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Intersections

Portrait of a Vestigial Structure

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Start early, when the bones are soft. A woman, an *a-yi*, soaks a little girl's feet in a mixture of herbs and animal blood, shaving the girl's toenails as far back as possible. The *a-yi* presses the little girl's toes tightly to the soles of her feet and then wraps a cotton bandage over the toes and around the heels, securing the gauze with red ribbons.

At night, the little girl wakes, screaming from the cracking of her bones. Her feet wrapped, up to the ankle, in beautiful red ribbons.

The little girl grew up with five sisters. Later, she would remember the days before her feet were bound, when all six sisters used to carry bags of rice on their backs, trudging from the market to their home.

The little girl was my great-grandmother. I met her only once in Wenzhou, China, when I was 15. At 91, she was bedridden, receiving hospice care after decades of excruciating hip pain, persistent infections, and severe muscle atrophy. I sat on a chair beside her and saw her feet peeking out of the covers.

They did not look like feet; they looked like hooves. Abnormally high arches. A deep crack split the soles. Also, toes ironed flat. Beside her bed was a pair of bright red four-inch-long lotus shoes, embroidered with flowers. I thought about the tragic juxtaposition of these images: the perfect, beautiful shoes and the ruined, mangled feet.

It felt rude to ask Great-grandmother about her feet, so I just bowed my head, sitting in awkward silence. Then, my curiosity stirred; I blurted out, "Do your feet hurt?"

Great-grandmother sighed. "No. No—I have had them for so long, I have gotten used to the pain. Now, they just feel numb."

"Are not you mad? Are not you mad that your feet were broken without your consent?"

"I wish things had been different," she said. A faint smile lit her face. "But things are different for you."

Normally, organs become vestigial through a lack of use, not through force. My great-grandmother's society had forcibly turned her feet into vestigial limbs, barely capable of carrying her from the bedroom to the wooden doorway of her house. After Emperor Li Yu from 10th century China chose a woman who bound her feet as his favorite concubine, Chinese society destroyed the biological function of women's feet. Bound feet became sexual objects. Great-grandmother's feet were a symbol of a society that deemed a woman beautiful only if she was fragile, only if her strength had been broken and rebroken until it was gone.

I recently turned 20 and I find myself thinking of great-grandmother often. Twenty years was the age at which great-grandmother married. Her bound feet bound her to the domestic duties of raising children and doing household chores. Yet I have perfectly functional feet to take me past wooden doorways and through lecture halls. It is as though my functional feet have arisen from the extinction of my great-grandmother's vestigial limbs. Perhaps it is the practice of foot binding itself that has, finally, become vestigial.

As a young woman, I do not take lightly my wellbeing and my boundless opportunities. Great-grandmother and her bound feet are a constant reminder that unlike her, I am not bound to cultural expectations that require me to become someone other than who I want to be. "Opportunity" is a word that for me carries the weight of bones broken more than 50 times.

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