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## Shoes

Kristin Rothell

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## Shoes

*Kristin Rothell*

I see his shoes every. Day.  
A vice squeezes my lungs  
until I can no longer breathe,  
my stomach ties itself into knots  
whenever I hear his footsteps,  
and my voice freezes in my throat  
like a core of iron dropped in nitrogen.

I never look up.

Not when his shoes settle in my sightline –  
trained on the floor and nothing else –  
blocking off my view of the speckled linoleum  
until my breath hitches and I can't replace it.  
I'm drowning in my own ineptitude,  
afraid that if I do look up  
I'll be lost again,  
that fragile little girl he took hold of  
and never really let go.

But I escaped.

I ran.

I looked up for the first time in years,  
took my eyes off the floor for but a moment  
and saw the bars that surrounded me,  
saw the cage my life had become  
and I felt the fury surge through me  
like a thousand volts against my spine.

I was woken up.

I remember what that was like,

that jolt of electricity that kickstarted my evolution,  
but it wasn't fast enough.

The vice on my lungs comes from  
his arms that surround me like steel bands,  
constricting slowly so I know if I struggle,  
they will tighten until my lungs no longer function  
and the last thing I will see are those god-awful shoes.

The knots in my stomach are the ropes  
that scrubbed my ankles and wrists raw  
until the blood that leaked out became  
the prison of my own design,  
swirling spools of crimson that trained my soul  
to obey.

The iron at my core was once molten,  
a living, thriving thing  
that beats at the heart of every naïve girl  
until adulthood snatches that warmth away  
and leaves behind the frozen tundra  
made of liquid nitrogen and  
the remnants of herself.

The Oxfords glisten in the fluorescent lighting,  
the glare burning my retinas until my eyes water  
but I can't look away.  
Not when they hold all the power,  
not when they're the architect of my incarceration.

But I look closer and they're not the same.  
They're a dark, faded charcoal  
that have been spit shined so often  
I can nearly see through them if I look just right.

They aren't *his*.  
The bands unbuckle,  
the knots unwind,  
my core starts to soften.

I remember freeing myself from him,  
remember the sharp agony as my wrists were skinned  
when I pulled free from my bindings,  
as my chest was unburdened,  
and the electricity jumpstarted my life.

The sirens came and the men in blue and black  
took him away until all I saw was the back of his shoes,  
bracketed by well-worn combat boots of  
men born to protect.

And then warm arms replaced the chilling bands  
and the soothing timbre of my father's voice  
replaced the grating cadence of *his* voice.

The faded blue Oxfords are my fathers.

And I am safe.

*I am free.*