

Remains

by

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Five thousand five hundred years ago, in a black cave in Vayotz Dzor, before countries became countries, before borders carved the land, before anyone you know walked the earth, I left my shoe. It lay undisturbed in the darkness, untouched until its discovery. Now, in your time, it is the oldest surviving shoe in the world. That's what they say. That's what their science has determined. And to judge by its size, they say, it must have belonged to a woman.

It did. But I was younger then, younger than a woman, though old enough to remember the maker of the shoe with his face of fractured rock. He made the pair to fit my feet alone. He worked each shoe from a single piece of cowhide. Each was laced at the front and lined with soft grass from the valley floor. The horizons I walked in those shoes, and the ones I could walk, are too far gone or too far ahead to imagine. In five millennia of starlight, I have seen so much. But the shoe is alone in time.

They searched for its pair, knowing that there had to be one, calculating it had to be close. They scraped carefully. They dug the heavy earth with tiny tools. They brushed away the dust. They measured. They sampled. They illuminated. They went deep as they dared inside that black cave. They excavated time itself. But they could not find it. The lone shoe,

half a pair, is yet a revelation. It stands, they say, for the rest, for all of me, for what came before and what happened next. It reveals to eternity, they claim, the passing of a small woman with a small shoe.

The shoe has been presented in a case made of glass. It has been preserved at a temperature to make it last another five thousand five hundred years. It carries a date, and a few words to describe the knowledge, craft and technique of a disappeared people. They studied the shoe and thought of the foot. They reflected on the foot and imagined the life. But there is nothing more, not a word about the face of the shoe-maker, nor what he said, nor what he told, nor what it felt like to listen.

The maker of the shoe was my grandfather. Perhaps he knew of the endlessness of the journey he had undertaken, the wisdom that had passed to him and that he had passed on. But he could not know then of the craft to come, the turning of shoes, the welting and the cement-lasting. And he did not live to know the horizons his grand-daughter would walk and all that she would see. But he did know that mine was a breech birth, that I was out into the world feet first, destined to walk ever since in the shoes he made. A time-traveller lit by starlight, I was found by torchlight.

My lone shoe, now sealed, guarded, cherished as if a sign of a god, is also a god-like mystery. It raises from the darkness of a cave the question of the absent pair. 'Where is it?' they ask. 'It must be somewhere.' After finding nothing by digging down, they could not help looking up. They looked up to the sky for an answer, just as all disappeared people have done, and as those yet to appear will do. Cloud-like, the answer moves, shifts shape, and evaporates.

But to the wearer, to me, there is neither question nor mystery. I know where it is, the other half, the pair of a pair. We are recognised by our things, the things we have and the things we must have had. The absences, the missing things, are the greater part of the whole, their mystery as deep as cave-dark. What did I look like? What did I sound like? What did it feel like to touch me? What really remains of all of us, the disappeared? Memories, perhaps, these, our common memories, the things we remember about each other, nothing more. Some of these memories of ours are older than a shoe.

What do I remember? I have a memory of a bearded man by a burning bush. I heard a voice inside his head. It told him to put off his shoes from off his feet, as if to leave behind his body, as if to cast off earthly things, the things that equal earth. And I saw the terra cotta boots of an ancient Greek, boots made to outlast cremation, the spirit released from its boot-prison. And I saw a Chinese woman's feet wrapped tight to hobble her, to stop her wandering beyond the edge of the dust. And I witnessed the theft of the magical seven-league boots from the Great Ogre, as if to help the thief make great strides to another world. And I saw a spirit called Alexander Csoma de Kőrös walk each and every step from a place called Transylvania to a place called Tibet, in order to find where he had come from. And I have not forgotten Braccio di Bartolo, the prancing dwarf, shape-shifter, master of disguise, leaping expertly from soul to soul.

And I remember those who sought the centre of the snowfields of the Kush. Barefoot, they walked the burning snow as if to leave no trace. And I saw a silver-shoed girl called Dorothy make her way on a golden road. And I witnessed a madman with one ear painting boots and shoes and more

boots, as if to remind himself of what he had left behind on earth. And I know what happened to the boy who one day put on his father's shoes and met his death the way his father did. These things I remember over thousands of years. These things I have seen across horizons.

And I see you now. I see you on your path. I hear your memories. You will have a memory of childhood shoes that changed you, a pair in which you walked or pranced or leaped into adulthood. You will have left behind a trail of shoes on the trail you walked, shoes defeated by friction, holed, lumpy, smeared, torn-laced, deformed, disowned and, till now, forgotten. You will have worn vagabond shoes, picaroon shoes, dancing shoes, Dervish shoes, wanderer's shoes. You will have worn shoes to live in, shoes to take off at the door to your life, shoes to take off at the door to someone else's. New shoes. Old shoes. Dead shoes. Just by changing them, you could be someone else. I had but one pair, one pair in which to walk my life from end to end. Half lay in a black cave for five thousand five hundred years. The other half, they say, is mysteriously absent.

What could remain? Memories, perhaps, like traces. Sometimes a step we take reminds us of the steps we have taken, as if someone has passed us like a wind in soft-soled shoes lined with valley grass, someone like us or like the self we left behind. We cast off our shoes like a forgetting, leaving them behind for others to find. We are wayfarers walking the Long Road, and one day we must put off our shoes from off our feet. It's just that we do not know when.

If by accident we could see into ourselves or if we chanced to hear a voice inside our heads or if we stumbled on someone to guide us, we would

know exactly when to put them off. I remember, somewhere between the beginning and the end, in a mist in a gorge, the sight of Monk Damo. He was crossing a river called Yangtze. He was walking on the waves. In a hand, he held a shoe.

On the far bank, there stood a boy, astonished by the sight of someone walking on water. But it was the sight of the shoe that truly entranced him. He called out: ‘Monk, where is your other shoe?’ And I saw Monk Damo smile, and look back to where he had come from. The boy did not understand. But I did. Monk Damo looked back because of course he had left his other shoe in his coffin.

Light in spirit, unburdened of time, the monk no longer needed to reunite his feet, the left with the right. He was everywhere and nowhere, within and without, on the waves and across. The future I have seen, the history that will happen, the present that only continues: what does remain? A shoe, perhaps, a shoe just like the one they found, like the one you will some day see in a case made of glass.

Like an ancient monk, I left a shoe in my cave-coffin. The other I held in my hand, and I took it with me across the waves. I am known only by the shoe I left behind. And wayfarer, one day you too will be known by yours.