

# A Collector's Guide to Shoes and Feet

>Salvador Luis

Translated by Maya Feile Tomes

**THE MONKEY MONO EXPERIENCE** | *Ebook*

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# A Collector's Guide to Shoes and Feet

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a) Anna's bandages

b) Tabaré is 43 years old

c) Frau Berbig

*... because you have such tiny feet.*

Some years ago, my love of  
aquariums inspired me to fill  
my beauty salon with fish of every  
color of the rainbow.

MARIO BELLATIN

**a)**

**Anna's bandages**

If my feet were to become true *golden lotuses*, they would need to measure seven centimeters in length and be not only tiny but slender and pointed too. The standard treatises suggested that the whole process took about two years. To begin with you washed the feet and cut the nails as short as possible. Next you had to bend the toes right round towards the soles of the feet and fix them in place with a bandage some three meters long, initially just on the right foot but then also the left. Prior to this, the toes were broken one by one, leaving only the big toe intact. The bandage had to be changed every three to four days and the traces of blood and pus duly cleaned away.

One fine day I informed my mother that I wanted to be like the Chinese ladies in my book and wear beautiful

embroidered slippers. She gazed back at me with the forlorn eyes of someone who can see no further than the pall of her cigarette or the time it takes to drain a bottle of whisky. Even though she had taken to picking fights with me ever since Dad moved in with that other woman, for once she didn't seem particularly concerned. All I heard was a vague sigh, practically non-existent in the midst of all that empty space: a nothingness caused by the fatigue which emanates from the back and motionless bones of a woman who longs for a different life.

**b)**

**Tabaré is 43 years old**

1

At my southernmost extremity, my body tapers off into two discrete endpoints: an ending on the left and an end on the right. Sometimes I feel as if they meet my hopeful downward gaze and return it with a formidable sense of alienation. I may be a free man, but I am also a man shaped by my manners and by the educational precepts which my teachers drummed into me at school. I cannot and must not fiddle with my feet. I cannot and must not lick my feet. I cannot and must not bite them.

2

The question is: how long must I go on hanging my head as I make my way through this world which keeps on proliferating – and its norms and its platitudes-pouring-from-my-parents'-lips along with it – without so much as troubling me for an opinion?

Yesterday I popped out of my apartment to get the mail and while I was making my way back up, opening a letter from the National Insurance people (who never have anything to say that I want to hear) as I went, I caught sight of my neighbor's boots (the soldier who resurfaces once every few months), sturdy, caked in mud, reeking of days and nights spent fighting out at some godforsaken spot. I instantly longed to touch them, to sully myself with their dirt and the grime from some little Lolita in Thailand,

inhale their scent until I could see a lemon grove conjured before me. But there was Glenda, the old lady who always has her beady eye on me. If this had happened at night, I know I would have stolen those boots. Then I'd have them between my lips right now, like molten caramel or dark chocolate.

3

I'd like to be able to state for the record that I am the true authority on the conquest of a tiny pair of feet, but I'm afraid somebody might ransack my house and come across the pages which – without meaning to – would betray me. We had one of those *undesirables* – that's how they always referred to him – here in our neighborhood once and with my own eyes I saw them drag him out of his house and cart him off in a Ministry of Health ambulance. Apparently obese women were his thing and this, they said, had inspired him to put his daughters on a diet of potatoes, butter and every flavor of ice-cream under the sun. The girls couldn't get enough of the ice-cream; the man couldn't get enough of how fat they were. He loved seeing them that way. I don't want them to drag me all the way down

from the fifth floor, screaming at them to let me go, let me go, it isn't a crime.

4

The canvas shoes which I inherited from my sister have pride of place on my table; I don't have vases or pieces of pottery. I used to put out a bowl of fruit – apples and peaches, in the main – but not any more.

When my sister died of that lung disease, her husband asked me if I wanted to take the photo albums (he couldn't bear to look at them any more) or the terracotta ashtrays which she used to paint by hand. I said that he should sell what little there was of value and give anything else still of use to charity – perhaps to an orphanage – but that I would take care of Elsie's shoes.

She had five pairs, all brightly colored. The ones on the table are my favorites: I call them the *glassé* pair. The

rest of them grace my window-sill and the corners of my  
bedroom.

5

Even Glenda would represent a site of sanctuary and a thing of beauty for me if she went around with her feet on display. The accident which forced her to cover her legs with a blanket and spend her days lurking in the shadows means I can never love her, but if she could get her foot stuck in a gutter or trip over as she got off the subway at Rokossovsky Square then I would.

6

Sometimes when I'm in my room I close my eyes and imagine a group of men and women kicking me with shoes of all different colors and styles: platforms, clogs, lace-ups, cowboy boots, sneakers, sleek moccasins, sandals, crocs, ballet slippers, tango shoes, all showering me with blows and treading on my fingers, high heels bearing down on my windpipe. I want that heel to asphyxiate me, I want my skin to start changing color. Inevitably, however, some total stranger – a Jehovah's witness or a door-to-door salesman (sometimes it's history textbooks, sometimes little crystal dog figurines) – will ring at the door and break the spell, and I have to open my eyes right before that boy in the dream boots me in the mouth.

7

I don't know when it all started – I think it's always been this way; this thing inside me has been with me since the day I was born. Experts will beg to differ: people aren't born that way; I must have picked it up from Rétif de la Bretonne or a hellraising cousin.

Or someone might try to account for it by suggesting that I was born castrated. And so it must be my quest for the phallus which drives me each day to that park in the center still frequented by shoeshine boys with intriguing boxes on which to rest the feet.

8

I abhor long skirts and have never been able to comprehend how anybody in this world could wish to conceal their feet with a dress. Why do they do it? Those sorts of people fill me with suspicion: I intuit that they must be plotting something; I can see it in their eyes when they look at me, as if they were saying through gritted teeth, “This is the start of a new era and there’s nothing you can do about it”.

They march in groups all over the city. I’ve seen them laughing for no apparent reason, in the daytime and when it gets dark. I won’t deny that I feel slightly frightened when they start dressing little children the same way as the grown-ups.

9

The person I most admire is a businessman from a well-to-do family who leads an enviable lifestyle. His name is Leo Link. I've seen him arrive at the brothel with a leather briefcase full of high heels and ladies' boots. He'll make himself comfortable on a chaise longue and then get the girls to parade past in a catwalk show of his collection; the one who looks best gets picked and taken off to a private room.

What I find most fascinating about Leo Link is that he never brings the same type of footwear twice. He produces a new shoe from his briefcase each time he visits the whorehouse – something glitzy, maybe with safety pins

or made of animal skin. In the past I've been tempted to steal that briefcase and try on its entire contents myself. If only I were brave enough to go over and make off with one of those samples...

10

I like squeezing my toes really hard to make them turn bright red: one by one, from the little toe to the big one, watching the blood pooling in the tips and the nails seeming to change color. Sometimes I'll put on a pair of shoes that aren't my size – ones that are too small for me – and go out walking along the main roads, just for the hell of it, for at least two hours a week. I have to confess that there's something inexplicably lovely about the sores which I get as a result.

A few years ago my sister and I went to visit a friend of hers who had sustained terrible burns. Her feet were exposed and we were informed that the fire had devoured the vast majority of the skin, now completely covered in blisters. I had a sudden vision of the girl's throbbing raw

flesh and myself using my right hand to massage it; licking it too. Those charred feet tasted of aloe vera gel.

11

Millions of years ago we stopped being four-footed creatures and instead turned into a species that walks exclusively upright. The way we employ our feet marks us out from the rest of the primates and allows us to see the world in a manner utterly unimaginable to a baboon or gibbon. There's something singularly unique about our feet, something which sets us apart from all other creatures and which never ceases to amaze me.

12

I like invalids' feet just as much as babies', but babies' feet have the particular virtue of being so very small, not to mention the fact that they always seem to be near a mouth or in the hands of an adult. When I was little, I liked to go over to Elsie's crib and rub the soles of her feet. Sometimes I would gently nibble her big toe and it would make her laugh. My mother didn't consider it normal for me to be forever touching Elsie's feet with such single-minded fascination. She took it as a sign that there was something not quite right about my feelings towards my sister, rather like a child who suddenly exhibits the tendencies of a compulsive sniffer when presented with one of Egon Schiele's reclining women. I recall one particular occasion on which she chased me out of Elsie's room with a leather

strap and a dire warning. Later she banned me from doing up her laces or taking off her shoes. My mother knew, I'm sure of it, but there are always things about which people are not prepared to talk.

13

Many years ago, before I was born, shoe shops used to contain a contraption called a fluoroscope, a device that allowed people to try on their shoes with the aid of an X-ray machine. Thanks to a special visor, shoppers could see their own bones inside their boots and chuckle at the anatomy of their toes. The few who recall it say that, despite the controversy surrounding the use of radiation technology, a visit to such shoe shops could be an illuminating experience like no other. The ability to see not only the outside of one's feet but their hidden depths too. Contemplating oneself without fear.

14

Sometimes I shut my eyes and the next thing I know I'm immersed in a swimming pool full of Manolo Blahnik creations. I see myself splashing around among the exquisite high heels, works of art which are quite plainly the products of genius: those tips, those textures, those colors... Somewhere on this earth there's a pool of *manolos* just for me.

15

Elsie went behind our mother's back and taught me how to perform pedicures. Her feet were beautiful; first she would soak them for ten minutes in warm soapy water to soften the skin and the cuticles. Then she dried them carefully and applied exfoliating cream, massaging it round in little circles on the tougher patches of skin. She also had a pumice stone for when she wanted to give them a really good scrub and she used to say that the best way of cutting one's toenails is in a square shape, so that the corners don't dig into in the surrounding flesh as they grow. Elsie's treatments always ended with a gentle foot massage and a quick polish of the toenails with a buffer.

16

Someone recently told me that Leo Link also owns a photo collection and a mini art gallery in which he exhibits pictures of feet. His personal museum is home to images from all across the globe: grubby feet with overgrown toenails, gypsy feet, a whole series featuring the deformed toe of a Hollywood star, and numerous ankles belonging to the maids and chauffeurs who've served him over the years. His most prized possession, or so they tell me – I've never actually seen it for myself – is an oil painting no larger than thirty centimeters in which a consul is eating grapes from the foot of his slave-girl.

17

It was from a Swedish film that I got the idea of masquerading as an artisan shoe salesman. The trick of the matter lay in compiling a photo catalogue of all manner of unusual shoes and then going round different neighborhoods, offering the non-existent products for sale. I also used to take along a tape measure so that I could size up the feet of those I managed to convince on my rounds.

The beauty of some of the feet which passed through my hands was practically divine, although, truth be told, I enjoyed handling all the ones I was fortunate enough to measure. One of the people to open their door to me was a retired old lady named Olga. She wore a hearing aid in her right ear and explained to me that she had just taken her tablets so that she could have an afternoon sleep. She

apologized that it was not a good time. I cast a furtive glance down at her feet, plump and straining against the fabric of her socks, and knew right away that I would not be able to let this opportunity pass me by.

Shortly afterwards I forced the lock on the back door with a crowbar and made my way stealthily towards Olga's bedroom. She was lying peacefully on the double bed, sound asleep. She didn't hear me come in and nor did she feel anything when I undid my trousers and placed her feet on my member. The calluses on her soles were really rough and the polish on her toenails was all chipped. That afternoon my embarrassment knew no bounds.

18

Once upon a time sandals served to distinguish people according to their social status. I learned all about it from a history book with a number of accompanying illustrations, including a step-by-step guide to sandal manufacture. There was even an emperor who once decreed that only he and his descendants should be allowed to wear red sandals.

I think sandals are the right sort of shoes. When someone has a pair of sandals on, you can see their feet in the most intimate detail: scars, moles, the tell-tale signs of athlete's foot. People wearing sandals – whether they realize it or not, and probably without even meaning to – tend to be liberated for a moment from that horrible globule of fat we call shame.

19

I have a recurring dream in which I see the *glassé* pair walking around the house. It is free. It climbs onto the countertops and plays with the aluminium saucepans. It tries to keep the noise down, unaware that it is a truly lamentable cat burglar and that I've been spying on it from the moment I heard its footsteps or glimpsed the light of the fridge glowing through the darkness. Sometimes it coughs because it gets a bit of gingersnap caught in its throat and quickly has to gulp down a gallon of water. It likes to read Orwell, and it likes sitting in the wicker rocking chair.

20

I think Glenda would be less of a recluse if someone were to present her with a pair of prosthetic legs. Then she wouldn't need to spend her time being such a busybody because she'd be out of the house all day herself, going round the shops, sitting in a café on Brusone Avenue with a *caffè macchiato* in her hand. Everything would be so much simpler for her. She could finally stop paying that boy from the store to bring over her groceries, because – thanks to her new plastic limbs – she'd be able to run all her own errands. I'd stand back and hold open the door for her; we'd talk about Elsie and about how Manolo Blahnik makes high heels that look like droplets of water. At Christmas I'd be happy to spend the afternoon by her side watching the nativity play which they put on in

Rokossovsky Square each year, because Glenda – all smiles and awash with the unmistakable glow of second youth – would finally be in possession of something thoroughly beautiful.

21

I know that the soldier who comes back every few months suffers from athlete's foot. Whenever he's home to visit his family, I recognize the characteristic smell of damp in his boots, that breeding ground for the fungus which must surely cause him such irritation. This in turn prompts me to imagine the precise moment at which he first contracted the infection: did he put his foot wrong in the gym or as a teenager on the beach resting his feet on the sand, probably distracted by the sight of a girl with really big breasts – or maybe with teensy ones, like the young Twiggy's in the days when she was discovered by Nigel Davies. I imagine the initial sensation of burning and the strange new reddening of the soles: scales formerly unfamiliar to him which now return, like a plague of locusts, with every humid summer.

Those delicate feet of his are covered in blisters and calluses – I know them like my own – and sometimes the flesh smells bad, the toenails taking on a yellowish tinge or turning black because of the spores.

22

I enjoy re-reading the novellas of Mexican author Mario Bellatin, especially the one entitled *Beauty Salon*. In it, one of the characters turns his hairdressers shop into a sort of hospice where men with terminal illnesses can go to spend their last days in the company of others. As well as providing clean sheets and a bowl of soup, the salon owner breeds fish in an attempt to turn the establishment into something more than just a temple of death throes and demise.

I've always wondered whether someone so sensitive to man's inner workings as Mario Bellatin must surely be is also the owner of a lovely pair of feet, and whether he thinks the same sorts of thoughts as I do when I contemplate a pair of handmade espadrilles.

23

For a while now the boy who never kicks me in the mouth has also been taking part in a clandestine piece of performance art. (This is all part of a new recurring dream of mine.) The act takes place in the basement of a North African restaurant where, in spite of the beliefs held by a certain sector of the clientele, there are manifold images of gods and representations of the human body on display.

In the dream, the boy brings in a basin of water and places it at the feet of an old man whose eyes are veiled by a black bandage. The old man wets his filthy feet in it and then makes one of the audience members drink as much of the contents as they possibly can. This ritual is repeated many times, with new basins and new spectators, but the

old man who dips his feet in the water never takes off the bandage.

24

In Hipogeo – where I used to live before I moved to this neighborhood – there’s an urban legend about an expert foot masseur who plied his trade near Maddox Bridge. The man in question was called Kastor and those who knew him report that the care with which he practiced his art was extraordinary, indeed quite legendary as compared with that of his brother, a masseur of lesser talent who went by the name of The Secret.

They say that The Secret became so insanely jealous of his brother that one night he attacked him while he was busy licking the vulva of the woman hired to distract him. The sheets turned red with Kastor’s blood as The Secret stood clutching a carpentry hammer in his hand.

Those who believe in the truth of the tale also claim that The Secret mutilated the corpse and made off with Kastor's feet, whereupon he employed a technique similar to that of the Shuar Indians to shrink them so that he could keep them as talismans. The most incongruous aspect of the whole story, however, is not so much the gruesome fate of the two brothers as the fact that neither was ever seen or heard from again.

25

If I had the power to perform one feat of daring, I would choose to be able to walk over hot coals. I once read that the ancients employed this as a test for determining the guilt or innocence of those on trial. If I were able, for example, to walk calmly across a bed of smoldering embers in the presence of all those who doubt me and scrutinize my every move, precisely as Glenda does, then it would serve to demonstrate that there is a power greater than that visible to the naked eye – some sort of superior force – and that I've got this supreme energy on my side. Then nobody would ever again have grounds to question my sketches of tied up feet or raise eyebrows over the fact that I like to track barefoot little girls' footsteps in the sand.

**c)**

**Frau Berbig**

A number of extraordinarily detailed accounts of the ancient Chinese custom of footbinding can be found in a series of books named *Tsai-fei lu*. The treatise in question came to me by way of my father, an accountant from Cologne with an all-consuming passion for old bookshops.

When I was little, the illness affecting my legs meant that I spent many a long hour in Dad's library reading all about the procedures for preparing the *golden lotus*, the perfumes applied to combat the terrible smell of the dead flesh, and the medicaments given to young girls which eased the binding process by softening the bones and muscles of the feet.

According to the accounts, from the earliest days of the Manchu Dynasty marriageable women were expected to possess bound and perfectly symmetrical feet, which, the story goes, all went back to a courtesan who bound hers up so that she could dance *en pointe* to please her emperor.

Mothers typically liked to begin the treatment on girls the age of six, remarking that there were only two times in life when a woman submitted without so much as a word of complaint: when she had her ears pierced and when she had her feet bound.

For a period of two years the bandages would be changed regularly, and then for the rest of their lives women would look after their *golden lotus* with the same rigor instilled in them by their elders: silk stockings, religious cleanliness, and aromatic herbs.

The beauty of this practice lay essentially in the diminutive shoes in which the feet were encased, which over time came to reach astonishing heights of stylization. Another point of fact is that in some Chinese cities of yore the architects devised specially narrow little streets so that

the ladies with bound feet could proceed unimpeded about town.

## About the author

SALVADOR LUIS RAGGIO MIRANDA (Peru, 1978) holds degrees in Motion Pictures and Spanish Literature from the University of Miami. From 2001 to 2011 he worked as Managing Editor of *Los Noveles Literary Magazine* ([www.losnoveles.net](http://www.losnoveles.net)). He is also the author of *Miscelánea o el libro geminiano* (short stories, 2006), *Rock duro y metal pesado* (music catalogue, 2006), and *Zeppelin* (experimental novella, 2009). As a freelance-editor he has prepared several anthologies of contemporary prose such as: *El Arca. Bestiario y ficciones* (2007), *Asamblea portátil* (2009), *La banda de los corazones sucios* (2010), *La condición pornográfica* (2011), and *Malos elementos* (2012). His short stories and articles have been collected in compilations in both Latin America and Spain. Salvador Luis has also written film reviews for *Miradas de Cine* in Madrid and currently is a contributing editor of *Koult Magazine* in Spain. He lives in the United States.

# A Collector's Guide to Shoes and Feet

Salvador Luis

*A* *Collector's Guide to Shoes and Feet* is a book dedicated to passion and its idiosyncrasies. Without ever bringing its characters fully into view, it opens up a peephole through which to observe those who see beauty in the wrinkles of the skin or erotic depths in a pair of Manolo Blahnik boots. Obsession and fetishism permeate its pages – not to mention the search for the perfect pair of shoes.

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