

SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things



RUTH ROSENGARTEN



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Stain

At the close of Virginia Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room* (1922) the reader is given to understand that Jacob Flanders has died in the trenches of World War I. Woolf's circumspection makes the young man's death all the more poignant. His very surname flags this up, but Woolf leaves everything vague, exquisitely scrambled in a kaleidoscope of impressionistic fragments. The book is filled with solipsistic silences and liminal spaces, empty rooms, misunderstandings. Jacob's friend, Richard Bonamy (no name in this book is random), whose love of Jacob is tinged with undeclared desire, attempts to interpret the contents of Jacob's room. 'He left everything just as it was,' Bonamy says. And why wouldn't Jacob have? It is then that Jacob's mother, Betty Flanders, holds out Jacob's shoes and asks: 'What am I to do with these?'

Rushed to hospital three weeks before he died, Ian too left everything just as it had been. But in fact, life as he once lived it had come to a standstill three months earlier with the onset of catastrophic headaches. Traces of his busyness had waned and his belongings had already settled into an uncanny second life as things abandoned. A year after he died, I found a single dose of his nightly medication—five small pills—hiding on a bookshelf in our house. Removing them showed up little dust-rimmed ghosts where they had been, pale like the skin under swimming costume straps.

We had been married for nine years when he died.

This was a second marriage for both of us: he had been only four months widowed when we met in Lisbon, where I lived and where his sister also lived, while eleven childless and fairly wild years had elapsed since my divorce. As is the case with many middle-class people, separately and together, we had accumulated many things that we loved and a good many things that we didn't even like but could not quite get rid of. Then, there was the fact that, since Ian was averse to shopping, he

had become a keen stockpiler. *It'll see me out* was one of his well-worn refrains, and, notwithstanding obsolescence and sell-by dates, mostly, whatever it was did see him out: litres of lavender and aloe vera liquid handwash; energy-saving light bulbs; Basildon Bond letter writing paper crammed into several drawers (untouched now, since no one writes letters); cables, adapters, routers, floppy discs, writable CDs and external hard drives; dozens of candles bought at the Dutch department store de Bijenkorf; and heart-stoppingly, three dozen colostomy bags.

Of course there were also papers, mostly neatly filed: personal and professional correspondence, pared down, but extending over decades; deeds, official records and reports of one kind or another; plans and permissions for the construction of our house, which he designed and in which we managed to live together for his last two years; detailed records of investments, finances, insurances; warranties and user manuals; albums and boxes of photographs and negatives; a half-hearted stamp collection and a fat file containing every detail of the treatment for the bowel cancer that, in the end, was only indirectly the cause of his death.

Ian died of *Aspergillus meningitis*, undiagnosed at the time of his death but revealed in the autopsy. No sign of cancer in his brain, liver or other organs. He died, then, of a rare form of fungal meningitis, difficult to detect and treat (most survivors suffer cognitive damage: unthinkable) but contracted because chemotherapy had caused havoc in his immune system.

The body's various capabilities of tagging disease entail a labour of categorisation, distinguishing self from not-self, own body from foreign body. In this, the body is an archive. Dating to the 1950s and '60s, the notion that these functions are articulated into a complex and co-ordinated system of immunity is a recent theoretical development in immunology. In her riveting book *On Immunity* (2014), Eula Biss describes how cells honed for immunity are generated deep in the body, the bone-marrow and the thymus. She notes the dizzying array of cells specialising in different tasks, 'falling into an intricate arrangement of types and subtypes,' and interacting 'in a series of baroque dances.' Ian's furtive illness installed itself where chemotherapy had left a gap in his body's defences: a gap in which that courtly choreography broke down.

I never opened the envelope containing the coroner's report on the cause of Ian's death. Someone called me with the outcome of the inquest

as I was driving from an appointment with a gynaecologist, and I pulled up to take the call. I couldn't bear to read the details, the description of incisions and the thought of Ian's organs like offal on a slab. All these years later, the official document remains unopened, passive and malign in a grey archive file labelled *Ian*.

Back home, stricken, I read up on *Aspergillus*. I discover that its spores are in the air that we breathe, and mostly, they do not make us ill. They also lurk more thickly around garden compost. Any rotting material poses a risk of *Aspergillus* infection to immunosuppressed patients. A flash image appears to me, of Ian tipping vegetable peelings or fragrant grass clippings into the large compost vat at the bottom of our garden. Gloved to prevent anything passing through his skin, he would nevertheless have been breathing in that decomposing matter, while happily pottering on days when he was less fatigued during his last phase of chemotherapy. It is an image I try to tamp down, an unproven causality I cannot bear to think about. And it shows up a chink in what, by sheer effort of will, I had hoped would be an impenetrable wall of sanitised protection that I erected around Ian while he was in treatment.

Like me, Ian was averse to the *battle* metaphor or, worse still, the *journey* metaphor for his illness. It was just a matter of *shit happens*. I found it hard to believe that his oncologist had fallen in with this most tedious and untruthful of clichés, the journey with its inevitable, grim end. And when, not long after Ian's death, someone attempted to console me by saying it was *so unfair*, I turned on my heel. I did not need fake solace: it was normal to grieve. And it was *not unfair*. An elderly (some might say old) person dying of natural causes, however awful, is not a statistic in God's ledger of unfairness, and anyhow, there is no external agency considering the moral weight of a death by *Aspergillus*. The dying is just a fact of life, and if his death was not a fact in Ian's life, it was certainly a fact in mine.

Though he was a self-contained, reserved man who despised extravagant public displays of sentiment, which he too hastily read as sentimentality, Ian's warmth punctured his best attempts to hide it. I was not surprised, then, to find, tucked away in books, notes to and from his first wife Ulla; a paper envelope stuffed with cards that I made for him; charming play-doh figures fashioned years earlier by his daughter, Sanna; paper templates of his sons' feet; notes and drawings from all

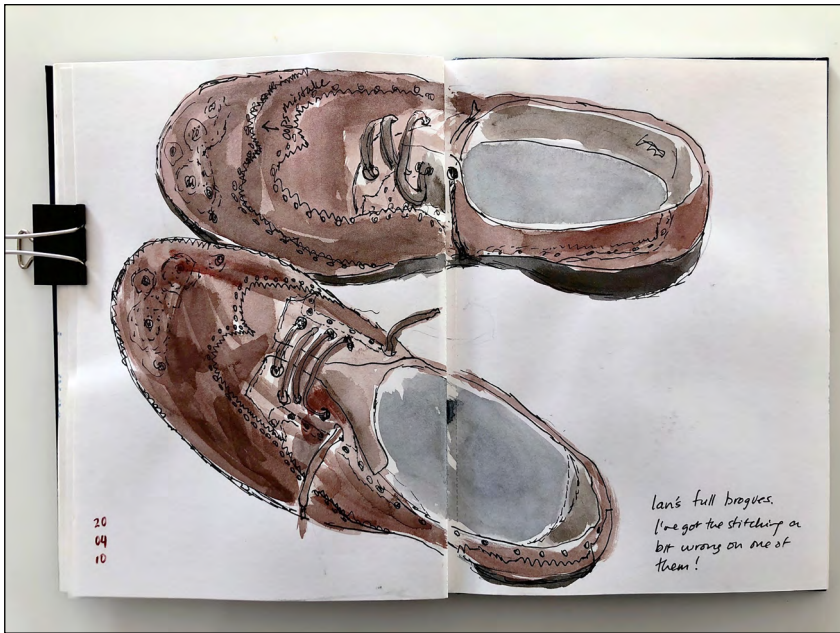
his children, the three living ones, that is. Then, inside a flimsy frame, a child's scratchy drawing pasted onto a card, together with a tiny, wan photograph of Antonia, Ian's second child, drowned in a swimming pool in Germany before she was three.

I remember tears squeezing out of Ian's eyes when he first told me about Antonia, not long after we met. I remember especially his description of the rank smell of a carpet on which he was lying, face down, waiting for the helicopter to air-lift her inert body. By the time he described all this, she had been a quarter of a century dead. Later, he took me to her grave: *Kleine, süsse Antonia* is inscribed on the headstone. Ulla, whose cremated remains are buried next to Antonia's, was German. Ian's ashes are now interred there too: I knelt in the bitter January snow to place the urn in the hole. *There's room there for you too*, Sanna said. *Dad would love to be in a sandwich with you and Mum.*

Ian's possessions, his things... Any widow, any lover or close relative recently bereaved, any child of a parent who has moved from the family home into a care facility, must decide if, when, and how to dispose of the possessions that are remainders a past life.

I would not be the first to note that this is no easy task, and that, as Joan Didion made explicit in the famous account of her bereavement, magical thinking of one sort or another might render these decisions visceral and impulsive. If one does not bag up everything immediately, there is no definitively good time to do so, though anniversaries can prove useful, as can subsequent house moves or refurbishments. After Ian died, I found myself drawing his shoes, his shirts, his shaving brush.

Be-longing (begun 2009), part of a larger project titled *The Power of Possessions*, is a body of work by British photographer Carol Hudson, testifying to the old-fashioned belief in photographs as imprints of the real, and consequently, it announces the capability of photography to act as a placeholder for the thing itself. After her husband Tony's sudden death, Hudson didn't know what to do with his belongings, 'the leftover scraps of ordinary life,' as she puts it. She, like me—like so many others—was especially moved by evidence of her husband's touch, of everyday wear and tear. Hudson made black and white 'portraits' of her husband's possessions to enable her to release his actual belongings, granting herself the permission to get rid of them, while still preserving



her husband as an internal object. The photographs serve, in other words, as transit tickets in a trajectory of grief. Hudson concentrates in each image on a group of similar objects: a taxonomy of socks, books, ties, handkerchiefs, shredded papers. Each pile is ordered with a keen eye to pictorial design and composition (in other words ordered with a view to being photographed) and with a feeling for tone that takes into account the transformation of the objects into monochromatic images. Each of these pictures has the whittled down quality of a modernist still life. Each is also a melancholy distillation, an archive of things that have lost their primary use.

In a similar vein, attempting to stave off forgetfulness in the face of her father's worsening Alzheimer's disease, American artist Rosalie Rosenthal photographed objects from her parents' home; objects that had been packed up and given to her when they moved to accommodate her father's worsening condition. Titled *Midlife Tableaux* (2020–2021) these poised, exquisite pictures show objects shimmering forth out of smoky darkness, mining the old vanitas/memento mori tradition in their suggestions of mortality and in their dramatic chiaroscuro. The inclusion of the artist's own body and that of her daughter establishes a

genealogical thread and suggests the honouring of memory over time. Rosenthal writes:

Midlife is traditionally a nexus for recalibration; parents reach an age of needing care, children become adults, and those of us in the middle assess and adapt. Midlife Tableaux is a manifestation of that reconsideration of self through examination of significant objects in my familial histories.

Rosenthal sees her guardianship of the objects as sustained in the act of photographic elaboration, and those photographs themselves serve as distillations of acts of care, each pushing against inevitable oblivion.

With Ian, I found that although the sorting began not long after he died, it extended over years; is not over yet.

For the first week, people were in and out of the house. Sanna and I went to Norfolk with my ex-husband J and his wife M, who had arrived a day after the memorial service that replaced a funeral (since Ian's corpse was in the service of science). They stayed with us in the house; their support had the lightest of touches. M would improvise delicious meals without making a fuss or asking where anything was, just finding her way around the kitchen and extemporising. That day in Norfolk, we trudged along Holkham Beach, which Ian had loved but which, that day, felt hostile, aggressive. Going there was a desperate bid for action of some kind, an enfeebled attempt at proving I was alive, dragging my heavy feet in fierce sunshine. A tempestuous wind whipped our clothes about us. My lips were crusted with sand. Sanna had brought Kato, an epileptic cocker spaniel she was fostering, who feasted on putrid seaweed and molluscs and was violently ill as we got back into the car. He was soon to come live with me: a dog blighted by misfortune but sweet and stoical in the manner of dogs. He died of a grand mal seizure two years later.

After everyone else left, Sanna remained to help with the sorting. The house seemed to lose coherence and become an agglomeration of disparate, jangly parts, many of them dispensable. I had to learn to distinguish between those things that would simply inform me that everything that had once mattered had vanished, and those that served as signposts in my own trundled trajectory towards life as a widow. I embraced the term without embarrassment.

Sanna was my first guide. She was kind and solicitous in a way I might not yet, then, have expected, and she was also the very soul of

efficiency in dealing with anything that I found difficult or boring to think about. Though we had had a few prickly moments in the past, we both now wanted to spend time together, affection blooming in the spaces left by Ian and in the recognition of what we had lost and what we now shared. She was both firm and tender in her ministrations.

After that, of course, I was on my own.

Since the dead cannot control the paths taken by their secrets or indiscretions, I feared discovering something that might warrant interrogation, an obstacle resistant to my prying. But I unearthed nothing more than a few random scrawls jotted in notebooks, and several receipts revealing how much Ian had spent without fessing up, though of course he was obliged to do no such thing: a state-of-the-art scanner to digitise negatives (only used a handful of times); a hugely powerful lawnmower that I could not manoeuvre; Quad speakers that made the eventual buyer drool despite one of them being broken; a circular saw (obviously essential for someone, but not me); a soldering kit. Out went those unwanted gifts, camping gear I would never use, down duvets that I didn't want. And of course, that was also the time to divest myself of things I had not had the heart to ask Ian to remove earlier: things from his life with Ulla. This resulted in some mistakes. I was stricken when, a year or two later, Sanna asked where her mother's vintage flour tin was. Who knew.

Then, there were the things I kept. That bag of *personal effects*, as they are called, handed to me at Addenbrooke's Hospital on that close August evening when Ian was merely one hour dead, including pyjamas and a pair of slippers imprinted with the memory of his feet and a cashmere jumper frayed at the sleeves and still impregnated with his smell. Almost all the contents of his filing cabinet, who knows when I might need to track something. Photographs. Certain fetishised items of clothing, each a synecdoche of the man. Anything that contained his handwriting. And a blue and white checked table napkin, the one he'd used on the day that I rushed him to hospital for the last time. Now I needed such bio-metonymies: things that had randomly experienced his touch and that expanded, like balloons, filling out as proxies, as fully substitutive objects. For all the years since his death, this napkin has lain, compliantly rolled up in the narrow, tarnished silver ring that bears Ian's initials. How old-fashioned that we each brought our own silver napkin ring to the marriage, mine a birth present.

I pull this napkin out of its ring from time to time, flatten it out and smell it, not quite sure what I expect or want to find. Nothing. It yields no smell, despite never again having been laundered. And not a stain on it either.

I realise I'm looking for a stain, just as I had hoped to find a small remaining filament of hair in my father's hairbrush.

I am not taken aback, then, reading in Eimear McBride's shattering, short novel *Strange Hotel* (2020), that the unnamed protagonist—a woman mired in an old grief and having casual sex in anodyne hotels, making sure to request ground-floor rooms to resist the temptation to jump—is attached to the idea of the molecules that her partner may have shed and left behind. He is many years dead, and though he was much older than she, in the years of survival, her age is about to overtake his in its place of absolute arrest: 'tomorrow I will be older than you, for the first time. I am about to pass you by. After all these years, and how it always was, the time where the shape kept its shape has almost run out.'

As I write this, approaching the age that Ian was when he died, thinking of the shape that grief takes—an outline that becomes familiar and, in keeping to its silhouette of absence, turns into a form of comfort—I return to the thought of the stain that isn't. The desire for a stain.

A stain in fabric (clothing, bedding, handkerchief, napkin) marks the site of a spill or an emission; a breach in the boundary that holds self and non-self apart. The intrusion of the stain, its persistence, indicates a failure: the failure to keep things apart. The labour of cleaning—of holding chaos, impurity, disease at bay—is a task of maintaining boundaries intact. I realise that with each thought of the word *stain*, I am reiterating a desire, a longing not for order and immunity, but for evidence of its opposite: for the visceral connection both to vitality and putrefaction contained in its uneven shape.

Holding Ian's bland and stainless napkin, I think not of spillage, but of manners. Of how annoyed he would be at people's table etiquette, irritated with slurpy chewing, with sounds of too much sucking or smacking of lips. Evidence of gustatory pleasure would elicit his signature, downward-turned smile. He'd roll his eyes too at the fashion for table conversation about fine dining or restaurants or TV cooking programmes. Food bored him, and especially talk of it.

The stain in question is non-existent, but I'm sleuthing for it: I want there to be a stain on the napkin, a trace of Ian's meals, his living days.

The stain is not (only) that which the body expels (through orifice or rupture—sweat, blood, dribble); it is an indexical sign of a having-beenness. A sensory snapshot.

But stainless as it is, I kept this napkin because of the idea of a stain; an idea of the last stain. Not in a Shroud-of-Turin kind of way, or not *only* in a Shroud-of-Turin kind of way, but also—powerfully—because of something I read decades earlier, something I took in and knew I would never forget. In Heinrich Böll's *Ansichten eines Clowns* (1963) published in English as *The Clown*, the protagonist, Hans Schnier, is a 'collector of moments,' a self-described monogamist with no church affiliation. His wealthy parents are devout Protestants who sent him to a Catholic school, where he met and fell in love with a girl called Marie. As a Catholic, she eventually feels the need to 'breathe Catholic air' and she leaves Hans for a man called Zupfner who shares her faith.

Reeling at the end of their seven-year relationship, which he can neither take in nor get over, Hans remembers—not for the first time in the novel—an earlier loss, the death of his sister, Henrietta. A 'lovely girl with fair hair,' she'd been killed at the age of sixteen while doing anti-aircraft duty, for which she volunteered seven months before the end of World War II. Hans' description of catching sight of Henrietta's napkin after receiving news of her death was perhaps my first full literary realisation of the power of the poignant, ghostly presence in people's lives of evocative objects.

I was sixteen—the age of Henrietta when she died—when I first read this novel. While the subtleties of the book's critique of the Catholic Church and of the hypocrisy and wilful amnesia of post-war German society would certainly have been lost on me then, I carry with me from that first enraptured, heartbroken reading the memory that Hans' mother was a Nazi sympathiser. It was she who had urged her daughter to do her bit 'to drive the Jewish Yankees from our sacred German soil.' In my memory—and in notes I made long after I first read the book—Henrietta's napkin has on it an egg stain. But I now reach for the old paperback with its overblown cover design, its broken spine and tiny print, and find that this is how Böll describes the napkin:

When we got the news of Henrietta's death, the table was just being set at home, Anna had left Henrietta's napkin, which she didn't think was quite ready for the laundry, in the yellow napkin ring on the sideboard, and we all looked at the napkin, there was a bit of marmalade on it and a

small brown spot of soup or gravy. For the first time I sensed how terrible are the objects left behind when someone goes away or dies.

The stain, the napkin: the *thing*, the real object of memory, is not the physical object. It is the experience to which that object points, and it is that experience that seeing and touching an evocative object can serve to open out. In thinking about this 'thing,' misremembering becomes a form of interpretation, or perhaps re-interpretation, re-inscription: of exegesis. For all of us, certain objects serve as relics or tokens, memorials to past selves and lost loves, inviting the projection of certain associations. And while, incontestably, what we call a *self* is constituted by memory, it is also, importantly, the cracks in memory—mnemonic failure—that certain objects address. Repeatedly, I have found that objects remind me of certain events, but that those events are, in effect, misremembered. Some external check—a spoken or email exchange, a search in Google or in an archival document—audits my (mis)memory.

With *The Clown*, the misremembered image has taken root in me as a significant token. But Böll's stains of marmalade and gravy are more cleverly angled, less predictable than the egg stain of my recollection, multiplying into layered reminders of more than one meal. What I retained, however, from my first reading of the book, with its incorporated mis-memory, was the sense of the significance of objects-as-remains. A forensic, intimate archaeology. This is negatively reinforced in the novel when Marie walks out on Hans, leaving nothing in her wake. That *nothing* becomes palpable. Hans mourns her, above all, in the empty bedroom, in the 'tidy, clean wardrobe,' the absence of stains, the anti-trace. This is 'the worst thing she could have left.' We need, Hans seems to be telling us, the things that we associate with those we've lost. We find ourselves testing the abiding reality of the disappearance of our love objects in the enduring presence of their possessions.

At the moment of looking at Henrietta's napkin, Hans' mother decides to pretend that everything is normal, and continues eating, as if to say: 'life goes on.' But for Hans, it becomes clear that 'it isn't life that goes on, but death.' Not only the prematurity of death, but also its pervasiveness, its ongoingness, gives meaning to the objects that once enjoyed casual proximity with his sister.

In the study where I read and write, one of my large work surfaces has a glass top, held in place some inches above the wood. That glazed

space creates a kind of vitrine, an informal display cabinet into which things come and go, a serendipitous museum: tiny birds' bones, two bars of soap wrapped in vintage paper, various postcards and photographs, three small drawings made by friends, a heart-shaped pincushion, a blue painted foot on a broken Portuguese tile, a folding Kama Sutra. Ian's napkin has its place in that tiny gallery.

You are not expected to display in a vitrine, or anywhere else in your home for that matter, such items as your dead dad's dentures, your dead mum's sticky lipsticks, your dead dog's chewed up toys, your dead husband's table napkin. Too ordinary, too abject. And yet. There is death and grief in all these objects, but of course, signs of life too, of someone having once lived, of someone's intimate, dribbling, leaking, odorous corporeality.

That intimate bodiliness is most poignantly and variously expressed by clothes.

Many years ago, in the mid-1990s, in my studio practice, I worked with old dresses. It was around this time that I read Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905) and my now yellowing Penguin edition, bought in 1994, has the following section underlined:

She [Lily Bart] had a few handsome dresses left—survivals of her last phase of splendour, on the Sabrina and in London—but when she had been obliged to part with her maid she had given the woman a generous share of her cast-off apparel. The remaining dresses, though they had lost their freshness, still kept the long unerring lines, the sweep and amplitude of the great artist's stroke, and as she spread them out on the bed the scenes in which they had been worn rose vividly before her. An association lurked in every fold: each fall of lace and gleam of embroidery was like a letter in the record of her past. She was startled to find how the atmosphere of her old life enveloped her.

In Lily's 'descent' (the falling metaphors for women stepping out of the social roles carved out for them are legion), as she spirals away from marriage and 'prospects,' veering off course from her peers and cohorts, class and status are, at every turn, intertwined with personal, embodied memories. The clothes, which no longer have a use, bring an almost unmediated re-experience of a life once lived and of opportunities missed.

In the 1990s, I collected amazing, glamorous frocks that came my way by various devious or serendipitous means. They are made of

taffeta, georgette, lace, crêpe-de-chine, organza. Onto them I pinned stamps and photographs and keys and watch faces. I had them hanging all over my home, their droopy shoulders corrected, as in deportment classes, on the wooden skeletons of vintage clothes hangers. I would never have been able to squeeze into these silky garments with their tiny bodices and pinched waists, yet they spoke to me directly of how femininity is construed for me; spoke to me about glamour and fantasy, about grace, and about money too. And despite not having been worn by anyone I knew, once I had worked with them, they felt to me like personal reliquaries. That project, longstanding as it was, never came to public fruition, but I have preserved what I consider to be the best of those dresses, and I have remained fascinated by artists who use clothes in their work.

In *Story of Dresses* (1990), a body of work that pressed itself upon me during my own work with dresses, Annette Messenger placed frocks in glass cases, each resembling a votive offering and seeming to memorialise a life once lived. On a far larger and more public scale, in *No Man's Land* (2010), the thirty tons of used clothes amassed at the Park Avenue Armory in New York by Messenger's partner Christian Boltanski, were reminiscent of the mountains of personal possessions collected at Auschwitz from the stripped and the doomed. These piles of clothes were destined for German citizens, owing to the shortages in essential goods Germany was experiencing. The cultural memory of the Holocaust seeps through much of Boltanski's work (he was born in France in 1944) and all of it deals with life's passing: mortality and memorialisation. In *No Man's Land*, each garment served as a placeholder for an entire life lost.

Then there is Maira Kalman, who, with her son Alex Kalman, rebuilt the closet of her mother, Sara Berman, installing it and its expensive, stylish, obsessively ordered contents, which Maira had kept, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (2015). The clothes are very neat, starched, immaculately preserved, all in shades of écru and white. The closet was presented as a small chamber in dialogue with the Met's then recently installed Worsham-Rockefeller Dressing Room from 1882.

The closet represents Sara Berman's life from 1982 to 2004, when she lived alone in a small apartment in Greenwich Village, but the book *Sara Berman's Closet* (2018), featuring Maira Kalman's singular combination

of drawings, photographs and beautifully scripted, hand-written text, at once witty and slyly melancholy, is about the memories triggered by clothes and a few useful utensils, of which the potato grater (essential for *latkes*, a traditional Jewish pancake eaten during Hannukah) remains, for me, the most affecting. We see through Kalman's drawings Sara Berman in her pressed whites, and we hear her daughter's musings about Sara finding her style and shaping for herself a life that suited her and making time—a time—for herself. 'She edited out useless distractions. She cherished the small moments, which are the sweetest. Every action was done with care. Every day was filled with precise and brilliant actions. She bought a lemon. She mailed a letter. She wrapped a package.'

Sara Berman's Closet is about great style, but it is also about developing the wherewithal to cultivate that style. It is, in other words, about the social and economic ascent ('graduating' from shopping at Klein's in Times Square 'to Alexanders and then to Loehmann's') of an immigrant whose life had begun in a village in Belarus, escaping the pogroms in 1933 when Sara was twelve and travelling on the S.S. Polonia to Palestine (Maira, like me, was born in Tel Aviv) before relocating to New York in 1954. I once wrote a fan letter to Maira Kalman because I felt such affinity with her work and her person, but she never replied.

And finally: Louise Bourgeois, who felt, as Rosalind Jana puts it, 'both the solace and burden of garments.' In *What Artists Wear* (2021), Charlie Porter describes Bourgeois' small kitchen containing a rail of clothes opposite the gas stove. Like Sara Berman's closet, Louise Bourgeois' clothes rail contains mostly whites: shirts and tops, 'her everyday layers.' In the catalogue to *The Woven Child*—the exhibition of her fabric works at the Hayward Gallery in London (2022)—Louise Bourgeois' diaries and notebooks are copiously cited. Bourgeois writes about her need to preserve all her clothes—even stockings—for decades, 'some are old others dusty/ others out of season others are dirty with/stains in the front' but nothing will make her throw them away, since they are, as she baldly puts it, 'my past.' Bourgeois continued to hoard her clothes until 1995 when, aged eighty-three, she cleared them from her home and took them to her studio in Brooklyn. The lived reality ends and what she calls 'the history of the wardrobe' begins. During the last twenty years of her long life, Bourgeois made works out of these clothes as well as out of exquisite home fabrics that she had also kept for decades.

I was enthralled by the exhibition of these late works, visiting it twice as I was completing the editing of this book. The works I loved best were the ones in which the material and the thinking went hand in hand; often, these were not the largest or the punchiest works. But how I devoured

- the delicacy of the moulding and wadding of faces (those heads, as if bandaged into place, made of towelling fabric or jersey)
- the use of thread and spools
- the recurrence of knits and tapestry
- the woolly figures kissing
- the skeins of thread
- the puffy felty breast shapes
- the appearance of Bourgeois' own silky undergarments and draped linens
- the crocheted, cushiony objects piled into Brancusi-like pillars: soft Brancusi
- the spiders' webs made of mattress ticking
- the amazing drawings and prints on bits of trousseau (pillowcases, napkins)
- the gridded weaves made of fabric leftovers in the studio which was also a sewing room.

And I loved the fact that in her eighties and nineties, Bourgeois was still thrashing through obsessions of the infant with the mother, whose exaggerated breasts materialise a child's fantasy of femininity and maternity; still exploring desire and female sexuality, sometimes through the point of view of the once-upon-a-time child that she was, a fearful vision embodied by those scary headless, handless black stuffed and sewn copulating thugs.

That she imbued these refashioned items with a magical element—call it voodoo, call it fetish—is evident in her writings too, which, like the work itself, thrum both with visceral presence and with foundational loss:

A newly widowed woman collects the
 Top underwear of her late husband
 Unwashed, and makes a doll with
 Elastic and places it on her bed at his place—
 Smell of sweat—it is a symbol of life
 Smell of feet and caress of feet
 Related to the bring me my
 Slippers.

I love how Bourgeois emphasises the fact that the underwear is unwashed and how she links the smell of her dead husband's sweat and the smell of his feet lingering in his slippers to a bossy speech act that, one senses, might not have been entirely welcome. *Bring me my slippers.*

Bourgeois wrote this short poem in pencil on the back of a pamphlet she kept. The pamphlet, by Werner Muensterberger, is titled *The Creative Process: Its Relation to Object Loss and Fetishism*. Muensterberger builds a theoretical bridge between the fetish in its anthropological sense, and the fetish as a psychoanalytic concept, steering us into his reading of the transitional object in D. W. Winnicott. He argues that 'primitive' fetishism magically reconstitutes the lost love object, in a process not dissimilar from that of the clinical fetishist or, more pertinently still, from the process undergone by a child with her early, treasured possessions. In Muensterberger's view, the inner search for the lost object is a restorative, magical act that also characterises creative work. Looking at Louise Bourgeois' late work, it is easy to understand how such a notion would have spoken to her and why she might have jotted the widow's note on turning her late husband's clothes into a pacifier on such a pamphlet.

I am mesmerised by works that contain this bodily quality of which Bourgeois speaks: of stains or odours, of having been worn or touched, of having had contact with orifices and skin. I am transfixed by the indexical traces of individual lives, how they have unfolded and left skid marks, burn marks, tears. I would rush any day to a place in which such objects were on display: not so much the house where such-and-such lived (too reconstructed, too fake, too dead) but something already avowedly mediated, curated. A museum of crying. An archive of scars. A collection of stains.

In 'A Modest Manifesto for Museums' (2013), Orhan Pamuk turns such a museological desire into a promise. He wants to see museums

filled with humble, everyday things, objects that reveal the stories not of civilisations, but of individuals. Or, in Maira Kalman's words, objects that reveal 'a small and monumental story.'

Pamuk sees such a museum as 'much better suited to displaying the depths of our humanity' than the museums that 'construct the historical narratives of a society, community, team, nation, state, tribe, company, or species.' The manifesto ends with a statement/pledge: 'The future of museums is inside our own homes.'

I know that for me, not all evocative objects—not all the things I need to keep, or have kept, or have kept a record of—are literal remainders in the way of Ian's napkin, of Henrietta's napkin. I know that some are meaningful and mnemonic in other ways, and not for the evidence of corporeality they bear. But I have a persistent attachment to the idea of the body's trace; an attachment to those banal objects that have become, over time, stained with human meaning. Here is a smudge, a blot at once material and ephemeral, marking the place where someone no longer is.

