

Shoes or no shoes

“Where I go, my feet will follow . . .”

Text: Mary O’Donnell (Ireland)

I burned a pair of black patent shoes at the age of four, understanding at a young age that incineration was the most final choice for objects that irritated me, or which were ushered towards me in an aura of expectation that I would be delighted. An uncle had bought them for me, and everybody exclaimed about them, putting pressure on me to like them. They were glossy and probably lovely shoes, with a strap across the instep to contain young feet. When the adults were occupied in the kitchen I removed the shoes, placing them strategically on the open fire. I remember the flames dancing up around them as they burnt merrily, the patent leather melting and cracking, but oddly, I can’t recall my parents’ reaction, beyond someone bearing down on me in surprise. Whatever the reaction, as I was the apple of my parents’ eye, and still very secure, I’ve probably let the parental performance slip free of the shelves of memory, as I did not care what anybody thought.

Perhaps I should have gone barefoot all my life, and spared myself the bunions, the hammer toes, hard skin and toenail fungus which have all thrived at various stages. Once, I put a photo of my right foot up on Instagram, with its (to me) ugly joint and twisted big toe, and immediately attracted the attention of all the foot fetishists in America, it seemed, one of whom claimed to find my foot very beautiful. This amused me, but it made me think differently about my feet without shoes. I felt strangely liberated. On the other hand, when I saw a video of one man sucking a toe as if it was a nipple on a breast, I felt repulsed. My daughter did not find anything about this episode amusing. She likes her mother to behave on social media at this point in her life.

Most women conform to society's dictats regarding grooming, often by purchasing extreme stilettos. It is a solid contemporary echo of foot binding in ancient Chinese society that has found its way down the centuries of female bondage and right into our most modern lives. As we willingly bind our feet today, we disable ourselves from free movement on the streets, on corridors, and in public encounters and discourses. And yet, visually, I too am attracted to the illusion of an elongated leg which a high heel creates. And I love the long black boot, all too aware of the connotations and echoes of erotic dreamtime, the uniform of dominance prettified in some way with suede and with criss-crossed laces.

But my dreamtime is circumscribed now by time itself and the attrition of walking, running for my life, through my life, with my life down all the decades, bringing me to what? A love of the most fashionable shoe shops combined today with a nose for selecting the horribly practical item which will not hurt my tender feet and arthritic joints but instead mark me as one still aware of her body, and not forgetful of the beautiful form I still appear to inhabit, regardless of what goes on beneath clothing and footwear.

The beautiful form of the body is the place in which we live at our most intimate, carrying the DNA of cosmic order into the most minuscule parts of blood stream, bone marrow, the matrix of cellular structure. With the eyes in my head I see what comes to me in light waves. With my toes, arches, heels, I see something else: the surface, the gravity that holds me in its grasp, strapping me to myself and to the planet lest I escape into the wrong dreamtime of depression, or worse. That is where my shoes have brought me down all the years. Towards self-knowledge. Towards deepening awareness. They have enabled me, with all their restrictive yet glamorising aspects, to know myself as a human woman. But when I die, I do

not want someone to shove my best shoes onto my feet, any more than I wish to be dressed up as if I was going out to a formal party. My feet shall be clean, naked and smooth, the nails cut and oiled, the bones shining through my crooked joints, the skin scented. The rest of me they can cover in a shroud. Where I go, my feet will follow, and have no further use.

Burning shoes, clunky sandals, platform shoes, kitten heels, high black boots, those longed-for mules by Balenciaga, those über stilettos—all part of what I am and have been, leading me to the what-will-be-done when I empty myself out of the body I have loved. That is enough. There are no shoes where I am going.