

# Time the Footbinder

Today I meet her again: Time the Footbinder, with her bag of bandages and little hammer for breaking bones. She's not the woman who used to call on little girls in the China of not so long ago, to carve dowries and sex-toys from newly crippled feet. She's changed, moved on, and comes for different reasons now, such as my new silk-sateen evening shoes in a soft regretful shade of blue. Their architectonic heels measure five inches: more than a finger's length of uplift under swags of fake pearls. But no-one sees my breakings-in to them, only the Footbinder, who waits at home. And whom I cannot deny. Her face is age itself, framed with grey hair, like a mirror. Her fingers have the weight of decades. She flaunts the black of widows. And when she traces her fingers across my face I feel webbings flicker in my skin. Still, there she is. Indomitable. She bows. Takes the package as I hang my coat. Kneels where I sit in the indicated chair.

Holds out the shoes. And, ceremoniously squeezes me into the stilettos, twisting, tunnelling, compressing, re-modelling. Every so often her hammer drops, quick and sharp, on stubborn bones. The manipulation takes time. And how it hurts. Fashion often does. And more.

But when she's done she makes me stand. I bite my lip, waver, try to balance, and make wincing contact with a distant floor, like a ballerina en pointe, all my weight on crushed toes and two new hind claws (the supports being very narrow, not proper

heels at all). Then, with arms held wide, I take small painful steps: how the balls of the feet cry out, how the contorted toes scream. And so at this unaccustomed altitude I try out those T'ang blue shoes dipped in foggy pearls, weaving down the hall like the willow of

the graceful concubine, hips swaying, erotically perhaps, in a desperate search for balance and relief, her pain as hidden as the bound and weeping feet, whose skin wilts as easily as the petals of a dying rose, whose flesh may yet turn black and fatal, somewhere in China not so far from home.

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