

SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things



RUTH ROSENGARTEN



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Ruth Rosengarten, *Second Chance: My Life in Things*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0285>

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Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0285#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 9781800643741

ISBN Hardback: 9781800643758

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800643765

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 9781800643772

ISBN Digital ebook (AZW3): 9781800643789

ISBN Digital ebook (XML): 9781800643796

ISBN DIGITAL ebook (HTML): 9781800646704

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0285

Cover photo by Ruth Rosengarten

Cover design by Anna Gatti.



Situating

I was a child, perhaps eleven or twelve years old, when it occurred to me that there existed a link between things—I mean physical things, material objects—and grief. That realisation seeped through me like a blooming of ink when I understood that the cat had gone but the water bowl remained. Imbued with a no-longer-usefulness, that water bowl was imprinted with absence. Previously a mute and unexceptional object, it had been transformed into an emblem of sorrow, a fetish occupying the site of loss.

This was maybe two or three years after I realised for the first time that one day, not only would my parents be dead, but also: my younger brother, my newly born sister and I myself. We would all, one day, be dead. There would be no ‘I’ to think thoughts or fret or know things. How to think about nothing, an absence in the place of this vital knot of feelings that was *me*?

Thinking of my future deadness (and of course, this is me, now, thinking of my past-future deadness), I knew (I know) that what mattered to me about that cat’s water bowl—about all my future dogs’ bowls and chewed toys (the ones that look like roadkill), the special pencil stub and musty handkerchief with its stencil of my mother’s lipstick lips; boxes of letters and photographs; my father’s hairbrush and Seven Star diary; that battered edition of *The Mersey Sound*, with its too-long, childish dedication in the hand of a friend who was my idol and my rival; the talismanic trinkets (a brooch in the shape of a pig, a tin St Christopher) given by lovers and now signifying nothing so much as the loss of love, as though one could ever have really possessed it—what mattered about those things would evaporate with the extinguishing of my consciousness. Someone will one day throw all that away.

Without me, it will become mere stuff, junk.

That is a great deal of thought to impose retrospectively on the mind of a young girl ardently striving to understand the disappearance of a

cat, a beloved pet; a girl suspicious—knowingly uncertain—that her mother had a hand in that disappearance. Decades later, I can scarcely tolerate thinking about the day that Ginger was taken away and the dawning that came with it, the blending of recrimination, impotent fury (fury is always impotent), sorrow, guilt.

The things that mean the most to me—I am using the words *things* and *objects* interchangeably here, though arguably they are not the same—are seldom objects of great (or any) monetary value. The phrase *sentimental value* often appears with a qualifier: *only*. It is possible for the qualities of material and sentimental value to overlap and coincide: think of Edmund de Waal's *netsuke* whose extraordinary trajectory he traces in *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2020). But mostly, objects to which the word *sentimental* adheres occupy a different order of value. We might scoff at them, but they are the very things that we would attempt to salvage from flood or fire or war.

There is an attitude everywhere present in the English use of the term *sentimental* that denigrates it as a thing of little import, a trifle. Unlike the broader French use of that term, the English one suggests an exaggerated emotion for which, in Oscar Wilde's formulation, one has not paid. Poet and essayist Mary Ruefle borrows the definition of *sentimental* from novelist John Gardner, who describes it as causeless emotion; that is, says Ruefle, following a skittish riff on cute kittens, 'indulgence of more emotion than seems warranted by the stimulus.' Sentimental value is pitted not only against material value, but also against artistic value: the word *kitsch* brings the field of aesthetics into focus. Aesthetic merit is generally attributed to artefacts around which, ostensibly, not a scrap of sentimentality is wrapped. Yet when we talk of objects of sentimental value, we admit that it is a value that must be respected; that without such sentimentality, we move towards the threshold separating us from bare life.

This is a book about objects that are of sentimental value to me; my evocative objects.

You could say it is a book of modest—even blinkered—scope, since it shines no direct light on the wider (political, environmental, bureaucratic) contexts in which I find myself. I write, in other words, from a cocoon; cognisant of the intruding world but not addressing it directly. To do so would be to use a voice that was not my own, since (for

reasons I cannot entirely fathom), when I talk in the voice of politics, I feel I am ventriloquising. Yet I am writing from a body that is embedded in culture, with its crosscurrents of voices and changing concerns. I am writing from my embodied position as a middle-class, white woman of advancing years (I am thinking a lot about that metaphor of advance), a person without descendants living in the guilty comfort of a too-large home in the English countryside, inexorably drawn into a vortex of virtual spaces and statistical algorithms, rapaciously devouring books or (more accurately) sections of books, lamentably enmeshed in the habits of consumption that contribute to capitalism's insatiable momentum, yet also possibly at the point of giving up certain polished habits of work and long-if-loosely-held-and-partly-disavowed ambitions, thinking about excess, my excess, and what to do with and about it.

If this project is in no way political in its declared drives (although a political beast lurks in some of the words that I use, such as *excess* and *indulge*), I nevertheless believe that humans are linked to other humans, and also to non-human beings by shared vulnerabilities: to power, to violence, to language, to pathogens. This makes all our destinies a matter of politics and policy. But it is really the human vulnerability to neediness and love, the accommodations both to desire and to injury that I touch on, taking as specimen, target and source my own self, my life in this body.

There would have been a different story to be told had I chosen objects of archival value, friable, disintegrating documents salvaged from my family's migrations and my own; or if I had chosen objects of cultural significance (had I such objects), as Marina Warner does in her *Inventory of a Life Misaid: An Unreliable Memoir* (2021). Warner's objects (including two diamond rings, a cache of German marks, a Box Brownie, expensive brogues, but also nasturtium sandwiches, which now exist only in memory) are magnets to which shared cultural signifiers have been drawn well before the writer's own memory work begins. Her brilliance resides in a mesmerising capacity to braid intimate memories and family myths together with—and into—broader cultural narratives. Warner's memoir is always simultaneously personal and historical/political. It speaks of class, and it speaks of Englishness and it speaks of gender and of Empire, all the while homing in on a few objects (icons, metonyms) to tease out the details of a short period of the author's early

life, and the few years preceding her birth. ‘Mrs Warner,’ she writes of Ilia, her Italian mother, ‘was beginning to cook *all’inglese* and learning the words to match.’ A nasturtium sandwich is as much a thing in itself as a thing named and reified in the naming: a twinning of words freighted with significance, foods eaten during wartime rationing but described with the delectation of a cordon bleu chef: ‘the flower’s seed pods were draw-purses packed with tangy seed,’ Warner writes as she launches into a paradoxically sensuous description of making do.

Marina Warner’s memoir sits comfortably alongside other volumes of memory work—a method and practice of unearthing untold stories, connecting their parts and making them public—constructed around material objects. In *Motherwell: A Girlhood* (2020), Deborah Orr uses her mother’s bureau and its contents as the centrepiece from which her personal recollections issue: a clipping of baby hair, a reference letter for Dad’s work, Harry’s silver cigarette case, school reports, an album of tea cards. Though focusing on her own girlhood, Orr builds a bigger picture of an unhappy marriage, mid-twentieth century factory employment, class aspiration (a front and back garden), keeping up appearances, and an architectural and social experiment in Motherwell, Lanarkshire.

In *What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past* (2011), American literary scholar and memoirist Nancy K. Miller examines a small store of things she found after her father’s death, personal objects—an unexplained land deed, a lock of hair, a postcard from Argentina—that she sees as mnemonic remnants steeped in silence. Alighting on clues in photographs and letters, Miller uncovers inevitable skeletons, conjuring evidence and navigating through six generations of her paternal history, building up a picture of pogroms and migration, resourcefulness and adaptation.

Maria Stepanova’s monumental *In Memory of Memory* (2017) begins with the death of her father’s sister Galya; Stepanova finds herself in ‘the cave’ of Galya’s tiny apartment, a place heaving under ‘layered strata of possessions, objects and trinkets,’ objects which become ‘suddenly devalued.’ In streams of writing that wind history and reflection in and out of descriptions of this stash of old family belongings, Stepanova establishes an ambivalent, multidirectional relationship with memory, moving sometimes towards it, sometimes away. The piles of clothes, crockery, postcards, toys, photographs and towers of yellowing

newspapers and clippings, form the architecture of Stepanova's monument to memory, which is also, it turns out, an apologia for forgetting; sometimes more a critique of the cult of memory than its celebration.

Unlike these moving, intricate works of research and reconstruction, mine is not a book in which a writer minutely tracks past events using as points of departure a paper trail of documents and objects found in the family home. My evocative objects are not necessarily linked to my family, and none is an heirloom. Yet singly and together, they stand for the loss that invariably attends the passing of time. Each of them addresses me with a quiet statement of that loss.

To associate the objects I have chosen with loss and therefore with grief is to invoke the idea of memory work as a process of recovery and to ask what aspects of the past those objects are able to retrieve. But it is also to query how they do that work and to what extent that retrieval is itself an invention. The traffic back and forth between subjects and objects is incessant: a dialectic of projection and internalisation. Susan Pearce, a doyenne of museum studies who has focused on material culture and the process of collecting, notes that the projection *into*, and internalisation *of* objects reverts to infantile experiences, suggesting that an early association is forged between our bodies and the ways we imaginatively construe the material world. And yes, we once found our boundaries through working out which objects felt good, which hurt, and we have had to continue practicing this exercise, reiterating our earliest negotiations with things-that-are-not-me. For when you were a baby, says poet and essayist Anne Boyer, parsing D.W. Winnicott, 'objects said everything about whether or not you were alone.'

But Susan Pearce arrives at an affirmation that is perhaps surprising in the context of museum studies, a discipline which focuses, after all, on material things. It is an affirmation that points to the persistence of Winnicott's infant in the adult: not of the separate thingness of objects, but of what she calls their potential inwardness. She thinks of this inwardness as one of the most powerful—even if ambiguous and elusive—characteristics of objects: 'Objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be impossible otherwise.' Objects, in this formulation, are not only *out there* functioning

as mirrors, they are also inner agents forging links in private narrative chains. My evocative objects are those things that—modest, intertwined, interconnected—‘conspired to tell me the whole story,’ as Pablo Neruda puts it in his poem ‘Ode to Common Things’ (1961; 1954) with its breathless opening gambit: *Amo las cosas loca/ locamente*. ‘I have a crazy, crazy love of things’ does not quite capture the break in the adverb *locamente* and the pre-iteration of its first syllable.

Of all the objects that people collect and keep, it is doubtlessly photographs that hold the most special (almost sacred) place as treasured miniature memorials; they are, to flip metaphors, our sentimental capital. Writing from a situation of acknowledged privilege, I feel chastened scrolling on screen through documentary photographer Muhammed Muheisen’s *Memories of Syria* (2015–2017), a series of images of refugees, each holding a photograph picturing—so as to hold at bay the conditions of bare life—their loved ones; images of their lives before the war.

Philosopher Giorgio Agamben has defined bare life as a life in which a person is excluded from religious and political community and is no longer able to ‘perform any juridically valid act.’ That person’s existence is ‘stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight to a foreign land.’ In Muheisen’s images, faces and bodies are outside the frame; he narrows in on the hands holding the photograph, in some cases no larger than a postage stamp. Each of these photographs acts as a thin interface between a life of human connectedness and bare life, one in which subjects are banished, stripped of legal status and expelled from coherent community.

Snapshots especially, in their casual and often artless compositions, seem most poignantly like arrested and distilled segments of a past time and a lost space. They are always retrospective; for Muheisen’s photographic subjects, they are imprints of a life before its reduction by a sovereign power. The subjects of snapshots look out of the photographic frame at us, their viewers, through history, just as we look at them in retrospect. Meanwhile, as history unfolds, meanings change and possibly get lost, giving way to conjecture and interpretation and leaving us further away, more acutely aware of being somewhere else, mired in our own material and historical present. And, however much

we know that a photograph is an artifice—a frame randomly imposed on space and an act of severance in time—the compelling relationship between the photographic image and the real presses photographs into service as essential instruments in memory work.

In his book *About Looking* (1980), John Berger asks how photographs work as mnemonic prompts. He examines not only the phenomenon of the photograph, but also the things remembered through it. He notes that a memory ‘is not like a terminus at the end of a line.’ Rather, memory requires varied and multiple but confluent approaches. Similarly, he suggests, multiple approaches converge upon a photograph, comprising a radial system whose constituent parts are ‘simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic.’

Borrowing the metaphor of a radial system from John Berger, feminist cultural historian Annette Kuhn writes of the modest resources required for memory work. In *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (1995), she writes that if you have a family album or some loose photographs, a few letters or a small cutting of hair, you have the material for such work. For Kuhn, a radial system integrates personal photographs into social and political memory. Such a system describes her own practice of weaving together “‘public” historical events, with structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and “personal” memory.’ Note that she puts both *personal* and *public* between quotation marks, as though the distinction were a mere formality. Outer and inner lives coalesce: we are not conscious of the precise workings of ideology and external influence (parental, but not only) on what we apparently freely choose, or how such constructs intrude upon and constitute that which we ‘remember’. My recollections are certainly affected by those of others (parents, siblings, husbands, friends, lovers, colleagues) around me who were co-participants in occasions or events. And importantly, memory itself is not stable: ‘the stories, the memories, shift,’ writes Kuhn. The passing of time affects how we remember. Traces of our former lives are ‘pressed into service in a never-ending process of making, remaking, making sense of, our selves—now,’ she writes.

Memory work, which entails an excavation and bricolage of documentary evidence and material traces, also involves running with speculation: not only acts of memory but also acts of imagination. The

starting point that Kuhn describes is necessarily in the present time of writing; an ongoing present moment as the temporal fabric in which the making, remaking and making sense of the self unfold. I feel closely allied to this kind of practice, one in which the elusive present tense of writing is welcomed as the point of departure. That present moment is both real and chimeric, ever shifting, accommodating (without necessarily specifying) smaller and larger changes of circumstance.

To designate certain objects as evocative is not to say they encapsulate memories so much as that they coax out of me states of being. Those states erupt in me as feeling-thoughts that are linked to recollections but that are not well-formed or contoured enough to be identifiable as distinct memories. Perhaps *reverie* would be the term best suited to describe the kinds of states into which I am seduced by my evocative objects: they reach out to me, almost as though they had agency, enveloping me in a dreaminess through which the forms of the objects themselves are vaporous, unevenly distributed. The work they exact of me is not that of detailed, phenomenological description. It is more akin to dreamwork in waking.

Objects and Things

In recent decades, scientists and historians of science have brought to light complex mutual entanglements between different forms of life. In doing so, they have unsettled previously categorical, binary thinking: studies of forests and of fungal life, for example, have turned given classifications into questions. Importantly, under the rubric of the new materialisms, especially driven by feminist and queer studies, such a shift in thinking from categorical to non-binary emphasises the extent to which the (human) body has never been singular and self-same (think of the billions of microbes living in our gut and orifices, of the lives constituting our microbiomes); we exist in fluctuating states of vital entanglement with other kinds of bodies. In addition to this, we exist in systemic entanglements with non-organic matter too.

Terms such as *viscous porosity* (Nancy Tuana, 2008) and *vibrant matter* (Jane Bennett, 2010) underline the ways in which beings are interpenetrative and interactive with other beings and with the inanimate world too. Both Tuana and Bennett posit matter as unstable, permeable,

unruly, difficult to categorise and in flux. For Tuana, ontological divisions (say between the biological and the social), though deeply entrenched in bodies and practices, are shifting rather than fixed. The notion of vibrant matter has been especially influential: Bennett suggests that subjects and objects intervene in each other's being; that objects are enmeshed in a political ecology and have what she calls 'Thing-Power'. She writes of 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.'

Does it remain philosophically relevant, in this context, to enquire about the nature of a chair, especially if you do not have a chair, or the essence of 'chairness' if you do? And what is the status of a chair in an empty room? To ask that question is to enter a web of words around the thing-in-itself, the existence of things outside of our perception of them, and to summon the lofty names of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, of Plato. And it is to invoke, with Anne Boyer in *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (2018), questions about words and truths, the 'infinite amounts of untruths about chairs and also all the new truths you could tell about chairs, the ones that no one had yet discovered.'

But to ask how an emotion—love and its anticipations, or the pain of love's ending, say—affects the objects in a room is to invite oneself into the domain of literature. In Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), a scene is described from the perspective of Neville, who has come early to experience the anticipation of Percival's arrival. The door opens.

'Is it Percival? No; it is not Percival.' There is a morbid pleasure in saying: 'No, it is not Percival.' I have seen the door open and shut twenty times already; each time the suspense sharpens. This is the place to which he is coming. This is the table at which he will sit. Here, incredible as it seems, will be his actual body. This table, these chairs, this metal vase with its three red flowers are about to undergo an extraordinary transformation.

The transformations of, and exchanges between, inert objects and evocative ones, between objects that we ignore or simply don't pay attention to and others that offer us their thingness as unique, is one that may be occasioned by the proximity of the material objects to Neville's—or my—objects of desire, the *actual body* of the-one-who-is-desired transfiguring the chair or the metal vase with its three red flowers into a symbol of the most excruciating eroticism.

Bill Brown, a celebrated theorist of things, initially distinguishes between objects and things in the following way: objects circulate through our lives, he tells us in an article titled 'Thing Theory' (2001), and we look *through* them 'to see what they disclose about history, society, nature' rather than really experiencing them with our senses. In their functionality, they are transparent; we have established habits with and around them. But we begin to grasp the thingness of objects, Brown argues, when they resist us, when they stop working for us (that printer that always lets me down, the watch that needs a new battery: in defying my will—obstructing me—they state their objectual nature). I did not see Ginger's water bowl until Ginger was gone, and then that vital absence enlisted my preoccupation with its thingness, which signified loss. The ponytail is severed; the photograph folded, the trinket is broken off from ongoingness by the end of the love that occasioned its giving. 'The story of objects asserting themselves as things,' Brown writes, 'is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.'

I find this formulation resonant: I like the idea that *things* are objects that are within the range of people's attention, noticed objects, relational more than functional. Yet I query the validity of the distinction. I certainly can appreciate the heft of a ceramic jug—its thingness—before dropping it to the floor, thereby making it lose its functional integrity; can enjoy the engineered beauty of a pen without necessarily breaking its nib. Some years after 'Thing Theory,' in the introduction to his book *Other Things* (2015), Brown's distinction has become more nuanced. He regards the earlier separation between objects and things as totalising in its simplification. He is now concerned, he writes, with 'how objects grasp you: how they elicit your attention, interrupt your concentration, assault your sensorium.' How they stop being things you look through, in other words, and present themselves in their quiddity. (There is tautology in writing those very words: you can hardly write about objects or things without using the words *object* and *thing* to define them).

Everyday objects that persist in people's daily lives have about themselves a factual ordinariness onto which memory readily alights, sometimes more easily than memory alights onto certain events. Max Morden, the narrator of John Banville's melancholy *The Sea* (2005),

speaks of his memory groping for details, and it is 'solid objects' that are, for him, 'components of the past.' In people's lives, objects compose themselves into familiar formations, and then just as readily decompose, disaggregate in the mind's eye. If they are clothes or tools, implements or instruments, they might lose their autonomy and act as prosthetic devices, extensions of my body. Not only do I not notice these ordinary objects on whose existence I rely to provide a background of continuity, they also, in their taken-for-grantedness, blend 'so profoundly with the stuff of thought,' as Virginia Woolf observes in her story 'Solid Objects' (1918) 'that each thing loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain.'



To see an object as a thing, it occurs to me one night on the edge of sleep—that time when you know that if you don't put pen to paper, you'll forget the idea—does not entail a necessary alteration in its material conditions or a stripping away of its functionality, but rather, a change of focus. When you allow an object to interrupt your concentration, to assault you; when you permit yourself to experience its thingness, your focal length shortens as though you had changed a lens on your camera. This operation, this shift from one kind of looking to another, brings about a defamiliarisation, much in the way that a photographic close-up would defamiliarise an object, making the known thing strange.

If a *thing*, then, is an object made strange—estranged from its everydayness, removed from the context in which it merges, unnoticed, with other things—you might think that I should be talking about evocative *things* rather than evocative objects. But the term *evocative objects* already has traction, a history. And while I am interested in the thingness of objects, I am equally interested in the slippage of that word *object*, first describing something in the material world, and then describing a grammatical and also psychoanalytic relation: I am the subject of my speech, I may at times be the object of desire or of love, and I certainly address some of the objects of my own love or desire in writing about my evocative objects. The term *evocative objects* embraces not only things in the world, but also how those objects are internalised and processed, how they become objects of thought and feeling, how they are entangled with—and work upon—me.

Evocative Objects

In an essay titled ‘The Things That Matter’ (2007) introducing an edited volume on evocative objects, Sherry Turkle, a social scientist whose work focuses on the relationship between technology and the construction of self, uses the term *evocative object* to describe objects that we use to think with. I find a similar suggestion in ‘A Friend’s Umbrella’ (2009) by American poet Lawrence Raab. In this poem, Raab describes the way, towards the end of his life, Ralph Waldo Emerson would forget the names of familiar things.

Later the word *umbrella*
 vanished and became
the thing that strangers take away.

Paper, pen, table, book:
 was it possible for a man to think
 without them? To know
 that he was thinking? *We remember*
that we forget, he’d written once,
 before he started to forget.

And then, further: ‘Without the past, the present/lay around him like the sea.’ Familiar objects anchor Raab’s Emerson in his unique biography. With their names taking leave of him, he is left unmoored, bereft of

himself. The present, a tense in which all the yoga teachers tell you to be, is actually nothing when it is unhooked from the past, when it is unbuttoned from body and language.

Objects are of course material things, but they also offer themselves as matter for thought. (I am considering now the expression *food for thought*, its attention to objects whose very function it is to be incorporated and metabolised.) They are vehicles of subjective energies, essential signposts on the path between interiority and the world out there. This is particularly so with those things that, through their presence at significant moments in our lives (the still-life objects that attend the scenes we shall never forget) or contrariwise, through their persistence in the inbetween moments, the unremarkable ongoingness of life (the fountain pen I've always used, the thin gold chain I cannot remember ever having been without) enlist us to project onto them states of being.

Citing the celebrated formulation of William Carlos Williams 'no ideas but in things,' Turkle describes how she would rummage among objects safeguarded in a cupboard in the kitchen of her grandparents' apartment in Brooklyn when she was a child, searching for clues to the backstory of her own existence. This memory closet, as Turkle calls it, held her family's keepsakes, including her mother's and aunt's trinkets, souvenirs and photographs. Each object in the closet, she writes, 'every keychain, postcard, unpaired earring, high school textbook with its marginalia, some of it my mother's, some of it my aunt's—signalled a new understanding of who they were and what they might be interested in.' More to the point, every photograph of her mother on a date at a dance 'became a clue to my possible identity.' She attributes her lifelong interest in objects and their mnemonic and associative power to the fact that she did not know who her biological father was. As a child, she anxiously ransacked the photographs and knickknacks in the closet for traces that might have served as pointers to his identity.

While Maria Stepanova is led by the accumulation of old family possessions and mementos to explore her Russian-Jewish genealogy in broader historical contexts including the history of anti-Semitism, Turkle uses her family possessions to think about thought. Though interested in the historical and personal contexts that brought those particular objects together, she becomes more concerned with how she might hold onto them internally. Seeing herself as she once was, a

young woman on a trip to Paris in the late 1960s, Turkle describes her immersion in the intellectual world of the French structuralists. While she is away, her grandparents move out of their Brooklyn home and many of the contents of the memory closet are dispersed, given away to charity. 'Far away from home,' Turkle writes, 'I was distressed at the loss of the objects but somewhat comforted to realise that I now had a set of ideas for thinking about them.'

That set of ideas comes from her reading of the work of French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. She compares her elaboration of an associative and creative thought process around those now-lost objects to what, in the opening chapter of *The Savage Mind* (1966; 1962), Lévi-Strauss calls the science of the concrete. This describes a form of thinking that deals with the 'sensible world in sensible terms' (*sensible* in its two French meanings, sentient and sensitive), rather than in the more abstract, speculative terms of the natural sciences privileged by rationalist thinking. Linked to an attempt to understand the process of myth-making in 'primitive thought' (*pensée sauvage*—these terms were later to become problematic), the science of the concrete 'was no less scientific,' he argues, 'than the results achieved by the natural sciences' and its results equally genuine. 'They were secured ten thousand years earlier and still remain at the basis of our own civilization.'

Lévi-Strauss finds that the readiest way to describe such a way of thinking is by analogy to the process of bricolage. Bricolage is an improvisatory form of making in which the maker deploys what is already to hand rather than honed, task-specific tools and materials. It is an ethos of making-do materially, but it is also a mindset. It is an accommodation to contingency, serendipity, and circumstance. Riffing on Lévi-Strauss' notion of animals as 'good to think with', Turkle speaks of materials as 'goods to think with' as well.

Turkle proposes an additive, extemporising approach to piecing hypotheses and facts together in an operation that entails not only objects but also the temporal and spatial distances between them (displacement, memory); not simply things, but the ways in which we channel them, how they help constitute the building blocks of thought. Seen through this prism, evocative objects are those things that lead us from the material to the immaterial, enable us to devise new configurations, combing the familiar for the unfamiliar. In this way,

such objects tap into a vein that psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas calls the unthought known. Wordlessly, they give form to 'abstract thoughts, sensed memories, recollections, and felt affinities.'

Bollas, who has written about evocative objects for over three decades, sees them as generative and defines their psychic role as that of unleashing free association. 'We may extend the domain of the free associative to the world of actual objects,' he writes in *The Evocative Object World* (2009) 'where the way we use them—and how they process us—is another form of the associative.' Also adopting and adapting Winnicott's term subjective objects, Bollas sees our engagement with the objects that carry our subjective states as playing a vital role in our investment in the world.

The unconscious meaning that I project onto my objects and that makes them uniquely my own, expresses what Bollas calls a 'syntax of self experience.' Put otherwise, this is an idiom through which I experience my *self*. Evocative objects interrupt the temporal flow of the everyday, disrupt my ordinary perceptions, intruding on my sensorium and bringing the past into the present. In that interruption—that movement from perceived object to thought-object—I feel myself to be in a fecund state of estrangement, a feeling that is close to the one I experience when I am drawing or making collages, or, closer still, the strange sense of mindful embodiment I experience when I have just woken from a dream.

I address these thought-objects through a process of making that communicates with other works of art and literature, works in which similar or associated objects play a significant, or structuring, role. In doing so, I experience free association as extending beyond my personal objects to the cultural artefacts that have entered my being by a kind of osmosis, an affinity less elected than absorbed and felt.

Put another way: my evocative objects offer me my own trajectories and associations in nuggets of remembered personal experience, while simultaneously enjoining me to linger on works of art and literature that I have carried with me on those rutted paths as internal objects.

The radial metaphor that John Berger uses, and that Annette Kuhn borrows from him, furnishes me with a sense of how my excursions function structurally. A radial system describes what I have constructed around my evocative objects: a series of associations that do not all tie

up or connect with one another, but that converge upon that object, at least as it exists in that particular consciousness that is mine. I see this private and particular process as also extending an invitation to others to engage with their own evocative objects, however modest or apparently irrelevant they might appear to be. And similarly, I feel, in each act of association that nets together my own intimate concerns with works others have made, an opportunity, an unfolding and entanglement.

My World

I began writing this book in a spirit of experimentation during a small personal lockdown. In the late summer of 2019, I broke my right patella falling on a concrete ramp while rushing to the ceremony that would grant me British citizenship, and I was more or less immobilised for a couple of months. I was lucky enough for Brexit to have been the most troubling thing on my horizon, which is to say, I was again happy in love and beginning to feel energised by work too, after a hiatus. I was still researching for a book on the exploration of evocative objects by a wide range of photographers, a book that I had pitched once, unsuccessfully. The pandemic turned everything inwards. I took refuge in my home, setting my mind into an unusually introverted standby mode. My work changed direction, became personal. In this process, there were procrastinations, hesitations and head scratchings, archival meanderings and revisions as this book took shape during the collective lockdown that began in March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

It would be no exaggeration to say that, from the beginning of the pandemic, I felt my imagination rewritten, shifting my sense of place in a greater scheme of things. It is only at the time of revising the final edits of this book that I feel a new quickening, a sense of being able to participate in a broader flow of life again, an exhilarating rush of collective energy. It did not help that my partner P made a sudden and shockingly unilateral decision to end our relationship at long distance six months into a lockdown he was spending with the youngest and neediest of his three daughters, 200 km away. If lockdown narrowed the perimeter of my life, depression exacerbated my tendency to cocoon myself (not always the first thing people notice in the company of a

gregarious person) and to live in my head, which offers me a comforting if permeable architecture.

There we were, here we are, in a house, in a head: my dog Monty and me. The house is embarrassingly large, and my main source of carbon-footprint-shame. It is also a generator of daily pleasure. We are surrounded by Monty's toys (a huge array of soft scraps and a ball within a ball) and my books. There are cushions on sofas and throws of different fabrics bought in countries I visited in that other time when I used to travel, and there are beautiful drawings on the walls, often gifts from—or exchanged with—artist friends, which situates me squarely in a particular demographic. I have airy workspaces (a study, a studio, several reading corners) in this light-filled house overlooking a paddock. Standing at one of the upstairs windows in the late afternoon, I can watch the sun dipping into the horizon, watch two horses—not mine—going about their horsey business.

In such privileged and luxurious confinement (a custodianship rather than ownership, through the happenstance of marriage, but that is another story), with silence ringing through me and solitude disciplining me, thinking about my evocative objects seemed at once unreal and grounding, pinning me into my own life and holding me back from the temptations offered by a new idea: I could spend my days curled up under a blanket; no-one would know and my superego was giving me the slip.

During this time, not surprisingly, I was in intimate conversation with texts written by others, a communion which saved me—in the episodes when I succumbed to the lure of the blanket—from excessive self-pity. And if I allowed myself to doze off during those long afternoons, reading filled my nights of insomnia and made them not only tolerable, but oddly comforting: piles of bedside books dipped into with an intensity that dissipated into distraction in the light of day, but that, to borrow a phrase from the peerless Elizabeth Hardwick, were now 'consumed in a sedentary sleeplessness.' Reading, which has always been central in my life, now seemed to replace it, or constitute it. Every thought or memory of what used to be called reality seemed to have an equivalent in the books I read. I chimed with Annie Ernaux saying, in *Exteriors* (2021; 1996) that she was always 'combing reality for signs of literature.'

Abandoning the rigours of writing within a single discipline—art history—I found that reading and writing functioned ever closer than before, in tandem with each other, adhering one to the other in a sinuous, slow dance. Like the undulating transitions between familiarity and strangeness, the movement back and forth between these two intertwined activities makes its way through this book. It is an oscillation that struggles constantly with the vicissitudes of attention, both reading and writing vying with the hundreds of other things that, in the interspace between them (on my screens, in my books and notebooks) try to claim my attention. John Ashbery's 'Late Echo' is a poem that I reread, now differently. Though written in 1979, it speaks directly to the 'chronic inattention' of the present time, and to 'our unprepared knowledge/Of ourselves, the talking engines of our day.'

Alone with our madness and favorite flower
 We see that there really is nothing left to write about.
 Or rather, it is necessary to write about the same old things
 In the same way, repeating the same things over and over
 For love to continue and be gradually different.

Just the *same old things*, then... bewilderment, joy, loss, terror, death, *for love to continue and be gradually different*.

For love to continue and be gradually different (and what else is there?) here are some of my objects, or perhaps their material proxies, since my real objects are the layered experiences to which these material things point:

- a severed ponytail
- a family album
- a book
- another book
- a cache of letters, ribbon bound
- a box of letters and postcards
- a cigarette lighter
- a hairbrush
- a napkin in its darkening silver ring
- an audio cassette

- a white plastic carousel with women's underwear pegged on
- a photo album
- more photographs
- two snips of baby hair in an envelope
- a selection of chewed dogs' toys
- a pig made of balsa wood
- a drawing on a piece of cardboard
- the collected poems of e.e. cummings with two dedications on its frontispiece,
- a pair of man's pyjamas
- a recipe book so crammed with bits of paper it has to be held together by an elastic band
- a cloth bag containing half-used lipsticks
- a baby book
- a painting,
- an accordion-folded Kama Sutra
- a diamanté brooch
- a thin gold chain
- a pair of suede, wedge-heeled sandals
- a postcard, another postcard, many postcards
- a painting
- sunglasses
- a tiny drawing on a scrap of paper

These are things through which I experience not only a sense of loss, but also a sense of self, even as I renew and renew again the habitation and possession of my world, its cycles of engorging and depletion.

In the great infection of fear that has been the collective experience of the closing down of the world as it existed before the pandemic, thinking about my evocative objects was a way of figuring out what provides me with necessary psychic continuities. 'Things hold life in place,' says the unnamed narrator of Claire-Louise Bennett's compelling novel

Checkout 19 (2021). 'Like pebbles on a blanket at the beach they stop it from drifting away or flying up in your face.' Those objects that enable me to experience myself as I inhabit my world are not only pebbles on a blanket, they are also remnants—survivors—and as such, they say something about my own survival as the narrator of my life.

Each of the objects I have chosen to write about here is intimately connected to someone or something now vanished: a person or a part of myself, an experience or a love. Some are metonymies of a person I once was; others are so redolent of another person, they serve almost as ensigns. With their close link to loss, these evocative objects enshrine states of mourning, but they have also served as reminders that the interruption we experienced at the time of pandemic anxiety finds its place in a larger ongoingness. They are landmarks in the continuum of my own subjectivity.

If the plates, thimbles, scissors, keys, cups, rings, pliers and saltshakers that Neruda addresses in his odes to common things speak of moments of sensory and affective caress, such objects also extend an invitation beyond that of attention, perception and sensuality: an invitation to narrative elaboration. Not plot, but story, and the transubstantiation of story into thing.

With each telling of my evocative objects, I feel an enlivening: remembering as an act of creative bricolage, with overlaps and gaps and changes of scale between its constituent parts. Ocean Vuong says it is memory that gives us a second chance at life; but it is art, really, and writing especially, that gives memory itself (so tenuous, so easily fetishised, so readily side-tracked) a second chance, or a third. It is writing that offers me the kind of consolation that life (at least a secular life like mine, with no thought of redemption) does not.

