

# The I Ching of Shoes

---

Darleen Quaife

☷☷ EARTH

He knows about the old woman in the kitchen with her bag of special dirt. Not that he's really seen either the woman or the bag, just glimpses through the swinging doors as he sits over his daily bowl of sweet and sour soup. The Dragon is handy, right next to his shoe store. Already he's become a fixture; they speak their English openly in front of him now, but not often. Since his ears don't work on the Chinese tongue, his eyes are there to record the men and women who go back among the knives and vegetables to consult the old woman. But of course he knows better than to use the barefaced western stare in this place. At any rate, he's not real good at eye contact no matter where he is. A habit his father still points out as unmanly. There is no need for eye contact in his business, no need to look above the ankle, and extremely dangerous to raise the eyes to the level of a knee. "Salesmanship," his father's favourite word. "Gotta look'm in the eye if you wanna sell." His father is or rather was Farmer Brown Used Cars. Farmer Brown doesn't understand shoes. You don't have to see at all to sell shoes, not really. You listen: *something fancy make my foot look smaller nice high heel you know for the calves functional killers crushing my little toe sturdy flat sensible stiletto red satin Oxford Buster Brown for a wedding no shit-kickers too bad pointed toes Italian geeze fairy boots bunions God should have such feet used to bind them you know black for a funeral nothing expensive you understand his good shoes can go to his brother's boy lots of wear left do you bronze baby shoes said I'd ask.* Then he steps through the curtain into the back, the dim world of shoe boxes. He stands quiet, eyes closed remembering every word of the request. The words break apart, syllables spin down through his body like gyres of electricity. He wears rubber soled shoes. Grounded, he is charged with his mission, his hands reach for the shelves guided not by his eyes, but by a sixth sense, by instinct . . . call it what you will. It's enough that he doesn't read the labels on the boxes, doesn't look to size or colour for his answer, no, he simply runs his fingers over the bar codes—divining.

---

Known as Mr. Shoe or Buster Brown, he's never wrong. Never a pair of shoes returned, never a complaint of a bad fit: feet or ego. Of course, he understands better than most people that the psyche resides in the feet not the head. Which means we are truly divided, separate and opposite clay vessels for emotion and thought, impulse and reason, spirit and profanity. Mr. Shoe knows what kind of business he's in. The sign in his window reads: COME IN AND HAVE A FIT.

## ≡ HEAVEN

She's got it down pat. She can Step Back And Repulse The Monkey on both the right and the left. But she proved back there in the restaurant that she's not very good at Stork Cools Wings. This is what she thinks. This is what she thinks as she crosses the street and walks toward her Tai Chi class in the upstairs rooms of the old Martin Building. Definitely not cool to mutter about being late for an appointment, grab her gym bag and head for the door during the testimonials for the bride-to-be. Her friend. A stranger when surrounded by women so polished they reflect each other's perfection.

As she changes into her sweat suit, she notices how the material has worn thin between her legs. It's like gauze, she sticks her finger through to the flesh of her thigh. No matter, she's not ashamed here among those aspiring to Ride The Tiger. It isn't her clothes that need to be perfect, it's her resolve. She's working toward the 108th Move, the conclusion to Tai Chi, expecting to be disciplined, strong and flexible enough to execute a 109th Move she has dreamed up. It is her invention. She calls it: With Little Toe In Mouth, Blow.

Her shoes are worn too. Actually, that's where her idea for a 109th Move came from: her little toe breaking through the fabric of her black Chinese slipper. One day as she cast her eyes downward seeking the Needle At The Sea Bottom, Move 28, she witnessed at that very moment the tip of her little toe pierce the black cotton, thrusting itself into the air like a nipple, like the valve on a tire, no, an inner tube. Yes, that was it, the vision floating through her mind as she moved into Fan Through The Back—under her too tight skin was an inner tube she could inflate.

This is the image she takes with her to each Tai Chi class, to every practice, to each and every exercise. Soon she will transcend Cross Hands, Move 107, and lift her toe to her mouth. A sublime stork, indeed. Then she will be as graceful as the great white bird, unruffled, dignified in a room full of women.



This is the very best time. The hours before lunch in The Dragon. Hours when the theatre is truly his own. All that can be heard are his footsteps, the click of his keys, the snap of his film. In these hours he previews movies most of which he never intends to show his select public. There are days when he must watch the latest Hollywood imitations from Hong Kong or the peasant dramas from China. His bread and butter. But there are other days when he runs *White Palace*, *9½ Weeks*, *Cowgirls in Bondage*, for himself.

His floors are very clean. No popcorn in the aisles. He doesn't permit popcorn. So when he comes down from the booth to his worn plush maroon seat, he feels nothing under his feet but the chill of perfect concrete. Painted red, red curtains, red wallpaper. He's satisfied.

The film on the screen is a shot of electricity that starts his heart, the red walls expand and quiver, his stomach becomes light, his mouth dry. At the moment the images enter him, he remembers he is below the street, he has locked out the day, he is no longer a pedestrian. The girl opens her naked legs, the camera as predatory as his eye, closes in on a sparse crop of fair hair. There's a tingle in his right testicle. The specific nature of his response no longer surprises him. What does give him pause is that his physical response is never this pinpoint when he looks at his wife's dark privacy.

Now why had he thought that? It was tantamount to inviting her into his space. The idea was cold rain on his neck sending a shiver down his back into his left ball. Not entirely unpleasant. What if he were to bring her here one day? Sit her right down in the heart of the house and put on this movie. What would she do? Would she be an obedient wife and watch? He notices his breathing has quickened. That hasn't happened in a very long time. Not since he first started his private ritual of screening naughty films. What would go through her mind?

In the dark he could hear her breathing, a rapid shock of air. Embarrassed eyes, embarrassed by naked men in cowboy boots. He hadn't thought of that. He hardly noticed the men in these movies. They were just there to prop open the women's legs. Something like a fleshy door-stop. Now he wishes she wasn't here. He doesn't like the idea of those men. And her, too surprised to hide her eyes. He looks hard at the young actors. Tall, well-muscled unlike his own race in this. Surely she would find their excess of flesh and hair repulsive? Wasn't she used to his smooth fine skin, his compact limbs? After all, good women desire only husbands.

Although in shock, she would flee. Yes, there was no point to his spec-

---

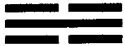
ulations. She would surely go. What a fool. It had been a bad idea to bring her here. Sitting in the dark, he couldn't help but wonder what she was doing at this moment.



## WIND

It has been light for some time, but Our Lady of the Gilded Shoes still sits wrapped in a blanket. She hasn't moved from her place over the hot air vent since her last trick left hours ago. The old curving vine cast iron floor grate connects her like tendril tips to the other apartments, the boiler room, and even the kitchen of The Dragon. She should be able to smell the various breakfasts soon; wonders if the various occupants can smell the wet wool covering her rump. She sniffs, her facial muscles twitch and the dried blood on her face cracks. Closing her eyes, she sees herself sitting suspended over a black hole that catches her blood as it drips from her body. If she stood back, she could see the hole leads to the centre of the earth.

The bell sounds on the door of the shoe store below, and her eyes open. Mr. Shoe has arrived. Soon she will smell his coffee perking. From her special seat she predicts he uses an old style coffee pot on a hotplate. Will he get a warm blooded whiff of her as he opens his nose to the coffee? Will he wonder? If not today, then perhaps tomorrow or the next day as she soaks the blanket. There is no doubt, she must sit over the hole her entire time. She knew this the minute the john finished wiping his bloody hands on her face. It had nothing to do with the fact that he had wiped himself with a twenty dollar bill then dropped it on her stomach. Not even half the price. She hadn't told him she was on the rag. No, it had to do with hunkering down in a wind with the smell of your own blood.



## WATER

He has been invited to float in the DEAD SEA. The flyer came through the mail slot in the shoe shop door. *New Age Health Club offering salt water meditation tanks. Float in the darkness of your dreams, murmur your mantra as you rock gently.*

"What if you don't have a mantra?" he questions the ad.

Looking for an address on the flyer, he expects to find such tanks housed in a suburban leisure centre with the wave pool and sauna. Instead they are three blocks away. He can't believe he hasn't heard of the place before now. A health club on this side of the tracks? Mantra or no

---

mantra, he now feels obliged to visit. He has always been a good floater. That's why the business of a mantra bothers him. Is it considered a necessity, the password into New Age Health? No matter, he can't resist water, it's in his blood, he'll walk down tonight.

He stands naked in front of the door. It reminds him of the outside cellar doors in horror movies: a plank and plywood cover on mystery. This door is red cedar, as pungent as pepper in the warm moist air rising off the tank inside. Once open, the body size door reveals a black hole. Not even a prick of artificial starlight in the draped dome of thick black plastic. He slips feet first into the salt sea and as he lowers himself, the door, tilted at an angle, automatically closes with a heaviness that betrays the cost of soundproofing. Black, there is only black and the smell of steam, salt and poly. The handle, he feels the wall for the door handle, tries it, a bar of light codes his relief.

Then darkness. Floating on darkness he closes his eyes, the insides of his eyelids a more natural shade. No sound unless he splashes, creates waves, stirs up the electrolyte soup out of which life could rise up around him. It brushes his thigh—a delicate tentacle, a sweet antenna, against his shoulder something of the jellyfish. None are phosphorescent. Not even the two parts of himself. In absolute darkness he is head; in buoyant darkness he is body. The head needs no body in this first midnight. The body no longer defined, reforms, reverts to a fabric of cells like a muslin shroud dropped on the water. Water and salt stain him, leave their mark so that every cell quivers.

His head has never known his body, this body. Never known the fragile power of each and every cell. If he were to open his eyes, he would now see that he is made of dots of light. No need to look, he knows this is true. Besides, it is growing red behind his lids. Not blood red, but fire red. There are flames in the night and cymbals galvanizing the air.

## ≡≡≡ MOUNTAIN

"I dance, I don't sing. I could dance 'Ave Maria' at your wedding."

"You'll be part of a choir. No one will know you can't sing."

"I didn't say I can't sing. I just don't do voice. . . I'm the physical type." Lengthening her stride, she hurries her friend past the restaurant. She doesn't want the subject of her spontaneous departure from the bridal luncheon the other afternoon to come up again. Today, together, they are walking into their past. This street was part of their growing up.

"Remember the gas station on the corner? North Star, or something like that, with that great concrete penguin, big as a truck."

---

"Polar Service."

"What?"

"It was called Polar Service. And it was an eight foot polar bear."

"Yeah, yeah, but the bear came later, after the penguin." She should have expected contradictions. The bride-to-be always considered herself right.

"Where are we going?" her friend asks, looking the old street over with distaste.

"You'll see." She punches her, this immaculately dressed woman, on the arm, before she can stop herself. "Old habit," she says.

They walk, she pays homage to the haunted heritage house, the candy factory, the old sandstone school. A tourist would show more polite interest. The theatre, surely the theatre where they slouched every Saturday, gradually, over the years, moving from front row centre toward the back of the house. Of course it wasn't a Chinese theatre then. It's true, they've left this world behind. But her Tai Chi lessons have brought her back and it's like she's found an old friend. She's comfortable here, relaxed. On the other side of the river, in among the towers of industry, she's a different person. All muscle and mouth strapped to the pedals of a bike. Spandex and ball cap.

Finally she gives up on the tour. "You want lunch later? Maybe The Dragon?" She pulls down on the skirt hiking up her hips. Wishes she would've put sweats on after all.

"Depends on the time. I've got a lot to do."

As they come up beside an antique store, she stops to look in the window. Her friend steps back to get a better view of the name over the door. Obviously she didn't know the shop was here. Obviously she's interested.

"Let's go in."

This is what she had hoped for. Her lead to a wedding gift. But now that her friend's in position, she drags her feet a little remembering lines of poetry she read standing in a bookstore waiting for her next job to come in over the radio at her hip. She never buys books, just reads them between deliveries. Poetry has become her favourite because it's short and so is time. Messengers are still busy like crazy, even with all the vacant offices. But this book she can't put down when a call comes through from her dispatcher. She buys it. And now she stands inside the door of this antique shop mumbling, "Some women marry houses. It's another kind of skin." Anne Sexton and her standing paralysed before this house of relics. The nail clippings of domesticity enshrined. On her it has the warning effect of a talisman. She remains on the welcome mat watching, noting what bits of sacred rag and bone her friend picks up, weighing by

---

hand the power of each piece. Yes, it's another kind of skin. Standing there blocking the door, she feels her skin itch and expand, her mouth tastes like the inside of a shoe.

## ≡≡≡ FIRE

Our Lady of the Gilded Shoes must have been working the upper end of the street, because she's the first one to reach the restaurant after the fire alarm goes off. It's a shame really, not about the restaurant, it was trendy, but the building was one of the oldest firehalls in the city. Red brick, squat and square as history, now glowing with irony. The Dragon's Chinese arrive speaking of cows and heavenly dogs devouring the moon. They're trailing their children who say, "Shit, look at the dump burn. Awesome."

Mr. Shoe comes along just as the firetrucks pull up wailing to high heaven. He recognizes Our Lady as the new tenant in the apartment above his shop. He's distracted by her shoes. Spike heels that could kill. Stilettos of base metal—gold and silver. The assault is double-edged as he watches the woman bend over, tight skirting riding black nylons up past garters to no man's land, and take her right shoe in hand to inspect for some sore point. The heel glints red in the firelight. The gilded lady cocks her shoe at a firefighter on the end of a hose. His cheeks burn.

Turning away, Mr. Shoe discovers the owner of the theatre beside him. They stand silent before the fire, until the old woman from The Dragon's kitchen comes up banging a pot lid with a stainless steel ladle. Her family makes no move to ban her noise.

"Why is she doing that?" He stares openly at her.

"To scare away the beast. Save the moon and the old from misfortune."

"Sorry?"

"Fire is good and bad."

She points her ladle at the moon eclipsed by the rising smoke. "Sing, sing," she commands.

He looks up through the yellow haze. Head up, he's struck from behind. He thinks of the beast. Swinging around, he's confronted by a woman balanced on a bike, her feet still locked into the pedals as if an invisible barrier, perhaps the smoke, prevents her from running him over. Her windbreaker announces Xpress Messenger; her expression of disdain for his pedestrian presence confirms her position. A courier in Chinese slippers? How flimsy. She should know better.

"Shit, are you blind?" She stares hard.

---

He steps aside and waves her through with a flourish. She glances back at him over her shoulder. Following in her wake, he eventually stands beside her. She has moved up dangerously close to the burning building. The exposed skin of his face, his hands feel the flames intensify then die back. He wonders at the cause. A hum comes from her. He leans in to listen. There are words, she is singing. He sings too.