

WHAT TO DO

Randall Brown

I wondered if the old woman collected stray children as one would cats. So many children, the rhyme went, she didn't know what to do. The picture of the shoe showed a playground built into the shoe's tongue and happy face after happy face going down the slide, peeking out the windows, leaning against the heel. In one window, bread seemed to be cooling. But there was no bread, only broth. How plump and round the artist drew them! Each of those so many children she whipped soundly. The rhyme really said that. I didn't understand soundly but imagined it be like a stick against skin, or the stick against the air on the back swing. This verse haunted me at night, my mother out and my father crying like a kitten in the room next to mine. My mom had only one kid and didn't know what to do. Her shoes made the tiniest tap up the stairs after my father had fallen off to sleep. She never once looked on in me to see if I were there, even if I coughed or sniffed real loud. She slept soundly, until noon. . I counted the children, the bowls of broth, each thwack of the old woman's switch until it felt as if I were among them. At the end, when she put them to bed, I could imagine them happy, I really could.