

SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things



RUTH ROSENGARTEN



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Time

A body one can no longer touch. A spot where someone once was. A mark of someone's once-having-beenness: how could such absences not fill one—fill me—with bewilderment, with a sense of the incommensurability of loss?

With the death of my dog Kali (though I balk at the possessive pronoun, for certainly I was hers as much as she was mine), the gnawed toys lying around the house turned into bruising reminders of the scope of her life and the range of my love; reminders of attachment and dependence. And it has been the same with all subsequent dogs who have cohabited with me. Fairly neat by inclination, I'm lax about the bedraggled items the dogs have, over the years, left lying around. I do not try to impress upon them—these dogs—the orderliness of my domestic habits. When Monty, the current incumbent, chooses a battered thing from his big basket of recreational artefacts and brings it onto the sofa where together we sit of an evening, I swell with pride at his intelligence, his understanding that now is the time for end-of-day pursuits. He's hidebound that way. He'd bring out a pipe and newspaper were he so inclined.

Of all the doggy playthings to which I am attached, those that are most broken have pride of place in my private museum of memorabilia: a wool-feathered fragment of pheasant, half the ear of an elephant, the eviscerated pelt of a giraffe, a bunny tail, the paw of a hedgehog. A carnage of fluffy bits. Given to dogs as comforters, these toys have been yanked and nibbled, nuzzled and shredded. There are soft scraps of felted and furred fabric around the house that, at first mashed and soaked in saliva, dry into tough parchment. In the field of child development, such objects of attachment would be described as transitional.

To be transitional, an object must be linked to maternal care; it must have a tactile nature and must have been selected by the child within a

continuum of behaviour that begins with the sensation of being held; with feeling contained and safe. I find that this is easily translatable to canine behaviour. For dogs, negotiation with that object occurs in a context of general wellbeing: you won't see a fearful dog playing. It seems to me that for a dog, while standing for prey, a soft toy is either an object of self-comfort or an instrument of darting negotiation with humans.

My dogs, as chance would have it, have always been spaniels or spaniel crosses. Each one has taken possession of plush toys (invariably representing animals) by practicing the devotion of blinding and disembowelling the creature and removing its squeaky voice. I retrieve beady eyes and wadding spread on the floor. Later, the dog will shake and thrash and pull the thready viscera triumphantly, only to tease humans with them, inviting play. Daring me to want those things, to want them *badly*. Sometimes—and Monty is expert at this—the dog will use these gutted parts to preen before visitors or present them as gifts: trophies imprinted with ancestral memories. Then, they will settle to a long session of nibbling and sucking and chewing.

In ways usually less dramatic than dogs' toys, our things bear—visibly or invisibly, in filigreed, layered webs—the traces of actions. Objects get bashed or broken, worn or threadbare, scratched or stained; colour rubs away, matter encrusts, deteriorates and dissolves. Such marks of friction expose the immersion of all our objects in the corrosive bath of time. We either take this on board or, if we become obsessed with the stainless and immaculate, in a fever of consumption, we discard our things and buy new ones.

But it is not the case in all cultural contexts that flawlessness is privileged. I learn of the traditional Japanese concept of *mottainai*—regret over waste—appropriated and used motivationally by environmentalists. It is also the Japanese who have developed a way of welcoming brokenness and absorbing it into the famous aesthetic of *kintsugi*—the art of visibly repairing ceramics—where a resin mixed with gold dust is used as an adhesive for the damaged pieces. The random, lucent network tracks the places of brokenness and instead of attempting to disguise them, acknowledges them in gold. *Kintsugi* openly avows the transformation of objects over time and the part played by brokenness in their very thingness, their new wholeness.

The beauty of objects repaired in this way—the exquisite delicacy of the gilded veins transforming accident into purpose—attests to value as something impermanent, shifting.

You see this in museums too, when painstaking repair of objects remains discernible. Museums showcase not only their ostensible objects (and here I am using *ostensible* to display its own etymology in the Latin *ostendere*, to show), but also the fact of their temporality; not only the historical time of their fabrication, but their duration as each object inches towards its inevitable disintegration.

In Hannah Khalil's play *A Museum in Baghdad* (2019), we follow the lives of two women, British archaeologist Gertrude Bell, one of the founders of the Museum of Baghdad in the 1920s, and contemporary Iraqi-British archaeologist Ghalia Hussein, attempting to reopen the museum after wartime looting in 2006. In the cross-cutting and interweaving of the two timelines, the play addresses the narration of nation, the legacies of colonialism and the consequences of war. In the staging of the play by Erica Whyman at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2019, sand served not only as a predictable enough metaphor of time, but—in a fast and steady downward stream at the end of the play—also suggested the relentlessly entropic way in which, over time, everything moves toward burial, disintegration, annihilation.

What is the time of an object? Temporal layers attach to objects like sediment, like dust. And some objects are overtly, visibly marked by different temporalities, displaying evidence of their own ruin. Curated by Edward Bleiberg, *Striking Power: Iconoclasm in Ancient Egypt* was an exhibition of damaged artefacts held in 2019 at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St Louis. With objects selected from the Egyptian, Classical and Ancient Near Eastern collection at the Brooklyn Museum, the exhibition tracked the widespread pattern of deliberately targeted defacement and destruction of Egyptian statuary, especially of figures of royalty or deities. The consistency of defacement of the noses of sphinxes and pharaohs, even in flat reliefs, suggested, for Bleiberg, that such statuary was vandalised to reduce the symbolic power of these figures. The display clearly spoke to other, more recent acts of violent iconoclasm.

Crucially, in this aggregation of broken things, works were taken out of the habitual museological context in which their historical origin

is explicated in wall texts and relocated within a narrative context underlining the politics and temporalities of destruction. But all objects in museums, by the very fact of being in a museum, are enmeshed in histories of displacement and migration, subject to the vicissitudes of ideology and the bullying mechanisms of market capabilities. All are, in short, subject to time.

On an intimate register too, every damaged object speaks of time. Look at the photograph heading this chapter: to the time(s) of reading and the time of destruction might be added that long duration through which the book's cover has gained its marks and stains, its pages yellowing over time. Every evocative object lives in several temporalities: varied times of doing, other times of undoing. Times of being ignored and times of provoking thought.

As things with which to think, evocative objects might also be described as thinking things. 'We think with the objects we love,' writes Sherry Turkle; 'we love the objects we think with.' In this sense, our evocative objects are like poems: amazing condensations, each—would it be an exaggeration to say?—a small locus of personal transcendence.

This notion comes into focus as I follow a thread in poet Brian Blanchfield's incomparable book, *Proxies: Twenty-Four Attempts Towards a Memoir* (2016), Blanchfield mulls over the formulation of a teaching colleague: 'a poem is a thinking thing.' In this phrase, Blanchfield hears 'both the poem's instrumentality for thought (it's something with which to think), and the processing of its materials (it's something that conducts thought, as if independently.)' Blanchfield titles the book's epilogue *Correction*, and in it he re-examines the material of all the preceding chapters, composed without recourse to the Internet or any other supplementary reference material (the words 'Permitting Shame, Error and Guilt, Myself the Single Source' standing as the epigraph to each chapter). In these corrections, Blanchfield checks his recollected material against the bibliographic sources that have informed his rich, broad-ranging associations. *Proxies* also speaks, then, of Brian Blanchfield as a reader. In the *Corrections*, he properly quotes Muriel Rukeyser, who says that poetry taps into something that is both unknown and known: 'that is the multiple time-sense in poetry, that is the ever new, which is recognized as something already in ourselves, but not discovered.' This is very similar to what, in a different context,

psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas calls the unthought known. Things that we apprehend unconsciously, but that continue to remain in the shadows of cognition; things for which we lack the tools of verbally articulate knowledge.

As a temporally complex thinking thing, an evocative object, like a poem, is a construct that uncovers as it abbreviates, channels as it transfigures. A thing through which we recognise that which might otherwise have remained mute. As with poems, we recognise but cannot prefigure the object's intertwined temporalities and woven meanings. Our most unassuming material possessions, addressing sight and touch, taste and sound, might reside quietly, unobtrusively, at the centre of our lives, and then over time, come to gain the patina of the evocative object. If our exposure to them occurs after an interval of time, this nudges us, eliciting stories that are not always self-same, even as *we* are not always self-same. In returning to them, we re-tell them. In this sense, evocative objects gain their comprehensive meanings in their association not only with thought and feeling, but also with words.

If you take the old-fashioned word *corsage*, and think of it as a souvenir, say of a particular ball on a particular evening, that corsage evokes a range of increasingly abstract qualities; it is, as poet and literary critic Susan Stewart puts it, metonymic to an increasingly lost set of referents: 'the gown, the dance, the particular occasion, the particular spring, all springs, romance,' and so on. But add a verb to *corsage* and something else happens, bringing it into the present. In her essay 'On Sentimentality' (2012), poet Mary Ruefle explores the sentimentality which, she suggests—undoing the negative connotations of this term—is of the very essence of poetry. It is terribly insufficient, she says, 'how an image of a crushed corsage [...] cannot recreate or give more than momentary value to the event it evokes in the mind of the retainer.' And yet the crushing of the corsage does embed it in time, in event, in association, and finally in memory.

The association of nouns and verbs (*corsage* with *crush*) in evocative objects—things upon, with, and through which actions have taken place—needs to be pinned down if it is to be communicated beyond the immediacy of its first appeal to the notion of time passing. In this sense, just as photographs require captions if they are to serve a testimonial or documentary function, the duration and temporalities of an object

require the verbal mesh of story if they are to evoke more than merely the passing of time.

Who crushed the corsage? Why? How does it come to be lying on this stretch of road?

The Book of Our History

Published in 1955, *The Story of Mozart* has been in my possession for over half a century. It's a children's book written by Helen L. Kaufmann, who, I see, has also penned the life stories of Beethoven and Haydn, *The Little Book of Music Anecdotes* (1948), and other abbreviated histories of, and companions to, classical music. *The Story of Mozart* contains nondescript black and white line drawings by Eric M. Simon. There are clumsily rendered, stiff-backed people: the men in wigs and breeches and shapely, waisted coats, the women in petticoated gowns and mob caps. My favourite illustration shows a young Wolfgang, dressed like a little man and jumping into a puddle. "'Watch me, Papa," he yelled, waving his arms' reads the caption.

The font used in the book is large and serified, the story simply and episodically told, with only tiny fragments of historical context. Papa is authoritative and Mama packs little Wolfgang's best suits for his tours. Wolfgang's sister is systematically called Nan rather than Nannerl, as though the Teutonic nature of her real name would prove too great a challenge for young English and American readers. Little Wolfi is instructed to take off his hat and bow low to the Emperor Francis and Empress Maria Theresa in Vienna.

The book captures, in broad lines, the rise of a prodigy and his early death: 'Wolfgang fainted over his work. Still, he worked on the Requiem whenever he could. He became so weak that he had to stay in bed all the time. The unfinished Requiem lay on the table beside him where he could reach it by stretching out his hand.' I remember how this first made me feel, reading about a young man dying, a genius to boot, long before I had ever heard the Requiem or known about the role of Franz Xaver Süssmayr in the version commonly heard today. There is nothing in the book about the crude language and vulgar streaks immortalised by Peter Schaffer in *Amadeus* (1979) (did Mozart have Tourette Syndrome?). Nothing about the compositions at the keyboard

being overseen by a mimetic starling in a cage, a starling that he bought on 27 May 1784, and that introduced a *fermata* to a phrase where there had been none and turned a G natural to a G#; a starling Mozart kept for three years and whose death he mourned more ceremoniously than that of his own father. Not enough about the insanely prolific output, the heavily worked manuscripts showing palimpsests of revisions, the appropriated sounds woven into new inventions; nothing about the operas I would come to love above all others. Actually, there is not very much about the music or how to listen to it, how it is filled with play and laughter and sudden cracks revealing a dark underside, how it can permeate you with wonder: its melodic lines, its rarer moments of counterpoint, its intricate patterns and repetitions, its digressions and moments of pure, sweet melancholy.

Inside this copy, a dedication is written in red ink: *Special Prize awarded to Ruth Rosengarten for excellent progress in Piano Playing. From Ray Smith, Johannesburg, December 1964.*

Like my mother before me, I attended piano lessons from the age of six. A black and white photograph shows me in our flat in Tel Aviv at that age: straight backed, fiercely focused, my hands pitched like tiny tents upon the keyboard. My first piano teacher was a woman of huge height and girth, whose yeasty breath I could smell when she leant over me to correct the shape my fingers made. I don't remember her name.

Mrs Smith was my piano teacher when we first moved from Tel Aviv to Johannesburg in the early 1960s. She was a woman who was surely old, since her hair was a white powder puff. But her dewy skin was pale and unwrinkled. She had the softest layer of powdered down on her cheeks: down that you could only detect when the late afternoon sun leaned in, those searing Johannesburg sunsets breaking into shaded interiors, breaking into your body too. I still attach a feeling of tremendous anxiety to the thought of those sudden Johannesburg sunsets of my childhood. I both longed for and dreaded the faint mustiness of Mrs Smith's cool, tenebrous house and her feathery touch. She wore twin sets in pastel tones that came out of a Fragonard painting, and little angora cardigans that didn't then elicit in me a scream of horror, since I did not yet know of the torture of rabbits that goes into angora production. This association—Mrs Smith and her angora cardie—once sprang to mind

when I heard Tom Waits' 1979 riff in a famous performance of his song *I Wish I Was in New Orleans*:

Suzy Montelongo used to wear these angora sweaters. I'm crazy about angora sweaters. I guess it's kind of a hang-up of mine. She had angora socks, and angora shoes. I believe she was originally from Angora. I don't know where she is anymore, but every time I see an angora sweater, I think maybe inside will be Suzy Montelongo.

And so, in a fantastic compression, each time I read the dedication in the Mozart book, I remember Ray Smith, and each time I remember Ray Smith, I think too of Suzy Montelongo. I think of the nostalgia that wafts through so much of Tom Waits' inimitable, gritty music and of how P and I watched Waits concerts on YouTube with our bodies intertwined in the libidinous heat of our early days—actually I think of P's tongue, which is certainly one of the best tongues I've known, not too bullying but not too solemn and passive either—and I think of my tinkly, childish piano playing and how I loved being praised and strove to do well at everything just to earn that praise, not ever endeavouring to try my hand at anything I knew I would not be fairly good at—how good was I at kissing?—but I was never excellent at playing the piano. And in this compression of times, I remember Mrs Smith's hands as she turned on the metronome or gave me lists of scales to practice, written up in red ink on thin paper glued onto stiff cards. I remember playing nervous duets in concerts with my friend Barbara, who, I heard, died in 2017 of breast cancer in Amsterdam. And I remember, too, with twinned stabs of relief and regret, giving up my piano lessons long after Mrs Smith had been replaced by Mrs Cloete, realising, as I launched into life as a university student, that something had to give.

Thought and affect, association and digression are laced together in my responses, over time, to this book as a particular material object. On its cloth-bound grey cover, a neat red scroll bears Mozart's signature. This cover is discoloured, the spine is cracked open, the front is all but loose, hanging onto the rest by a few threads. The binding has come unstuck. And on three of the four corners, oh, bliss! Traces of a puppy's gusto as she gnawed her way through cloth and board, unable to believe her luck.

Kali, beloved creature, golden cocker spaniel, gentle and submissive. She was, in effect, a consolation gift from J in 1984, after we had been

trying for over a year to get me pregnant. Eventually, it was at five years that I gave up trying. My nerves were frayed with the frantic daily ritual of thermometers and charts, with squabbles just when my vaginal mucous had the desired consistency of egg white, and when, consequently, I was trying to set the scene for some lavishly unspontaneous sex. In early December of that first year, I had returned to Lisbon, where we were living in a tall building overlooking a suburban railway station: returned from my first ever trip to New York with a suitcase full of exhibition catalogues, treasures from Strand Books and a too-large vintage man's coat.

A photograph taken on that trip at the Egyptian Temple of Dendur, transplanted into the Sackler Wing at the Metropolitan Museum, shows me looking coy and sultry against that ancient, monumental sandstone structure, the raked winter sunlight igniting my long hair.

The temple was built in the first century BC, just after the Roman conquest of Egypt, and the pharaoh depicted on its walls is in fact Augustus Caesar. The whole structure was given to the USA in 1965 in gratitude for a vast UNESCO campaign to save monuments that would otherwise have been submerged by the waters of Lake Nasser with the construction of the Aswan High Dam. But in the photograph, I am concerned with none of this: what I am concerned with is modelling the oversized coat that I think of as rather bohemian-chic. Looking at this photograph now, however, what I see in this person, this me, is someone biding her time, distracting herself from the main event, which was waiting for a baby to happen.

Back home. There she was. 'Surely the runt of her litter,' said the vet who checked her. He tried to have us send Kali back, as if one could; swap her for a better specimen. She was small-boned, honey-coloured. Lovely, with her narrow face and extravagantly fringed head, a delicate alien, shitting all over newspapers strewn on the kitchen floor, squeezing herself into a corner where, quaking, she hoped to remain unnoticed.

What'll I do with her? I remember asking, scooping her slithery body into my arms, smelling baby fur, foresty breath. Though I had longed for a dog, the reality weighed on me for a protracted moment: all that unsolicited responsibility. But it was just a moment.

You'll love her, J said.

And I did. I did.

Kali it was who, some months later, found my copy of *The Story of Mozart* just where I had left it, and Kali it was who, with puppy joy, had her way with it.

‘Because (in principle) things outlast us,’ W.G. Sebald writes in *Unrecounted* (1991), ‘they know more about us than we know about them: they carry the experiences they have had with us inside them and are—in fact—the book of our history opened before us.’ They are testaments, testimonials. This particular, material version of *The Story of Mozart* is the book of the book of my history, a reminder of trajectories, but also of roads blocked, directions thwarted.

I have not seriously played the piano since my early twenties.

J and I got divorced in 1993.

Kali, whom I cossetted and adored, is long dead. Her nibbled toys have been passed on to subsequent dogs, joining forces with the cherished trophies of these others. She absorbed and consumed all sense of the maternal I might have once achingly nursed in myself, deflecting the desire for a small human creature henceforth, and once and for all, to the canine.

Every dog I have had since has had to bear the burden of that maternal love.

I left Johannesburg in 1977 and I no longer live in Lisbon either.

I did not in the end—that strange formulation determined by the duration of fertility—have children, thus always remaining a childless child.

This whole trajectory, with beginnings and outcomes, with digressions and re-readings, with finalities contained in verb tenses, is metonymically condensed for me in a single object, a dog-chewed children’s book. It is not my whole story, of course, but several narrative strands that are important to me converge here.

I feel their confluence when I take this book out of the calico dust bag in which I now keep it; when I hold it, open it again.

