

SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things



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Abject

When I was in my twenties, I began to realise that the link between objects and loss existed most acutely for me in things that some might consider disgusting, things marked by someone else's bodiliness. I remember the singlet of Jean-Pierre, a close friend for a brief, brilliant moment; a charismatic, flirtatious, ostentatiously camp man, a scholar of the Middle East. Jean-Pierre was a man charming in his extroversion yet harbouring something shy and discreet behind his flamboyance. His translucent blue eyes were disarming and almost childish in their candour, and there was a coyness in the way he raised his long-lashed lids to look at you.

I remember standing in the bathroom of his flat in the nineteenth arrondissement of Paris, crushing this singlet to my face, inhaling in its soft folds his scent of after-shave, cardamom, sweat. This was 1990. He had left scraps of his life in mid-flow. I was staying in that flat with J, who was still my husband then, as Jean-Pierre lay dying of AIDS at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in the thirteenth arrondissement. I remember the friend who gave us the keys, a soft-spoken, dark-haired young man wearing wire-rimmed glasses.

On our last day, masked and swathed in hospital gowns, we went to kiss Jean-Pierre goodbye, one at a time, each holding his delicate, waxy hand when he was already beyond our reach.

I realised then that items like Jean-Pierre's singlet—things that had once known physical contiguity with a person's body—had always intrigued me. I summoned examples. My paternal grandmother had a long stream of hair that had once been auburn like mine, but that faded and thinned over the years as mine has, in fact, also faded and thinned now that I am the age of a grandmother. When I was five or six, I would watch as she wound the long, wiry strands into a bun, securing them with hairpins that I would sometimes steal and press into my own scalp,

hankering for hair long enough to sweep into an elegant, grownup chignon. Later, perhaps aged ten or eleven and possessed of that substantial ponytail, I loved the lipsticks and eyeshadows my mother used. I now fancy this was not only because of their pearly colours, but also because they were messy with use, distinctly bearing the physical impression of my mother's touch. As I write this, I can see her small hands, their lacquered orange nails to which the word *manicure* adheres. Clandestine application of make-up and nail varnish in her bathroom meant I would not only get close to my mother, but also *be* her; could inhabit her adult life with all its secrets. And then there were my siblings' clothes, first my brother, then my sister. Lying on the bathroom floor like doll's attire, sticky with food or paint or mud, they were miracles of miniaturisation: had I, too, once been that tiny? These clothes actually fitted those animated beings that stole my thunder, creatures to whom I could minister in mummy-mimicry, or whom I could patronise, with my extra years for leverage.

I developed something of an obsession with such mundane, unclean objects. They were evidence of the physicality of living beings. And once such an object survived beyond the confines of a life, or outside of the palpable presence of its owner, it became a poignant reminder both of the ordinariness and of the singularity of lives lived. I remember the feeling I got when looking at the arm of a sofa left exquisitely unpicked and artfully threadbare by Ginger-the-cat's energetic scratching, after my mother had him *taken back* to wherever cats get returned to. Those threads filled me with something worse than sorrow: a terror at the randomness of power. If the scratching post of the middle-class cats of today had by then already enjoyed its advent, my parents were innocent of that knowledge. Until the sofa was reupholstered, its distressed arm remained a domestic monument to the arbitrary edicts of the powerful.

By the mid-1980s, when I began considering myself something of a serious person, or at least an earnest reader of theoretical texts, J shared with me his discovery of Julia Kristeva's book *The Powers of Horror* (1980). I open this book now and I see J's name scrawled across the frontispiece in pencil, and the date 1983. Clearly this is one of the books I kept after we divorced a decade later. Its subtitle is *An Essay on Abjection*.

The idea of the abject came into focus for me, and for many others of my generation, in this period—the early 1980s—as a category in which earlier notions of social liminality were explored in terms of the

individual body. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), social anthropologist Mary Douglas had spoken of the ways in which all social borderlines and interstices are fraught with danger. Kristeva's exploration of the abject takes up Douglas category of impurity as matter out of place, within the context of lived, personal bodies. Kristeva troubles the coherence of the social body by probing the physical boundary of the individual body, and in doing so, queries the very definition of self. I wonder, now, how such a theory holds up in the face of the feminist new materialisms that seek to undo the old impregnable borders between humans and the world surrounding them.

The separation on which Kristeva focusses is especially violent around childbirth, where *me* and *not-me*, once merged, are corporeally uncoupled. For Kristeva, the abject describes that division: it is bloody, the wound and the trauma, the border that encroaches, the outline that is breached, the stain. But the abject is also metaphorically transported into the realm of feeling, especially around breaches, abandonment and the end of love. Then, it is your supplication that is abject.

Its original event in childbirth stages the person's first narcissistic crisis, since the precarious emergence of subjectivity takes place as a struggle between an entity that is not yet a subject, and a mother who, for that child, is not yet an object. That mother, in eventually being rejected—pushed away, repelled—will also, Kristeva tells us, remain the original source of abjection, the instigator of an older child's spasm of disgust, considering that body that is at once desired and disgusting.

If the arena in which abjection is most nakedly, most existentially played out is in the relationship between mother and infant, the abject has been more broadly linked to things (or sometimes, to unformed not-quite-things) that transition between the body and the non-body, especially—viscerally—bodily fluids. The real place of the abject is at the point of annihilation, where your body comes into being or shucks off being, 'the pink place,' as Dodie Bellamy calls it, where you lose yourself in another body with its liquids and slime and orifices, lose yourself in your desire to be consumed and dissolved; and eventually—finally—lose yourself in non being again. Its signifiers exist in those things that transition between bodies, those places that separate bodies or break to pull them apart or together; but also in things that remind the living body of the corpse-to-be.

For artists, the abject has been associated with objects that cross the threshold of the body, and in this way obscure the separation between interiority and exteriority. Think of Tracey Emin's infamous installation *My Bed* (1998): worn slippers and a soiled, fluffy toy; cigarette stubs; remainders of food; tampons; used condoms and knickers lie in disarray beside a bed that has been—following these narrative pointers—vigorously played in, but that has also been the site of insomnia and distress. We also see the abject in Emin's later, visceral drawings, expressions of love's ending.

I am amazed and humbled when I see her drawings at an exhibition of Emin's works alongside those of Edvard Munch's at the Tate Gallery in 2021. Emin exposes the way, when a person is in love, boundaries tear open, the ego dissolving and merging so dangerously with another... till you come to your senses—or lose them; the overwhelmed feeling of abjection and humiliation in being spurned or ditched and its attendant bargaining or pleading; rage and dissolution in spilled or scratched reds and fleshy pinks. And the titles! *I Wanted You to Come All Over Me; Because You Kept Touching Me...*

If blood, excrement, semen, nail parings and hair are the boundary-crossing materials that signal the abject in the work of late twentieth-century artists (I am thinking of Robert Gober, Paul McCarthy and Kiki Smith, who probe liminality and abjection within the sphere of intimacy), other artists use toys to that effect. Human and animal dolls, with their weirdly simulacral realism, their uncannily mimetic qualities, appear to straddle the unbreachable division between the living and the unliving. In the works of artists such as Maurizio Cattelan, Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelley or Annette Messager, toys draw me in while at the same time making me feel uncomfortable, repelled. This is especially the case with the more overtly mimetic toys that, separated from the arena of play, so keenly appear to invite defilement or violence.

Yet with this discomfort comes a kind of fascination that creeps towards tenderness: haven't we all loved a teddy bear, a plush rabbit, a cloth baby?

Tenderness, for me, is the most seductive aspect of the abject. I feel such softness and anticipation in the hope that I might find a tiny thread of hair—an infinitesimal bodily remnant of my father, now forty years dead—in his hairbrush, which I have kept all these years.

My Father's Hairbrush

My father's hairbrush seems smaller than I remember it. In my hand, it feels lighter, too. Like a jewel, its home is a calico pouch where it nestles, secured by a drawstring. After burrowing so long out of sight, it looks both familiar and strange. I don't remember a time when my father brushed his hair with anything else. In 1981, when chemotherapy made such styling redundant, this brush hung around the bathroom cabinet with my mother's long-tailed teasing comb, the two cohabiting like a quarrelsome, long-married couple.

I remember this brush in use. I see my father's face turned at an angle to the mirror as he flattens the wide waves of his hair. I see his hair's auburn gleam all but turned to brown, then to dun. I remember the oval tin of Yardley pomade, with its lavender fragrance, in the bathroom cabinet, one thing leading to another as I respond nimbly to cues from my eye, my mind's eye, my mind's nose too. As a child, I would lift the brush to the light, fascinated by the way its burgundy body would be transformed into a block of translucent amber or a huge lozenge. Its extruded, moulded plastic surface seemed to me to have been sucked and licked to smoothness. All its bevelled edges are now scuffed and chewed, as though one of my dogs had had his way with it. On its outer rows, the brush is as bald as a stressed hedgehog. The remaining bristles are crooked and yellowed, pointing every which way like bad teeth.

Objects I associate with my father found new homes in the weeks after his death. He was buried in his *tallit*, the fringed white prayer shawl used by Jewish men. Its significance is slightly obscure but lies in part in the numerical value of its fringes, reminding Jewish men of the central doctrines of the Torah. I think the *tallit* reminds Jewish men of their fathers too, of lineage and family; not so much a fringe as a temporal thread, back and back. Dad's *yarmulke*, his *tefillin*, his blue silk *tallit* bag, the *Kiddush* cup—a goblet used to bless the wine on the Sabbath and at other significant rituals—also go to my brother; Judaism is not unusual in being a patriarchal religion.

Other manly objects of consensual value moved down the male line: a fob watch, two wristwatches, gold cufflinks. My mother kept my father's wedding band. J received a gift too, but I cannot remember what it was, possibly a watch; my father owned several. I could ask J—my

first husband—now, but embarrassment restrains me. Would he, for a moment, imagine I might be making a claim on that object? We are affectionate and irascible with each other now; still locked in a game of provocation and annoyance, but still significant in each other's lives.

With my mother's death over three decades after my father's, I inherited two rings and a gold pendant I never wanted to wear. My sister inherited jewellery too. Such gender-biased distribution of booty happens in families, of course: fathers leaving meaning-drenched items to sons, mothers to daughters. Lineage and legacy along sex lines. There is something aspirational and discomfiting about such bequests: their passage from one generation to the next can be a gesture imbued with more symbolism than feeling. And in the exclusions they necessarily entail—I receive this, you receive that—they readily become the instruments of unspoken or deflected disappointment, anger, rivalry.

My mother's rings fill me with wistfulness, with longing. What especially touches me about them is not their style—reflecting my mother's preference for the modern (the idea of vintage or antique had little romance for her)—nor the precious stones they hold. What affects me is the very fact of their passage from her to me. The way their tiny circumference, which I had to have enlarged to fit my hands, reminds me how delicate her hands were, how small.

My father's hairbrush is physical in its address; intimate, private. It asks not to be seen.

I removed it from my parents' bathroom cabinet in their flat in Johannesburg when helping my mother clear away my father's possessions. I kept it, together with his Seven Star diary containing only ten pages from an insert dated 1966, in which Dad noted appointments around his own father's funeral. Reading these notes, I am moved by how spare they are, by my father's beautiful, backward slanting script, by the blurred memory of his father, my grandfather: a frail, softly spoken man with a shiny head and deep-set eyes. I also kept—I am a little ashamed to confess this—my father's dentures, set in a shiny, youthfully pink, gummy, death-defying grin. It seemed natural to me, even back then, to want to keep such a misprised prosthesis, something that, like his words, like his breath, like his kisses, had lived inside my father's mouth. A daughter does not often think of a father's mouth.

The dentures speak to me of the time when, addled with the effects of metastases in his brain, my father managed to extract—with a tweak of his feeble index finger and thumb—an actual tooth that had clearly already been loose in his jaw. The doctor had asked him to remove his dentures because of an infection in his mouth; after removing the tooth itself, he looked up with watery, confused eyes. Under the downy whisps of chemo hair, our father's head had become a skull, austere and ancestral. Still, my brother and I knew that if we looked at each other, we would not be able to stop ourselves from falling about in hiccoughs of uncontrolled laughter: we were highly strung with the anticipation of death. That same day, emaciated and delirious, destined soon to be a shade, our father had called for his father, whom he would shortly join.

I know that I wanted such things (the hairbrush, the all-but-empty diary, the dentures) more than the cut-glass paper weight or the Jaeger LeCoultre desk clock: the showy gifts he received after years of service as General Manager at Trutone Records in Johannesburg. These offerings seemed, at the time, more like jibes, in no way matching my father's devotion, his loyalty, his hard work, his inability to climb further up the greasy pole.

I love this brush now, in part, for the fact of my having kept it for so long, for its having-beenness. For its oldness, the use to which it was once put. I love it for its ordinariness. And its readiness, established years before I took possession of it, for the dustbin. That readiness—the point at which a utilitarian object loses its functionality—pokes my attention: the fact that this brush has serendipitously escaped the fate of trash, remaining intact, but useless. 'Why don't I just throw it away?' asks the diarist narrator of Heidi Julavits' engaging diary/memoir/novel *The Folded Clock* (2015). She is thinking about a ring that seems jinxed. Instead of discarding it, she wraps it in black paper, then in tin foil and hides it in her wardrobe. 'I don't know why,' she says.

For the same reason I could not, as a kid, throw away my broken lamp. One thinks a loved object is unique, unique to each human who loves it. But what is really unique is the unloved object. Or rather the unloved object confers uniqueness upon the person who fails time and again to love it and yet who still cannot throw it away.

The line between something repellent and something beautiful seems very fine to me, and it always tracks a route through the abject, enlisting a kind of delicate, precious repugnance.

The line between something loved and something unloved is similarly fine.

Perhaps that is why I have been so troubled each time I have had to participate in sorting the possessions of someone who has died. Being compelled to think of love and its opposite, its unmaking: the end of reciprocity.

Mostly, I keep this brush because it provides frank evidence of a past in which my father existed, in ordinariness, in everydayness; an item that would have been used without second thought, carelessly returned to its post in the bathroom cabinet, functional and boring. Now, it seems to me that his fingerprints are still on it, even as he has dwindled into remoteness.

My nephews and nieces were all born after he died.

