SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things

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List

A shopping list and record of expenses in Leonardo da Vinci's mirror script includes not only eels and apricots, but also a sword, a knife, a visit to the barber and a visit to a fortune teller.

The first entry in Susan Sontag's earliest published journal, dated November 1947 (she is only fourteen) begins with an earnest list of her beliefs. Ten years later, an entry written the day before her twenty-fourth birthday includes a list of *rules + duties for being 24.*

Poet Eileen Myles makes an inventory listing her dog's possessions, which include a plaid bed (two, with cat)—few dogs beds are not plaid, she tells us in an aside—cone, bowl and drugs (Rimadyl).

Marguerite Duras makes a long list, with no apparent intended irony, of the stock of things that a house (a home, actually) must always contain. It includes—among other things—wine, coffee, sugar, flour, eggs, bread, cheeses, *nuoc mam*, window cleaner, Scotchbrite, Ajax, steel wool, coffee filters, fuses and insulating tape.

In her poem 'Still Life with a Balloon' (1957),' Wisława Szymborska lists the lost objects she would like to see as she is dying; she wants the things that have gone missing over the years more than she wants a rush of returning memories. She wants to see coats, suitcases, umbrellas, and also 'safety pins, two odd combs/a paper rose, a knife,' and also permits and questionnaires and affidavits, and finally a lost balloon that floats outside the window and 'into the wide world,' an analogy, I think, for her departing soul.

I'm trying, in a list consisting of bullet points, to work out why I like lists. Ian, over a decade dead, used to like them too: their practicality (and sometimes practicability) reassured him.

But, actually, who doesn't like a list?

'A list,' writes Maria Stepanova, 'creates the illusion of possession: the exhibition would pass and dissolve in the air, but the piece of paper

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held the order of sculptures and pictures, as freshly as when they first saw them, long after the actual images had faded.'

Now I abandon the bullet points and sum it up like this: if retrospective, lists impose order on the past; if prospective, they seem to organise the future. In other words, lists make the passing of time manageable. Things to do, to see, to buy, to *not* forget; things seen, done, bought, remembered.

But there are other lists too: inventory, information. War casualties; mortalities from Covid on any given day or week; names on an electoral register; churches in a town; forensic traces of fatal injury; exhibitions on show at any given time, ingredients in a recipe. And so on. Ad absurdum: Gertrude Stein's tiny play *A List* (1932) includes six characters, whose names (all beginning with M) appear as a vertical column along the left side of her script, and the action (speech acts) is punctuated by listings of the words *a list.* Verticality is the list's most prominent formal feature.

Each item on a list is equal to any other item, the first and last not necessarily hierarchically determined, unless we have decided to re-list our list (initially made as free association dictates) by a list of descending or ascending importance. Lists pare things down. They require us to forsake complex grammatical forms: to abandon all verb tenses but the present imperative (though the future perfect might be the tense of the bucket list: *will have visited*) and to leave aside adverbs, and usually adjectives too. It might go without saying that we want to buy *delicious, really hard*, *medium-sized Pink Lady apples*, but those extra attributes usually do not make it into the abbreviated form of the list. We'll remember the details, choose from what is available.

Lists appear so frequently in literature, we almost trip over them. They come embedded in text, separated by commas or stanzaic arrangement. Nuance too, adding emotion and filling out the scaffolding of enumeration. Elizabeth Barrett Browning lists the manifestations of her love, 'to the level of every day's/Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light [...] with the passion put to use/In my old griefs,' and much more. In *Library of Exile* (2020), Edmund de Waal lists the libraries destroyed through history, and in that circumspect, objective itemisation, we intuit—or into it we project—grief at the loss of historical records and provenanced trails of truth: the libraries of Nineveh, Alexandria, Antioch, Nalanda, Mosul. Similarly, when in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001),

we encounter a list of looted and expropriated valuables—'everything that civilization has produced, whether for the embellishment of life or merely for everyday use'—history streams in to fill the gaps left by those objects.

American artist and poet Joe Brainard leaves us with a picture of growing up queer in Tulsa in the 1950s through a book-length list of incantations, each beginning with the phrase *I remember*. Its sensuousness and specificity serve as a mnemonic prompt of growing up otherwise, elsewhere. The list of things he remembers includes Liberace, dust storms and yellow skies, his collection of ceramic monkeys, a boy who told him a dirty pickle joke, and the first time he saw his mother cry.

The poet Tishani Doshi turns what the sea brought in into a lyrical, plangent evocation of loss, for amidst 'brooms, brassieres, empty bottles/of booze […] Bulbs, toothpaste caps,/instruments for grooming' and 'keys,/spoons, singular socks,' she finds also 'virginity returned/ in a chastity box. Letters of love,/letters of lust, the 1980s, funeral dust.' Indeed, what the sea brought in was enough

> to fill museums—decapitated marigold,
> broken nautilus, a betrayed school friend
> stuck in the dunes like the legs of Ozymandias

She finds solace in the knowledge that barnacles comprehend entire empires and that 'the feral creature of love' grows from 'gravestones of breakers.' And Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann shows us just how personal and devastating lists can really be, in a poem that begins like this:

> Everything is lost, the poems first,
> then sleep, then after that the day,
> then everything else, what belonged to day
> and what belonged to night, then when
> nothing more could be lost, more was lost, and then more
> until there was less than nothing, not even myself,
> and there really was nothing more.

'There really was nothing more' is the hypothetical ending of any list; sometimes it is a formulation perpetually deferred by the additive logic of the list, a structure that enables infinite inclusion.

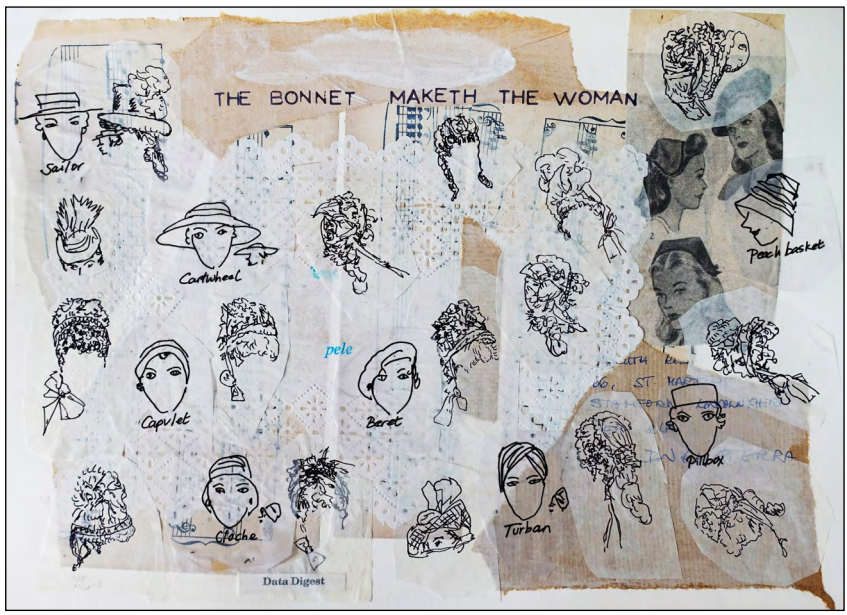
The material of listing is the random stuff of the archive: a history of the everyday in the making. As a visual thing, a list is a *cadavre exquis*, that surrealist visualisation of a game of consequences, where one line might have very little to do with the line preceding it, or the one following, yet each is consequential in the details of follow-up. In this sense, the list is a piece of surrealist poetry, the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.

Other lists will more readily suggest narrative threads. One of my Instagram buddies, artist Vicky Hawkins, recognises this when she posts iPhone snaps of her husband Tone's shopping lists, hilarious and disconcertingly grisly. These lists seem to have been staged at least in part for the amusement of Vicky. Eventually, we learn that Tone has become an enthusiast of DIY plumbing, but for a while, Vicky keeps that knowledge from us, allowing the lists to suggest compelling narrative readings. Here is one: 'cherrys/plain flour /sledgehammer/ baking powder/cement mixer/rope/gold leaf/dustpan and brush/ski mask/ plastic dustsheet/gaffer tape/hacksaw.' And another, because they are so irresistible, written in Tone's large, looped, pencilled letters: 'frozen prawns/6 MCB type B/large pot/caustic soda/builder bags/hand cream/chap stick/wire—6m. cable/head-size Tupperware container/ scented shoeliners/fresh airspray/boiler suit/low fat cheddar.' If a murder has not already taken place, it's about to, followed by a clean-up job and a snack.

A list might tell others something that is not otherwise evident. Once recorded and later re-encountered, it might reveal something I have forgotten about myself. Adrian Henri's poem 'Me' with its arch subtitle 'if you weren't you, who would you like to be?' consists of a list of names with line breaks but no commas, beginning with 'Paul McCartney Gustav Mahler/Alfred Jarry John Coltrane.' It runs through many names including 'Marx Dostoevsky/Bakunin Ray Bradbury/ Miles Davis Trotsky/Stravinsky and Poe' and ends with 'Hindemith Mick Jagger Dürer and Schwitters/Garcia Lorca/and/last of all/me.' I find this poem in a copy of *The Mersey Sound* (1967) snug among my books, well-thumbed in the distant past, but not touched for years. In it, I see that, at age sixteen, using a blue pen, I ticked the name of each artist, philosopher, writer and musician with whose work I was then familiar directly or by hearsay. This list-poem was, for me, more

than someone else's display of knowledge, it was my own crowing self-portrait in names.

Years later, I kept every ticket that I had been issued from 2002, the year of my move back to England to marry Ian: cinema, theatre, exhibitions, transport, parking: everything. A list materialised. In my studio, I make collages that are visualisations of lists.



In February 2022, while editing this book, I finally discarded every last one of these tickets. The completist fantasy of these transit passes as manifestations of some part of myself had dried up. Collaged onto a huge, hypothetical surface, I once imagined, they would map out the intersections and digressions of my trajectories over a long period of time, but the tickets huddled together in boxes in my studio, forever unrealised as anything but themselves.

Now I regret having thrown them away: is it possible ever to rid oneself of possessions and feel only the lightness of it?

Here is Marguerite Duras (whom I first read too young and who finally speaks to me now) pondering the same thing. Talking of housework as the domain of women (it is, for her, as though feminism had only the slightest effects on the gendering of social and domestic

roles), she speaks of women who are naïve enough to think they can put off the tidying-up till some later date:

> They don't realise the disorder, or in other words the accumulation of possessions, can only be dealt with in a way that's extremely painful. Namely, by parting with them. Some families with big houses keep everything for three hundred years—dresses, toys, and anything to do with the children, the squire or the mayor. I've thrown things away, and regretted it. Sooner or later, you always regret having thrown things away at some time or other. But if you don't part with anything, if you try to hold back time, you can spend your whole life tidying life up and documenting it.

Welcome to my life. Tidying and documenting clog too many of my days, Sisyphean in scope and pointlessness.

And yet. The archivist's regret: now I wish I had kept every shopping list I ever made, reminders of what I once wanted. I also particularly enjoy the lists of materials used by contemporary artists in their works. They speak to me of plenitude and bottomless invention, but without the filtering, stifling language of art-speak, a language I myself have sometimes used.

A collection of such materials-of-making would constitute a not-entirely-ironic work, a kind of commonplace book of citations and appropriations:

- polyurethane model of three-storey office building
- cardboard, plastic sheeting, packing tape, aluminium foil
- slide projection tape and cardboard boxes
- oil paint, straw, ash, clay, shellac audio and video installation, painted iron pot, paper bag, dried flower
- taxidermied sparrows in knitted sweaters
- steel, tapestry, wood, glass, fabric, rubber, silver, gold and bone
- metal tokens for dispensing machines, telephones or transport, empty matchboxes, clay
- oil-based house paint, wax crayon and lead pencil on canvas
- wooden broom base, cotton thread
- framed photocopies and filing cabinet

- latinum, diamond, human teeth
- oil, paper, fabric, wood, metal, sandpaper, tape, printed paper, printed reproductions, fragments of a man's shirt, handkerchief, handheld bellows and found painting on two canvases conjoined by wood ladder.

I am aware that this does not make compelling reading for everyone; but there will be those who, like me, are enchanted by the poetry of random adjacency. I want to go on, until I really can say *and there really was nothing more*, while at the same time, I do not really want to reach that end point, that hopeless barricade to continuity.

Lists have always been, for me, forms of incantation. My mind, which is in many ways the mind of a librarian, enjoys collecting lists of lists, essays that essay lists. In 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins' (1952), Jorge Luis Borges famously includes a fabulous entry in a fictional Chinese encyclopaedia, tantalising the reader with a list of categories of animals. These include, among other things, animals 'belonging to the Emperor, embalmed, suckling pigs [...], included in the present classification, frenzied [...], drawn with a very fine camelhair brush [...], those that have just broken the flower vase' and so—apparently randomly—on. The list is fantastical, and its arbitrariness punishes a reader's desire for categorical comprehension and comprehensiveness. In *The Order of Things* (1966), parsing this taxonomy in a reading that has become as celebrated as the original text, Michel Foucault finds all the familiar landmarks of his thought shattered. He observes that this fabled listing demonstrates not only 'the exotic charm of another system of thought,' but also, crucially, the limitation of our own systems, 'the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.'

Attending a writing workshop a few years ago, I was pleased to tackle an invitation to list the contents of something—anything—and then to proceed from there. I understood the logic of this exercise, for objects co-existing in a determined space constitute an order and an invitation to narrate. The objects engineer themselves into remembered times and places. In the proximity of things and the words that name them lies the lyricism of happenstance and contiguity. First this, then that, but in no hierarchical order other than the inchoate urgencies pressed upon

me by thoughtless thought, unconscious meanderings that coalesce and want to be caught just before they evaporate.

Listing the contents of a chosen space, I recognised that the magic that this exercise was meant to spin had to do with extracting from adjacencies that which had previously been unthought. Christopher Bollas' unthought known. In doing so, the listing was designed to tease out an unexpected trajectory, one object leading to another in threads of action and consequence. This form of making narrative would certainly serve me, since plot—the purpose it serves, its randomness—remains a mystery to me. I have never been able to fathom why one thing leads to another, why it matters, and why I should care. 'If I want a plot, I'll watch Dallas,' the incomparable Elizabeth Hardwick once said. Put otherwise: the items on the list would not so much provide plot points as be plucked out of their positions along a random vertical axis, and (re)positioned in a horizontal flow of diachronic text. Plot, no; story, definitely.

Discussing the vertical arrangement of the list in his essay 'The Book as Object' (1964), Michel Butor quotes from Rabelais' *Gargantua* (1534), noting that the good giant played 'at Flushes,/at Primero,/At Grand Slam,/at Little Slam,/at Trumps,/at Prick and Spare Not,/at Hundred Up,' and more. When I check in Rabelais' text, I see that the enumeration consists of no less than 218 games, including ones called *love, the fib, the lurch* and *needs must*, titles that, when listed, suggest a story. This is followed by a horizontal development: 'After he had thus enjoyed his games […] and dispensed his time, the moment had come to take a little drink.' Enumeration, Butor concludes, can be introduced anywhere in a text, vertical and horizontal structures combined in endless possible arrays. I see the patterns Butor describes as a weave, and understand that, in speech too, we play this game of meshing horizontals and verticals every time we add a series of observational details to an otherwise forwardly propulsive sentence or paragraph.

If the horizontal movement of narrative is essential to transporting the reader somewhere else—for the reader must always move on elsewhere, even without plot—the vertical structure of enumeration brings with it an embarrassment of riches, a luxurious amenity. I remember, as a young child in Johannesburg, reading a book in which a group of children was stranded on a mountain in a snowstorm. I had never seen snow.

I recall loving the list of their equipment and food rations; remember experiencing it as alleviation from the frightening teleology of the story.

Perhaps the comforts of 'mere' enumeration are 'shallow and illusory,' but, as essayist William Gass drolly observes, 'so are most comforts.' In his astonishing essay 'I've Got a Little List' (2002), Gass writes: 'listing is a fundamental literary strategy. It occurs constantly, and only occasionally draws attention to itself,' though sometimes it does just that. Gass speaks of *The Mikado* (1885), of Calvino and Borges. He also cites François Villon, Walt Whitman, Robert Coover and Juan Goytisolo. I think of Joe Brainard's *I Remember* (1975) and Georges Perec's eponymous book (1978), as well as his *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (1965), which includes a whole chapter exhaustively itemising the hypothetical contents of an apartment that Jerôme and Sylvie, a couple in aspiration and trouble, imagine one day owning.

I choose, for the subject of my writing workshop, to list the contents of a plastic box bought at Muji. The objects in the box constitute the modest, now pared-down items that I have preserved from the top drawer of Ian's desk.

When is the right time to free ourselves of the belongings of the dead? The question of *when* can be overwhelming for those remaining, and possessions no longer possessed continue to exert the psychological pressure of a relic or fetish, as though to discard them might also mean to delete the memory of the deceased. My friend Sid took all her husband Quentin's clothes to a charity shop as soon as he died after seven years of cancer. They were the closest couple I knew and had been together for over forty years when Quentin died. Joan Didion, however, speaks of not being able to let go of John Gregory Dunne's shoes in her year of magical thinking, reckoning he would want them should he return, while of course simultaneously knowing that he would do no such thing.

In the first divestment of Ian's possessions, I keep precious mementos, give meaningful items of clothing and personal belongings to his children and sister, and then I take the less meaningful items (that is, items devoid of any particular power of evocation) to charity shops. But many things, neither important nor unimportant, remain. I live in a big house: there is no need to cull. The stuff is there, but manages to disappear from view, and from thought too. However, not having

cleared out Ian's desk drawers in the first commotion of his erasure from the living, I feel on safer ground just leaving them untouched and not thinking about what needs doing.

And untouched is how they remain for six years.

In 2016, I find myself—for the second time since Ian died—in a relationship with a man. The passivity—finding myself in desire—is not merely grammatical; I have a talent for falling into relationships without considering the tangents or parentheses, along the shortest route from frisson to consummation. If I thought through everything tangential or parenthetical, I would never do anything: that has been the logic, though in truth, it is more kneejerk than that. And G has a lovely, winsome gentleness, though he turns out to be a little deer, so easily startled by everything. He has a wiry frame and a sleek torso that he probably shaves; he has a bristly head of silver hair and thin, strong arms that I find sexy. I love the sound of his breath in bed and the smell of him and I love how clean and pared down his flat is. And he can dance; I mean *actually* dance, with a leading arm that knows how to veer me and press signals into the small of my back—which anyhow is an erogenous zone—and a left hand that knows how to cup my lifted right hand ready for a twist. It is a heady pleasure to feel our bodies synchronised in dance, even though I never fully relax into being led.

But here is what I discover: the smallest change in routine or personal habit signifies an unbearably seismic event to G, something to be avoided. He loves cafe and pub chains for their predictability, their known menus. He researches a film thoroughly before committing himself to a dangerous night at the local multiplex, preferring those based on what he quaintly calls *real life.* 'Risk averse' does not begin to describe him. He is so tender and so timorous, so manifestly ill chosen, though never actually chosen. My spacious, light-filled house seems, to him, hostile: it is too large. He thinks the pictures and fabrics and books and objects furnishing my space make my home look curated. He cannot feel contained in it, or by me, and there is no question of my feeling contained by him. It is amazing that we last over a year. When we separate, it is with mutual kindness; we have an almost painfully nostalgic parting lunch at Pizza Express in Cambridge. We now still exchange Christmas cards. The memory of him remains un-embittered.

An engineer by profession, as Ian had been, G is a perfectionist of the DIY job. But while Ian had been inspired and inventive, crazy-cool in his capacity for improvisation, a bricoleur, a trickster, a lateral thinker and solution finder, G does things by the book. He circumspectly criticises the complexity of Ian's problem solving, of which he finds traces everywhere in my house: too much wiring, too much space, too many sockets, some pipes left unlabelled.

One afternoon, while he is helping me with something practical in the house, I tell him he might find a small Phillips screwdriver in Ian's desk. I cannot remember if I call it 'Ian's desk,' but he knows where I mean. Returning with the screwdriver, he is blanched. *It looks*, he says, affronted, *like Ian's just popped out to the shops*.

I take this as an admonition. It is. *He's right*, I think.

A 'veritable organ of the secret life' is how Gaston Bachelard describes a drawer in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) and I was mistaken to direct G to Ian's. Without drawers, wardrobe shelves and the false bottoms of chests, Bachelard says, 'our intimate life would lack a model of intimacy.' In his glimpse into Ian's inner workings, G feels accused, not only of intruding into the private world of my dead husband, but accused, too, for the paucity of his own imagination.

Thus prompted, I finally clear the desk. Heaps of pencils and rulers and sharpeners—Ian was never a minimalist where stock was concerned—are joined by soldering silver and epoxy resin, rolls of string, elastic bands, callipers and protractors, ballpoint and fountain pens, small screw drivers, drawing pins, paper clips, luminous markers, index cards and old, hardened inks in little bottles. There's Blu-Tac and Pritt Sticks, now desiccated, and Post-Its losing their glue. Several pairs of reading glasses. And more, more. I tip all these things into a bin bag. But I keep the contents from the top drawer, intending to photograph them later.

Here is the list:

- a pair of cheap JVC headphones
- a white cotton handkerchief, slightly soiled, but now odourless
- an old watch with a leather strap; he'd long not used it, laterally preferring a digital one
- a pair of wire-framed spectacles, Boots own brand

- a red cash book filled with Ian's scribbles: annotations and calculations of how much various items and services cost during the building of our house, which was completed in 2008
- a folded gold paper crown from a Christmas cracker
- one pencil eraser, brand: Softy, in paper casing
- a small plastic box of Smints and a small metal box of Potters, tiny cough lozenges from Holland
- three passports, the oldest having expired in 1996, the newest still valid at the time of Ian's death
- a black leather wallet with various cards in it: Lincolnshire County Library; Cambridge University Alumni; Build Trade; NHS; Lloyds Bank Credit, Lloyds Bank Debit. Inside, there is also a note, in my handwriting, that contains an address in Rouen, and a phone number of a mechanic, from the time our car broke down in Rouen, where we had stopped to spend the night and see the cathedral in the company of J, my first husband, and his wife M.
- a black and white photograph of Ian and me together in my flat in Lisbon. The photograph shows Possum's agile, furred body curving between us. I'm holding her and she stretches over to smell Ian's breath. He's looking at her; I'm looking at the person who's taking the picture, my good friend Lucia, who died of pancreatic cancer a year before Ian died. There was a series of photos from that day and I had given Ian this one. It was probably taken in 2007.
- a sheet of paper torn out of a wire-bound notebook, with instructions for changing the codes on a keypad
- another sheet of paper, this time squared, with the number '8814' written in large black numerals, surrounded by an ellipse with spokes sticking out of it, like a child's drawing of a sun.

I know these contents both do and do not constitute a portrait of Ian. I remember most of these items in use. I remember the movement of

Ian's large, safe hands as he flipped open his wallet to pull out a credit card, his deftness turning a screwdriver. I remember him soldering tiny things. I remember the way the glasses embossed a path along the bridge of his august nose.

The paper crown brings with it a recollection of recurring Christmases, the best part of an otherwise suffocating day invariably spent at home with two of his three children, both in their twenties when I first met them. The third—the oldest—lives in Atlanta. Ian would don the crown from the first cracker he pulled and keep it on his head until we went to bed, still with it on, replete and relieved that the day had ended, usually without too much bloodshed.

Goodnight Mr King, I would say, each year.

He'd give me one of his downturned smiles, the legacy of his buttoned-upness, as though beginning to grimace but changing his mind halfway. And he'd say *goodnight Mrs King*.

What makes the swallowing catch in my throat—more than the passports or glasses, more than the paper crown, folded like a bat's wing—are the snippets of handwriting, un-self-conscious tracks of movement, his body's imprint, its pressure, thought arrested in its tracks. No listing can capture the low rumble that seeing this familiar script causes inside the cage where I keep my heart.

8814.

A debit card PIN? But I knew the PINs he used, and this was not one. The piece of paper bears the impress of something unknowable: something fleeting, a jotted mnemonic that fits within the vertical ordering of a list but finds no explanation in the horizontal expansion of a story.

Nothing, in this miscellany of everyday items, so arrests me with the palpable fact of Ian's deadness as this note-to-self, a reminder of something for which I have no reference point. An infinitesimal memory that was never mine, all gone.