

ZINGCHAT: Joanna Howard

Assemblage

It was a different time. I was engaged to one of two brothers. My fiancé's brother returned alone from the war with a wooden leg. He was mindful of several losses. He walked no less gracefully than before, and he intended to take up a career on the stage. I had only of late come to understand his affections for me. I was aware of this commodity, and of shortages and rations, which still held in place. At first we settled in to making house together, as brother and sister, mournful and tentative, though I married him summarily.

It had a way of working. I had always admired this brother. Truly, he could no longer dash up stairs, in a passion, as I had imagined him often enough. Instead he took them stilted and a bit sideways, like ascending a narrow stepladder, but I thought that if I didn't know his leg was wooden, I would not know. Before bed, I watched his silhouette behind the dressing screen, and I tried very hard to remember the last night I had spent with his brother, but not much of it remained. The two boys had embarked together the following morning, though one was older, and higher in rank.

Then came the day we found out that his brother, presumed dead, was sheltering at a neighbor's cottage, though war shocked, and blinded. That morning, we heard the sound of the milk train, and a sudden wind picked up the window silk, and died back. We were awake but had not yet stirred. I had the feeling, one I felt often, of having taken someone's place, and become a dark angel. We could hardly believe ourselves as we headed toward the cottage. We struck across the field, as the morning fog began to burn off, and an unseasonable heat warmed my shoulders. We were keeping the pace of a wooden leg, and I felt very blissful. I had made no accommodations at all for my life, and still it managed it's own formation. I looked outward, beyond the two dogs leading us, and tried to imagine whatever spell could draw in a staggering, blind third.