

SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things



RUTH ROSENGARTEN



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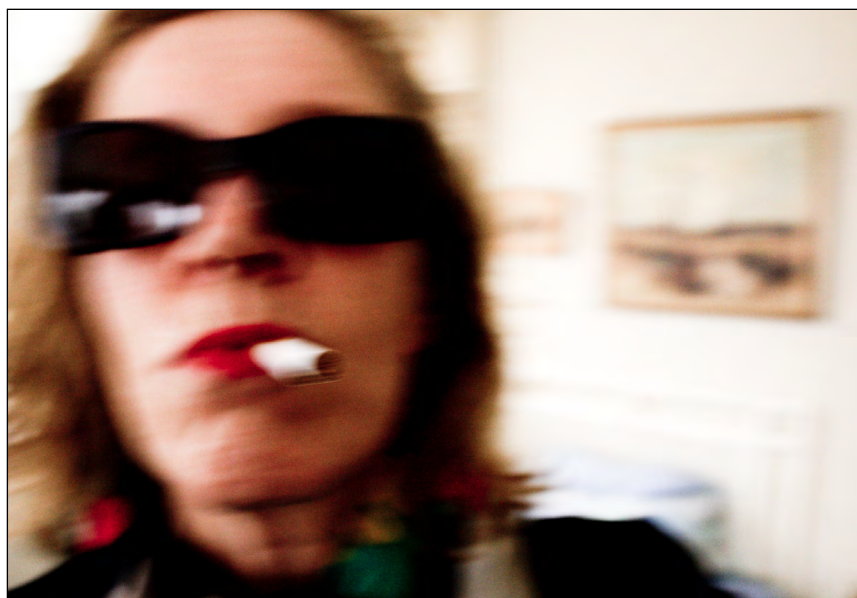
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Orphaned

There's a series of photographs taken on my mobile phone shortly after my mother died. They are the first photographs of me as an orphan. They exist only as constellations of pixels, but I can urge them into shimmering existence at will. They are immaterial, of course, but as evocative objects—objects that push me into cascades of thought and feeling—they are real.

This is Johannesburg, March 2012. My brother, my sister and I are clearing out the room where our mother lived out her last years. *Living out* her life is a peculiar phrase, but there was a sense in which she was bidding her time till it was all over. She did not enjoy old age.

The iPhone passes from hand to hand; we click away. A sense of spontaneous gaiety and fanciful hilarity infuses these moments, which are, you might say, moments of denial. While some images are unexpectedly static and sombre, others convey our edgy hysteria. In one sequence, I've slipped into one of my mother's boxy, wide-shouldered blazers. Once again, I am inhabiting her body. We always found it funny that in her tailoring, our mother remained faithful to the spirit of the 1980s. I've knotted one of her silk scarves around my neck. I've donned sunglasses—my own—but my scarlet lips are hers, as is the unlit cigarette I ostentatiously puff. In this theatrical construction, I am wrapped in an appropriated and travestied glamour: I'm passing as my mother. Both my siblings recognise her in me and cheer me on. Later, they too will throw on the mother-blazer, each taking a turn at being Fay, who was once Fusia.

There is something excruciatingly, comfortingly, self-punishingly intimate about donning the clothes of the recently dead. After my husband Ian died, I slipped into his crumpled linen jacket, which enfolded me in its large embrace; there was a receipt from Homebase neatly folded into a tiny wad in the left pocket: he was left-handed and

several jackets had things secreted on that side. I find this intimacy years later in a poem written by Maxine Kumin for her friend, the poet Anne Sexton. The two were also literary collaborators, daily sharing details of each other's lives. In October 1974, after what appeared to be an ordinary lunch with Kumin, Anne Sexton committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in her car. She was forty-five years old. A month after her death, Kumin slips into her friend's blue jacket and breaks your heart writing about it in a poem titled 'How It Is.'

Shall I say how it is in your clothes?
 A month after your death I wear your blue jacket.
 The dog at the center of my life recognizes
 you've come to visit, he's ecstatic.
 In the left pocket, a hole.
 In the right, a parking ticket
 delivered up last August on Bay State Road.
 In my heart, a scatter like milkweed,
 a flinging from the pods of the soul.
 My skin presses your old outline.
 It is hot and dry inside.

I think of the last day of your life,
 old friend, how I would unwind it, paste
 it together in a different collage,
 back from the death car idling in the garage [...]

The casual dejecta in pockets and the scent that a dog recognises turn into miniscule memorials, silent elegies, tokens of the vastness of loss, the collage and the movie separate metaphors working together to unwind time, piece the bits together differently.

I inhabit my mother's jacket, which makes me aware of how our competing bodies differed, her skeleton finer, narrower in its extremities, but a girdle of flesh latterly wrapped itself around her middle, her copious breasts, those places of attachment and nutrition onto which my mouth once fastened, turned heavy and droopy with age.

It is not long since our mother has been laid to rest in the red earth of Westpark Cemetery in Johannesburg. In accordance with ancient scripture, Jewish burials must take place within twenty-four hours of death. Our mother died in hospital before either my sister or I could reach her from the distant countries where we live: Israel, England. I was far away, too, when, over the years, she had a hysterectomy and

spinal surgery, polyps removed from her throat, cataracts excised from her eyes and a broken arm mended: various acts of subtraction and repair that enabled her life to continue. I was absent when bouts of depression kept her bed-bound (*magnetised to my bed* was how she put it); elsewhere when she took countless knocks and tumbles, emerging bamboozled, bruised and grazed. The sibling who stays, versus those who go, bears the brunt of the parent's scrapes with mortality. These tumbles are, it strikes me now, parodic enactments of the falling that is the ultimate destiny of the body; I think it was in Julia Kristeva's writing that I first learned the etymological link between *cadaver* and the Latin word *cadere*, to fall.

For her death, my brother—living in the same country, in the same city—also arrived too late. Although our mother was eighty-three, none of us had expected her to go just then: perhaps death always feels as though it has arrived too soon.

She had undergone surgery after slipping in her room and breaking a femur. She had seemed to rally for a day or so, but then she quietly waned and disappeared without an audience and with an uncharacteristic lack of fanfare. Because for years she had armed herself with the rhetoric of a death-wish so theatrical as to invite being shrugged off, the three of us were quite stunned that it actually happened.

For a while, we were lightheaded.

Always a great one for the surprise gift, my brother said. She had died a day before his birthday.

Her last earthly address was a retirement home called Madison Gardens. Outside of its frail care unit, it was more a residential hotel than a care home. My mother, refusing to be consoled by any of the kindlier platitudes of ageing, hated the other inhabitants for their infirmities, their inane conversation, their hearing aids and Zimmer frames. They provoked the uncensored, expletive expressions of her contempt, as though she were not one of them. Like a schoolgirl, she dallied with expulsion.

If the name of the residence was intended to transport its impermanent denizens—shroud them in pastoral dreams—it did no such thing for my mother. Neither did it placate the unsuspecting visitor. Smells of institutional food and disinfectant hung thickly in the lobby. There were long, neon-lit, carpeted corridors. Dining tables decked in sticky, floral plastic. Inside, the rooms were shrines to past lives.

In my mother's room, a few paintings she had rescued from home, several books, a radio. Her signature, dark blue, modernist Danish plates and bowls. As children, the three of us had loved these dishes, considered them to be our brand, so different from the old-fashioned tableware at our friends' homes. They made our parents distinct, modern. Pieces of chinoiserie, on the other hand, were vestiges of my mother's life before my father, first as a girl, then a young woman, in China. There were also numerous ornaments of mixed provenance. What is the point of an object conceived as an ornament, I asked myself when confronted with these, ashamed to be asking the question now that my mother was impervious to my provocations.

My mother's ornaments were mostly souvenirs from travel. She loved such mementos; not keeping the scratchy drawing torn off a paper napkin from that particular evening in Madrid but purchasing, instead, a miniature pair of lacquered castanets made for no purpose other than to ignite a generic memory of having visited Spain.

Lawrence Raab's poem 'After We Saw What There Was to See' perfectly captures the process of dutiful, self-improving travel and the concomitant acquisition of trinkets—fabricated memories—and how it might play out both in relation to gendered stereotypes and in the dynamics of a couple: the woman hungry for meaning and affect, the man happy to hang out somewhere, detached and lighting up by the car:

After we saw what there was to see
 we went off to buy souvenirs, and my father
 waited by the car and smoked. He didn't need
 a lot of things to remind him where he'd been.
 Why do you want so much stuff?
 he might have asked us. 'Oh, Ed,' I can hear
 my mother saying, as if that took care of it.

But those souvenirs can do more than cynically point to their origin in a workshop or factory. Through being picked by an individual—Lawrence Raab's mother, say, or mine—taken home and placed somewhere else, somewhere visible, adjacent to other similarly pointless objects from other occasions, they become re-narrativised, things linked to a particular life. In his beautiful, plangent memoir *In the Dark Room* (2005), Brian Dillon recollects a small plastic snow-globe from the living room in his grandfather's house in Kerry in such terms.

It partook of a modest and immediately decipherable narrative; it was a reminder of a place that somebody (my grandfather, my grandmother, or one of their daughters?) had visited. That place had vanished from my memory; I cannot summon the little landscape which the globe enclosed at all, or the inscription which I am certain was to be read on its base. But the globe still conjures up the objects with which it was surrounded.

Dillon's memory adheres not to the signifiers to which the bibelot points (a place, a time, a particular journey: all those are quickly lost) but to the quirky landscape of collected objects in a remembered room.

Also in my mother's room, on all available flat surfaces, were framed photographs of her children and grandchildren. Then, a deliberate, careful arrangement—an altarpiece—celebrating my father's life and death by smoking: a fanciful, marine-themed table lighter, a chunky orange and brown ashtray (1970s), and a large, framed photograph of Dad beaming and apparently in full health, dating from 1980, the year before he died of lung cancer.

Fay

Once a party girl, queen of the *je ne sais quoi*, later aspiring to middle-aged graciousness, my mother had gradually whittled her expectations down to the barest bones of sociability. Her room exhibited, in all its details, reminders of Fay's unwillingness to spend money on herself, *there should be more left for the three of you*. Everywhere, signs of an old person's incompetence with hygiene. Feeling accused, my siblings and I exchanged looks. The mattress, now stripped, was soiled. Charred cicatrices testified to her dogged habit of smoking in bed. She had certainly never held back from balancing an ashtray somewhere on her duvet, her benign essential tremor ensuring that every flick of ash landed short of it. On the carpet, a large, ragged stain, a map of incontinence, later scrubbed with diluted bleach by a cleaner living far from her own mother, far from her own children.

That stain, obscene in being witnessed by her children, attested to the hours our mother had lain on the floor, immobilised by her crushed bone. I try to imagine her shallow, irregular breathing, wondering where she would have placed her arms, how she must have felt, and I experience a tightening of my rib cage. My mother spending the best part of a day



unable to move or call anyone. How long till someone would miss her, she must surely have wondered. How long till I, at a distance, started worrying: *why is she not picking up?* Was she frantic? Or was she oddly calm? She sometimes surprised us. She had always refused to carry on her person either a panic button or her mobile telephone. Anyhow, we doubted she would have remembered to charge it.

There was other evidence of recent habitation, as though she had just nipped out to the podiatrist or hairdresser. Inside the fridge, the remains of her last meals: repurposed ice cream tubs containing slices of cold meat and processed cheese; a bottle of peach squash and another of Bailey's Irish Cream; a tub of Clover Original Spread; a bowl of prickly pears that struck me as an odd choice of fruit; four small pots of yogurt of varied synthetic fruit flavours, of which one lid bore the inscription *buy 6, get one free*. On her bedside table, a reading lamp; a TV remote control; her wire-framed spectacles; a clean ashtray and a pack of Kent cigarettes, together with an orange Bic lighter. A note written in her quivering, all but illegible script: a telephone number and a word that, perplexingly, may be *Sotheby*. She would have had nothing of value to auction. I imagine her lying in that bed, with its bolsters and blankets, her hands struggling with the TV remote, leaving spidery notes to herself, smoking herself to sleep, half wishing to set the place on fire.

With her eyesight failing and an attitude of *what the fuck*, her clothes testified to the careless habits of those who smoke and eat alone. She enjoyed flaunting her amazing finds from the charity outlet at the Jewish Old People's Home, where she would volunteer once a week while she could still drive. The colours of her clothes were often bright. As we sorted her things, knitwear with snags or pills of caught yarn lay on the floor; patterned skirts and plain trousers, all with elasticated waistbands; large blouses; bunion-deformed sandals and mules; weathered handbags, flattened, with their mouths snapped shut, in an array of colours to match her footwear. Matching was always important to my mother, and she could never understand how a single black bag served me for all occasions.

By the time she died, my mother had lived in Johannesburg for over twenty years. This had been her second sojourn there, a reincarnation; her first ended when, a year or so after my father died, she moved back to Israel, where we had lived when I was a child. But back in Tel Aviv,

she got tired of rubbing along with people she considered ruder than herself. *No one bothers with 'excuse me' or 'pardon.' And don't they know what a queue is?* At that point, Israel had been her home for seven years. She had previously lived there between May 1949 and November 1962.

Tel Aviv was the city in which she and my father met and married, the city where I was born, and then, four years later, my brother. My sister was born in Johannesburg exactly nine months after we arrived there: my mother, my brother and I. Theo, our father, had gone a few months earlier—trailblazer, pater familias—to settle into a new job and find somewhere for us to live.

Johannesburg and Tel Aviv became, for my mother, two points on a map that traced a zigzagging trajectory; each a space of longing, each a locus of disappointment.

Arriving in Johannesburg in the early 1960s, we moved into the Anlar Residential, a low-slung hotel on a corner of the main road in Hillbrow, which was an inner-city area crammed with apartment blocks. Googling *Anlar Residential* now, I find it illustrated in the August 1946 number of the *South African Architectural Record*, and its appearance and description are as unprepossessing as I recall: 'A block of rooms. Construction is conventional reinforced concrete frame, with brick panel wall. Face brick is golden brown with plaster contrasts. The elevations gain much from simple repetition and the falling articulation of the structural masses.'

A hotel like the Anlar—indeed an area like Hillbrow—was not home to people who would become my parents' friends: well-heeled, white people, mostly Jewish, ensconced in sprawling houses set in landscaped gardens in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. But Hillbrow had an urban energy that felt dangerous and exciting, the best book and record stores (Exclusive Books before it was a franchise, Hillbrow Records), and cool cafés. Later, as a teenager, ambling along those streets, I would imagine myself living in a metropolis. There were, already then, street vendors and vagrants, and more pedestrians than in other, sequestered residential areas; also a more diverse array of inhabitants than was customary in apartheid South Africa. It felt at once European and African. It was the backdrop to my first cappuccino, my earliest rehearsals of the bohemian life, usually in the company of my best friend Meryl, whose pale skin, crinkly red hair and interesting clothes made her look the part. The Skyline Bar on Pretoria Street was the first

gay bar I ever visited, and in Café Wien we would order genteel cups of coffee with Carnation milk, to the anachronistic strains of violins from Mitteleuropa.

The Anlar was cosy enough, but bleak. It was nothing like any place I had ever known in Israel, where we had had very little money, but where everything smelled piney; where dirt was dusty, not grimy. The Anlar was lit by 40-Watt lightbulbs and smelled of warm custard and floor wax.

Here, for the first time, I heard adults talking in slow, loud, condescending voices to other adults, calling them 'boy' and 'girl.' Here, I had my first English lessons with Miss Beira, soft-spoken, slim-hipped, wearing pencil skirts, filling ledgers with rows of words in a new alphabet. Here too, feeling I couldn't breathe, I had my first panic attack. Later, I would experience that same tightening of my chest, the chilly, dizzying rush in the head, sitting in the back of the car, returning from a Sunday outing when my parents were attempting to uncover the workings and pleasures of their new world, driving across the alien Highveld landscape with its too-big, all-or-nothing skies. A sense of what I would later learn to name alienation, and with it, anxiety would wash all over me. My parents took me to a doctor who showed me photographs and asked me to describe them and told me that I was suffering from *the altitude change*, it would pass. But separation anxiety would remain with me as a defining feature of my attachment style. With language proving to be a blunt instrument when it came to knowing my mind, it was my body—my lungs struggling to draw breath—that showed me, and performed for my parents, how much I resented having been wrenched from a life that, until then, had seemed indivisible; from a world that had unshakeably (or so I thought) belonged to me.

Years later, after my father's death, my mother no longer felt capable of living in Johannesburg, of inhabiting that milieu of pitied widows and cloying couples, who, to boot, had children who *cared*.

By then, I was married to J and living in Lisbon. My mother did not wish to continue occupying alone the spacious flat where, for the last two years of my father's life, she had finally felt able to settle into an uncomplaining life. Here, at last, was a place that had met her minimum standards of beauty and prestige. She experienced my father's death as punishment for her brief fling with contentment, a moralising

comeuppance. Her grief tunnelled through her, leaving her with a sense of affront, as though death had been an agent with a personal vendetta not so much against my father, but against her. Depression and rancour were scrunched together, never again to be disentangled.

With each of my mother's moves, papers were discarded, belongings pared down, things given away or sold. She could, contrary to her own belief, be exceptionally hard-nosed and unsentimental. There are almost no drawings, very few schoolbooks, a dearth of memorabilia from my childhood, or that of my brother and sister. The to-ing and fro-ing between Tel Aviv and Johannesburg, cities loved and detested in equal measure, was characteristic of her need to perform her restlessness, a physical and spatial expression of her discontent. She had little restraint: acting out was what she did best.

As she grew older and into the mother I remember, she immersed herself habitually, as if this were a tonic to her, in a cold bath of disappointment and resentment. She also harboured a fear of confronting the grittier challenges that life threw at her. I remember the terror she expressed at being left alone with my father after his cancer diagnosis, terminal from the outset. At that time—the early 1980s—doctors didn't always spell out the harsher prognoses directly to patients. My parents both pretended to each other that he was recovering from some lesser ailment, and she dreaded questions that might lead to her breaking down with him in intimate, mutual confessions of sorrow. But my father colluded with her; he didn't want to discuss his impending death either. There was never any talk of dying then, though after my father died, my mother would speak imperiously of a time *après moi*, when she wouldn't *give a shit* what happened to things and people that she held dear.

It seems astonishing to me, today, having also experienced the death of a husband, that my father's lung cancer should have remained a secret between my parents, each protecting the other from what mutual admission might bring to the party. He had the haunted look of many cancer patients, with the Thing territorialising his body; a look that avowed the secret and thereby made it oxymoronic and challenged you to examine your shame. A look that, as Anne Boyer puts it near the close of the account of her own survival, if survival is the right word, causes strangers to fetishise the suffering of those who cease to look like themselves.

It was not always easy to pinpoint my mother's shirking of responsibility, since gregariousness gave her the appearance of boisterous independence. Rage coloured her inability to face adversity, and this was matched by her desire that someone else, preferably a man, sort out her difficulties, whatever those might be. While he was healthy, my father bore the brunt of this obligation and the irritability it produced, but after he died, the duty passed onto my brother, who continued to live in Johannesburg after my sister and I left, and for whom the burden of care entailed being made to feel that nothing was ever good enough.

The short period of my father's illness was a limbo in which my mother—Fay—had no one to blame, and so it was then that she announced that she had stopped believing in God. I had not known that such a belief had previously existed.

Legacy

Here I am, then, wearing my mother's clothes and strutting about her room. In my gestures of flamboyant femininity, I am performing her as she seemed to me, not the last time I saw her, or the time before that, but when I was six or seven and when she seemed impossibly, amazingly seductive. I am reaching past her deterioration to the period of her greatest allure, when, with her teased hair and flicked eyeliner, her beauty struck me as that of a certain kind of husky-voiced Mediterranean film star: of Melina Mercouri or Anna Magnani. This was a time when my longing for her—my sense of not having her—was as complete as it was ineffable.

In impersonating my mother—in occupying her body by wearing costumes in which she performed herself—I am both an errant and a loving daughter. As the show plays itself out, most of her possessions strike me as useless, already relegated to the past: the flayed, sloughed skins of creatures no longer alive, dingy reminders of that particular bundle of creatureliness that was Fay, *née* Fusia.

With all the predictable power of metonymy, in the absurd elation that sometimes follows a dreaded death, my mother's things hand me her fragmented corpse and demand of me that I do something.

We separate our mother's belongings into piles of items to distribute among us and items to give away: books, pots and pans, lamps, paintings.

Tablecloths and ornaments (that untranslatable Yiddish word *tchotchke*), packs of playing cards and bridge score pads, a box of costume jewellery. Jumpers, trousers, nighties. Always one for a bargain, my mother had, in her youth, countered potential shabbiness with both figure and flare. I remember shantung sheaths, the glamour of high-heeled peep toes, slim-hipped slacks (she always called women's trousers slacks), expensive silk *foulards* that my father bought on his business trips to Paris or Rome. Unlike her, he was never one to stint, a fact over which she held a grudge, as though it was those very extravagances that had prevented her from living in the style to which she wished she were accustomed.

I am struck, however, as I had been previously struck in other bereavements, by how the value of things shifts as soon as the spirit inhabiting the body has evaporated. How quickly objects become *stuff*.

In her film *50 Minutes* (2006), sitting in her kitchen with her young son, artist Moyra Davey talks about "never ending, proliferating piles of paper, clothing and toys, and how much we pad our lives with this stuff."

Stuff is how we describe things that have been devalued.

Stuff is what happens when possessions become burdensome to their possessors.

I am compelled to rescue some of my mother's belongings from the fate of being mere stuff. The salvaged items are objects that, to me, seem drenched in the particular ownership and pastness that is uniquely my mother's. Things of an uncanny personhood. I am aware, as I do this, that the selection I make amounts to a pre-organisation of future remembrance, a process of curating my own museum of memories.

Surrounded by my mother's belongings—things marked by leakage, use and making-do, breakage and repair, some already receding, others quickly thickening with meaning—I feel the need to record. I want to be disburdened, but at the same time, I am beset by the sense that to discard my mother's things would be to undermine the value of her life itself, her taste, her proclivities, her affinities. I feel I want to give meaningful souvenirs to people, but I can hardly identify anything here that would be of interest to anyone other than my siblings and myself. I remember reading, towards the end of *A Very Easy Death* (1964), of Simone de Beauvoir sorting her mother's belongings with her sister:

We wanted to give keepsakes to her closest friends. As we looked at her straw bag, filled with balls of wool and an unfinished piece of knitting, and at her blotting-pad, her scissors, her thimble, emotion rose up and drowned us. Everyone knows the power of things, life is solidified in them more immediately present than in any one of its instants.

Yes, I feel my mother's life solidified in these objects, but at the same time, their dowdiness (*how glamorous she used to seem to me, how glamorous she once was*) brings me to the brink of shame.

I am not certain if that shame is on my behalf or on hers.

And I am unsettled, too, by the things that I do want to keep. Mostly, these are objects that expose my mother's frailty and vulnerability: a shapeless nightie; an ink-stained bag filled with miscellaneous stationery; a bowl of stale-smelling, worn down lipsticks. There is also a plastic laundry carousel to which are pegged several pairs of large knickers—stiff and thin from frequent laundering—and two pale, faintly yellowed, long-sleeved vests. These items have been so close to my mother's body, so intimate with her nakedness, they provoke in me the prickliest existential question: not what does it mean to be a mother, but what does it mean to have one? To be of that body, nourished by it, protected in it, then expelled from it? And, as a consequence, to inherit the world always as an outcome, the aftermath of everything that has happened before you, before me? In a profound and ineffable way, belatedness characterises our very beginnings in our mother's bodies.

I keep the carousel intact because it gives me a discomfiting memory of the body I came from. I travel back to England with it flattened in my suitcase.

In 2014, I pore over the work of Japanese photographer Ishiuchi Miyako, a body of work titled *Mother's* (2000–2005). I am overwhelmed by these images of her mother's intimate belongings, which include a camisole, a half-used lipstick, a hairbrush still snaring black filaments of hair in its plastic bristles. The title of this body of work with that possessive *s*, prompts my focus to oscillate between the person and her things, the photographer and her mother. I read that Ishiuchi's mother was born in 1916, a 'strong-willed woman who came of age in colonial Manchuria,' and I feel a frisson of affinity, since my mother was born in the former Russian settlement of Harbin, deep in what was then known as Manchuria (the current nomenclature favours the names of the Chinese provinces that constitute northeast China.)



Through their association with her mother's body, the personal belongings Ishiuchi has photographed exist in a regime of disconcerting intimacy. Relations between mother and daughter had been strained, I read, but Ishiuchi was deeply affected by her mother's unexpected death in 2000. She began photographing her possessions as though closeness might, finally, ensue through touching and positioning items that had been in close contact with her mother's body, reaching out to them with her point-and-shoot camera.

As soon as I see these works, I experience that shudder of serendipitous kinship that sometimes goes by the name of influence, since in 2012, without knowing of Ishiuchi's work, I photograph all of my mother's possessions before clearing out her room.

The few items of beauty or relative value—mostly objects from my mother's childhood in China or passed down to her by her mother—now unsettle me. For I am aware that my relationship with these things, and my relationship with objects in general, both material objects and those immaterial ones that are family memories—is necessarily shaped by the fact that I have no children; aware that passing things down—that vertical metaphor used to describe legacy—stops with me. Aware that the silver Shabbat candlesticks say something different to my sister than they do to me: for me, the nostalgic evocation of something almost lost; for her—a practicing Jew and a mother and grandmother—they encapsulate a potentiality, the possibility of a lineage, her daughter and her daughter's daughter, a pulsing, red, female line.

Since my mother died, I have been reading books by women about their mothers. For each, their mother's death served as a catalyst for thinking about that most primary and testing of bonds. Simone de Beauvoir. Adrienne Rich. Carolyn Steedman. Annie Ernaux. Nancy K. Miller. I also read Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments* (1987), a book written while her mother is still alive; I read it twice in quick succession.

Anything written by Gornick merits special attention: her writing is fluent and candid and discreetly brilliant; its measured pace and wit draws me in and holds me right there with her. She presents herself as fallible, independent, humane; the writing is warm and lucid. Perhaps because of a particular way of inhabiting both her childlessness and her Jewishness, Gornick is the one with whom I most readily identify. I identify with the passionate irritation that ties her to her mother. 'My

relationship with my mother is not good,’ she says near the beginning of *Fierce Attachments*, ‘and as our lives accumulate it often seems to worsen. We are locked into a narrow channel of acquaintance, intense and binding.’ Walking together in the streets of Manhattan—the daughter aged forty-eight, the mother eighty—Gornick’s mother stops strangers and assaults them with: ‘This is my daughter. She hates me.’ Then she turns to Vivian and asks: ‘What did I do to you, you should hate me so?’ Gornick speaks of her mother’s rage as burning, and she wants to let her burn. In middle age, she is still capable of feeling hurt, infuriated, humiliated, dismissed by her mother. Yet their connection is incontrovertible: ‘suddenly her life presses on my heart,’ she says near the end of the book.

My mother. Suddenly, her life presses on my heart.

Not reducible to formulae of loss, mourning and symbolic retrieval, these memoirs that I have selected, out of all the available mother-daughter literature, throw a light on the complex processes of identification with mothers by daughters who simultaneously—like me—cannot bear to resemble them. I can only walk in my mother’s shoes, my exuberant performance tells me, as parodic mimicry.

As I write, I think about fathers and sons too, a relationship about which I know less, though I have witnessed the closeness between my brother and our father.

I remember a powerful moment in Philip Roth’s *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991), a book in which Roth explores his relationship with Herman, his dying father. Herman, a ruthless and unsentimental chucker-out of paraphernalia, has held onto his own father’s shaving mug. Philip Roth, the son, wants to rescue this item above all others as a keepsake after his father dies. The shaving mug and his *tefillin*—phylacteries in English. The Yiddish word is used to describe the two small leather boxes containing Hebrew texts, worn by Jewish men, strapped one on an arm, the other on the forehead at morning prayer as a reminder to keep to the law. Both shaving mug and *tefillin* are gendered and each is, in a different way, a token of patrilineage that reminds Roth of his own status as a childless man. It occurs to me that while there is a word that describes a person whose parents have died (even as an adult, you suddenly find yourself an orphan), there is no similar word to describe a person without children. Similarly, *patrimony* has no opposite: it is a

word which, when feminised, acquires an altogether different meaning, a meaning that highlights the role of women as possessions.

Roth's epiphany about patrimony is not prompted by the shaving mug or the phylacteries. It occurs, rather, when he finds himself cleaning up his father's shit in the bathroom, 'not because cleaning it up was symbolic of something else but because it wasn't, because it was nothing less or more than the lived reality that it was.' A memorable, terrible scene, which begins with Herman announcing that he accidentally beshat himself. The quintessential scene of patrimony, then, is for Roth one of paternal humiliation.

If it is the realisation of an Oedipal fantasy—the devastation and demotion of the father—Roth never lets us know. Rather, he describes this as an event in which a boundary of privacy is breached and the parent-child relationship reversed. Every child taking care of an ageing parent is faced with the actuality, or the dread, of such a reversal. But every childless child is, in turn, faced with a more starkly existential question: *who will clean up after me, when the time comes?* Commenting on this scene in *Patrimony*, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips says: 'it is not the act of incontinence alone that is humiliating: it is trying to live in such a continent world. We are not humiliated by our acts but by our ideals.' Sooner or later, we fall short of them. Sooner or later, we shit ourselves.

In a collection of short texts titled *True Stories* (first published in 1994, re-edited and augmented at regular intervals), artist Sophie Calle writes: 'On December 27, 1986, my mother wrote in her diary: "My mother died today." On March 15, 2006, in turn, I wrote in mine: "My mother died today." No one will say this about me. The end.' Her existence is poised at the end of that line.

This is true for me too.

Thinking of the entitlement authorised—in effect, authored—by lineage reminds me that with the death of my mother, my history turns back on itself, all dressed up and with nowhere to go. With me, the things inherited cannot find a route back into the family: they are on the way to becoming just stuff. And stuff is, as I have already noted, the word we use for our objects—our commodities—when they have ceased to be of material, aesthetic or sentimental value to us. As essayist Maurizia Boscagli points out, stuff is on the spectrum of subject-object interaction, and speaks of porousness, of the mishmash of objects 'at

the borders of commodified matter.' Such things testify to the effects of commodification, but also test its limits. *Stuff*, in short, is how we describe things that are liminal; things that exist between value and its erasure. As such, stuff expresses itself in particular verbal formulations: *I've got so much stuff. Or: what am I going to do with all this stuff?*

It's always *all this stuff*.

We pack our mother's clothes and trinkets in big plastic bags and pile the bags into my brother's car: just one carload takes care of the lot. A little smug, a little ashamed, we give the bags to charity. Here, they join other people's things, now stripped of context and narrative. Like these other people's things, our mother's belongings have undertaken a journey of disconnection and disassociation, of unravelling and detachment. Pre-loved they may be, but at the moment of reaching the charity shop, they are dispossessed, stripped of association, just plain unloved. Orphaned.

