

Death of the Pointe Shoe

(Using Virginia Woolf's "Death of the Moth" as a Point of Departure)

Handcrafted by The Butterfly Maker, serried layers of satin, paper, cardboard, and paste arrive at my doorstep in the morning. A pair of pointe shoes is designed by a particular “maker,” each known by signature elements and techniques. Differences are measured in millimeters but give rise to distinct qualities and preferences that engender passionate loyalties. Some have an elongated vamp, a few bear a tapered box, while others offer a shortened shank to flatter one’s arch. After a perennial process of trial and error, I only recently discovered my quintessential match, the Butterfly Maker; Clef Maker is a serviceable second though not ideal. Opening the package, the tissue crinkles and the yet unseen pointe shoes pronounce their presence with a sharp smell of leather and resin. My adopted pair are swaddled in protective muslin, but the delicious, lustrous blush veneers peek through, and their pristine wings swell with promise. I carefully unwrap these *objets d’art*; they are full of vitality, reflecting an almost metallic shine, sublime in their luminosity.

Although my charges have been reverently sculpted, they are not yet functional nor fit. Armed with honed needle, fibrous thread, and elastic ribbons, I mold the pointe shoes to my particular image. Organizing the pair on my table, I align the ends of the slippery pink ribbon and puncture the shoe, violating its glossy construction. I pull and loop the thread, piercing ties and rims alike, securing my first rough stitch. I continue this process of tugging, stabbing, and suturing until the strips of satin are fastened tightly to the shoes’ throat lines. Although silken and handmade, the pointe shoes are now rebranded by my coarse needlework. This is only the beginning of the revisionary, even reconstructive regimen. Next, crouching down onto my knees,

I wield one shoe above my head and hurl it onto the floor with savage force. The pummeling persists and with each strike, a tremble of pain and pleasure escapes from the shoe. I bang out the sound and discipline their spirit. I set them symmetrically side by side, and stand up, digging my heels past the binding and press my foot towards the vamp. I grip each shoe and enshrouded toes tightly, stifling the boxes with my hands. The power and heat of my palms tenderizes the paste. Now flattened, I flip the pair off to fracture the shanks; I bend, curve, and contort their cardboard spines to obey the contours of my own morphology. Finally, I peel away the cloth that overlays the shoe's core. The nails are laid bare. I pry out these spikes with scissors to make my shoes more nimble, staving off little stabs in the feet from these tiny swords. They are perfectly broken.

Around midday, I make my way to the theater's studio. The benignant sun, resplendent in the sky, settles her delicate, equable warmth on me. I enjoy the moment of quiet calm. Upon arriving however, any pursuit of peace is like chasing a butterfly. Here, one is easily uneasy amidst the halls of mirrors and sweat-smudged air. A cacophony of sibilant gossip, crackling cartilage, and taut inhaled air pervade the space. But as I sit down to warm up, I reflexively submit to my role in this queer spectacle. In preparation, I swathe my fourth toes along with inner and outer bunions in cocoons of padded tape. Blisters are covered with gauze to prevent fantasy-spoiling spots of blood. I don my stained, sour toe pads, still damp from yesterday's rehearsals. I thrust my foot into my rewrought pointe shoe and coil the ribbons around my ankle; the silky spirals bind and shore my joints, a self-styled Shibari. The shoe's suffocating embrace chokes my toes, and keeps them in place. Taking my first steps on pointe, a searing twinge dashes up my leg. The shoes are avenging their brutal metamorphosis and exact their own violence against my feet. The back brims engrave my Achilles tendons; the narrow frames pinch my bones which threaten to buckle. Exacting and recalcitrant, my shoes relish their retributive gambit.

I find my way to the stage wings. Careful to preserve their surface sheen, I dust my pointe shoes with powdery rosin to create friction. The Marley floors can be slick. The violins reverberate, bellow out of the orchestra pit, and begin Paul Hindemith's score. I breathe in deep draughts: luscious, nourishing, and smooth as I feel the oxygen flood my lungs. With an intent exhale, I rise up onto demi pointe and emerge into the floodlights. On stage, my shoes become an extension of myself, and we move together through the steps, taking flight across the stage like a hawk moth. Deliberate and without inhibition, gravity no longer constrains us. The silky constructs and I have abandoned our battle. In symbiosis, we embrace mutual dependence and support, leaping and fluttering across the stage. Relaxing into my arches, my pointe shoes invite me to articulate through them, all the while working to stabilize and reinforce my ankles. But our graceful interplay's hard fate is ephemeral, and just as I sense Hindemith's denouement approaching, the boxes begin to fail. My shoes' tips soften, becoming fleshy and helpless. With each step I begin to feel my toe-nails press against the floor beneath. Now, the cellists let out sullen and mournful dirges, as if to portend the pair's demise. What was once stiff-necked and sprightly is now exhausted. For whom and what is the composer's coda; will I finish the variation before my pointe shoes perish? The last count of eight is forthcoming. As I glide into my double step-over pirouette, I culminate in fourth. And departing off stage, I perceive a timely death. Loss lingers from our simultaneous exit, both uncanny and ordinary. Tomorrow, the Butterfly Maker will offer more supply, and another dancer will perform. But the tiny memory of that ballet's pure life endures; indeed, it is the strongest of us all.