of delicious disrepute!

Once I had a pair, but mine were black;
I wore a pony-club tie, my breeches were tan.
At the junior show-jumping, down by Posingworth Lake
I swaggered all day and flourished my leather cane.

Too big in dresses, too tall in heels,
at fourteen I heaved a sigh of relief
and left my cloak of shame behind.
The loudspeaker's muzzy blare, the ponies' squeals,
a slap on my back—I could almost believe
I belonged here, in the genderless boots of my mind.

I crashed to hard-baked ground, crumpled in front
of the painted poles and the crowd let out a gasp.
Pain shot up my leg: I uttered one grunt.

A motherly woman ran from a tent. She clasped
my hand. "Don't move," she whispered, drawing
out a knife. I stared at the sky, breathed
sweet smells of horse sweat while she sliced
my boot from knee to instep, peeling
it back like the shell of a shrimp. I writhed
on the Red Cross stretcher. I paid the price.

Oh single boot, oh dusty lone survivor,
perched on my bookcase, god of my teenage years!
How can I go on being a true believer
in you who've stamped out so many doubts and fears?
You're collecting dust, your shine is fading fast,
you sulk and turn your perfect toe to the wall,
but what really matters is that you remain up there:
the echoes of your strides will last
longer than the memory of the fall.
Some day surely I'll find another pair.