

By Alexandra Nwigwe

Before You Cross The Street

Your mother has just bought you new boots and
you're so excited to pull yourself up by their straps,
to live the dream
you have grown up in, to emulate
the sitcoms you have seen on television, to finally feel
like all the friends you've made in school.

The boots make you a bit taller, almost
the same height as your mother,
so close that when she leans over, you're
more painfully aware that you can't
understand a word. The sounds still don't mean
anything in your brain. *Huh.*

You've always thought it was due to the distance,
the height difference being your excuse for it all
getting lost in translation.

You wear them everywhere now.
To your mother's disappointment, you keep them on
in the house, trekking mud all over the wood
floors of tradition. Sometimes, she tells you stories

about those traditions, about her childhood and places you have
no attachment to, lands you've never walked on
(and certainly never with your boots).

You don't reciprocate. It's better this way—
for the both of you. In your mind, you have walked
your way to a better
future, on a road best traveled alone.

You told your mother this once and she didn't
understand. She never does.

One day, they're gone. It's pointless to tell your mother,
who would simply wish the boots good riddance. It's easy
for her to say. She's lived her whole life without them;
this is the only life you've ever known.

You swing by her room anyway, knowing she'll revel
in the news, only to see her hopping on one foot,
pulling your boot onto the other.

They're too tight for her, leather wrapping around her
ankles in sharp lines and harsh creases.

She limps toward the other boot, ready to repeat
the painful process all over again.

You take it from her and slip it onto your own foot.

They're more uncomfortable than you remember,

with little room for your toes to move

and lining that chafes at your heel. You hadn't realized.

Both of you are on uneven ground, wobbling slightly

from the mismatch. You lean into her, embracing the unsteadiness,

and she leans back. It's the only thing keeping the both of you

standing. She says something

in a language you can't comprehend but

you know it is love.