

SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things



RUTH ROSENGARTEN



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Hair

One day, I retrieve from its long slumber the *Better Homes and Gardens Baby Book*, which serves as a record of some of the details of the first three years of my life. *Better Homes and Gardens* was launched in Des Moines in 1922. It presents, in its very title, an aspiration. Our homes, our gardens, our lives, can and should be improved. If today, we feel nudged or compelled to *optimise* our lives, in the 1950s when my parents acquired this book, *better* was good enough and presented a reasonable term for normative striving.

Not surprisingly, since my mother was never much of a record keeper, this baby book is filled with notes in my father's hand: his beautiful, backward leaning script. Here, in the way he has embraced the project of data collection, I recognise my own love of record keeping, the exacting attention of the archivist: the birth announcement in the newspaper, the congratulatory telegrams, a copy of my birth certificate, a short list of gifts received, several small monochrome photographs meticulously pasted in. Then there are the handwritten records of delivery (natural, no anaesthetic), details of the physical examination at birth (no exceptional birth marks, no heart murmur), the pink skin, the body height and weight, circumference of chest and head, an extraordinary chart of every single hour of the first week's 'natural rhythm' (sleeps, nurses, bottle feeding, wakens, cries, bath), vitamins administered, first weight loss, subsequent weight gains, first illness, breast milk pumping, the fact that, like most children of my generation, I was schedule fed every four hours. Of course I was schedule fed! Every symptom ever examined under the microscope of my own interest in psychoanalysis bears the mark of this: a lifetime of difficulty with frustration and delayed gratification, and the need to exercise it, like a tired but insistent muscle.

Following on details of the earliest days of my life—a time that is, for all of us, at once unremembered and, if we are lucky enough to have

a stable home, always already constructed through words and images that have been put in place by our caretakers—my father tracks my further development. He trails off at around my third year. News of teeth as they emerge, of the capability of holding toys and managing spoons, of giggling, of refusing breast milk, of the first signs of temper, of bladder and bowel training, of drinking from a cup and pointing, on instruction, to eyes, nose, hair. I am fascinated to read that the first full-blown tantrum, at seventeen months, is approximately coincident with the first use of sentences, confirming theories of the relationship between linguistic representation and loss, and therefore frustration and terror. My father writes: 'At 17 months, talks beautifully in whole sentences such as "Ruthie wants soup." Talks non-stop and is in motion all day long.'

Between two of the pages of this relic, I now come across a piece of paper pressed flat and thin. I do not remember if I have ever seen it before. Over time, this fragile thing has almost stuck to the book. I carefully prise it away, amazed at this delicate treasure. It is a child's drawing made on a piece of unbleached paper, possibly extracted from an exercise book, a notebook, or perhaps it is part of an envelope. The page has been roughly snipped with scissors—maybe a small pair of nail scissors or the kind of blunt cutting instrument that children are given—so that it is impossible now to fathom the original scale of the drawn image relative to the whole page, or how that image was initially positioned on the blank page. I know that, in analysing children's drawings, positioning and scale are relevant. But there's nothing to tell me whether the page surrounding what I now see was blank or filled.

On the verso side of the image, a child has written in Hebrew. She has pressed hard with a B or 2B pencil, emphatic letters that identify her. 'Ruth here, aged six and a half,' she has written. And then, as if doubly to ensure that authorship and ownership have been asserted, she has added: 'also by Ruth.' So: *Ruth here*, and the image is also *by* Ruth. I am intrigued by this doubling—or splitting—of self, but I know that any conclusion I draw from it would be overdetermined. At once too obvious, and too conjectural. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to return again and again to this drawing, finding in it a message in a bottle tossed into the ocean long ago.

This is my work, or rather, it is Ruth's, me and not me. The girl in the drawing is pictured from the back. And she does seem, if I am to judge

by the proportions of her body—the slim, straight torso, the skinny legs—to be a girl rather than a woman. There is a head of long, straight dark hair flicked up at the bottom. The child's difficulty in rendering that—the hair that has departed from the flat plane and projects into the viewer's space—has been solved by turning the flick into a kind of fat scroll, or a plaited loaf. In fact, above this plaited loaf is the shadow of an earlier one, a hirsute *chollah*, which has been scribbled over with the pencil, as though Ruth who is making the drawing has decided to lengthen the girl's hair, as well as thickening it. The length of hair is clearly an important signifier, as is its dressing: two red clips at the top of the head, I suppose securing stray wisps of fringe.

I say this with a grimace, the type that paraphrases 'time is cruel,' since at the time that I find this tiny drawing, all but the last traces of fringe on my head have disappeared. The doctor seems confident that my loss of hair will not be permanent; that it does not follow the known patterns of alopecia. She attributes the hair loss to a bout of cellulitis a few months earlier. I had never heard of cellulitis before, and the first I knew of it was the feeling of a clamp around my head. The pain was similar to that of shingles, difficult to describe, dull and piercing at the same time. The cellulitis extended from the top of my cheekbones, through my eyelids to the first quadrant of my scalp, swelling and reddening and then bursting into florid scabs. I looked grotesque. Prescribed antibiotics, debilitated with fatigue, I mostly stayed indoors for a fortnight, though a trip to the supermarket brought stares that gave me a taste of othering such as I had not ever previously experienced.

Loss of hair is so primal a threat, one hears of women facing chemotherapy who say they dread hair loss more than any other aspects of their illness or treatment. When I recollect my earlier head of big hair, the titian waves swirling off my forehead, tumbling down my back, I cannot help believing that punishment is at work for the hubris of youth: I had so taken for granted the refrain *you have such amazing hair*.

Now, not knowing if there will be regrowth, I toy with my choices, all of which have at least to bypass the Donald Trump comb-over. I perceive empirically, as we all do, that wind is the enemy of the gleaming pate under cover of a curl or two. And baldness seems preferable to the mullet option. Bandana, tick; hat, tick. But for indoors? I cannot see myself enduring a wig, so my first thought is a buzz cut, despite knowing it's not a good look for anyone over twenty-five, except Annie

Lennox. Google searches point to rocking that baldness on Instagram or opting for scalp micropigmentation, i.e. tattooing. All the while, I wish I still *needed* hair clips, that childish accoutrement that figures, for the six-and-a-half-year old I once was, as a sign of neat grown-upness. Indeed, going by this drawing, being adult was, for me, all about the hair, the clothes, the accessories.

In the drawing, despite the length of hair, I have taken care not to omit the fragile stalk of a neck emerging beneath it. This has the odd effect of making the head seem ridiculously long. It is also the most conceptual—in other words, the least observational—part of the drawing, since it has nothing to do with how a head of long hair would or could be seen from the back, but rather, with the prior knowledge of the existence, just there, of a neck. This tiny stem links the head to a washboard torso onto which arms are attached by articulated ball and socket joints, fitting neatly into capped, puffed short sleeves. The girl's back, unmodulated by any form of waist, slots neatly into the ballooned spread of a flounce. The dress is pale green: vertical crayon marks follow the direction of the torso, and horizontal marks fill the wide, bell-shaped expanse of skirt, which has thin piping along its hemline.

The visible area of the legs projecting beneath the dress is bisected by marks indicating the back of a knee, more like folds, or the edging of socks. Free of ankles, these legs are tagliatelle fed into kitten-heeled shoes. As with the hair, the child artist has been exercised by the representation of three-dimensional things on a two-dimensional surface, and here she has clearly relied on observation and rudimentary perspective rather than conceptualisation: all you can see of the foot, from behind, is the ball of the heel. The arms are like saucepan handles, semi circles devoid of joint or angle, and clearly, hands present—as they so often do in drawing—a difficulty. The left one is kept out of sight, the right is balled into a fist. Around the right wrist, a handbag is looped, its green hue matching precisely that of the dress.

I am fascinated by the plenitude of detail, which is mostly (except for the knee creases) about the dressing, the presentation. The omission of a face—rational from the point of view I have chosen—also means the exclusion of all signs of affect. I seem to be interested, rather, in an idea of femininity performed in tottering steps and girlish costume, matching greens offset by punchy touches of complementary red.

Unreconstructed, I love this girl stuff. I feel sure that at the front, there would be red lipstick to complete the look.

Near the head of this figure, one word is written in the child's emphatic script. This caption addresses me now across the decades, grabs me, pierces me. It is the punctum of the drawing. Even though *punctum* is a photographic term—a detail that pricks or wounds the viewer's expectations—it fits here. The punctum speaks directly from—and to—the unconscious. In this drawing, that single word that pierces me is 'Mummy.' It is written in Hebrew letters, but phonetically, it spells the English word, *mummy*, rather than the equivalent Hebrew word, *ima*.

This caption is where the drawing is hurt by an encounter with the real. It is the word and not the image that leads me straight to my bilingual childhood. It is the word that separates me from other girls my age, there where I am living in Tel Aviv, where these other girls call their mother *ima*, while already then, I call mine 'Mummy', with a Hebrew accent. That word, *mummy*, also signals my passage, just over two years later, from being a little Israeli girl to being a little South African girl, a bifurcated identity, never quite losing the one nor quite adopting the other. These identities would later be joined by two others, my Portuguese self and my English one, all jostling hopelessly for supremacy, all cohabiting and still today hailing me in different and not always predictable speech acts.

Here in this drawing, the word *mummy* in Hebrew letters also pinpoints the site of my longing. This girl, this curly, reddish-haired me, wants what she cannot have: long, straight dark hair. She wishes too, for high heels and beautiful clothes with matching accessories.

How to account for desire, and how to deal with its non-gratification? That question permeates the drawing, even as it percolates through life itself. In wanting certain things, the girl identifies with a mother whom she glamourises and idealises. My mother, after all, had short, curly hair. Yet still, this is both the girl and her mother, *my* mother, with all the things the picture could not show: her rasping voice, her accent, her peep-toe shoes, that Estée Lauder perfume. My mother, *walking away*. I want this drawing to tell me more than I already know, and in a sense, it does just that, simply by virtue of being virgin territory to mine, lost until now. But in some other sense, it explains nothing: it brings me old news of how I always felt about my mother, her lack of maternity,

her narcissism: like all narcissism, hers was more a clawing need for approbation than an expression of self-love.

Gorgeous Nothings

I am compelled not only by the content of this small drawing, but also by its physical properties, its existence as a little something that might well have landed up being discarded, along with so many other drawings made at around the same time: where are they? Why were they not kept? Not a full drawing, but something extracted, like a doodle or a note on the margins of something else: calendars, diary pages, envelopes, receipts. There is an old-fashioned (and of course newly refashioned) thrift to such recycling of materials (bringing them from the brink of nothingness back into somethingness), but it is also the very idea of marginalia that interests me. Margin: a space that, in its very status (unimportant, secondary, on the edge), releases the maker from the pressure of composition, the compulsion of the virgin mark, the mantic statement. And yet, in their fragmentary nature, things jotted down on such bits of paper can seem particularly significant, if not oracular.

There are works that I love, made as marginalia. Made as if in passing, yet distinctly not unimportant; made with urgency and often in response to something fleeting, an observation or a thought. As ‘active tracers of the inner speech-current’—George Steiner, spot on—jottings in informal formats are powered by an unconscious sense of freedom and enablement. Not necessarily disputatious, in the most literal sense of marginalia, but afterthoughts and forethoughts: such mark-making permits itself to bypass any prior formal strictures. They are governed by the making-do logic of bricolage, the poetics of improvisation. In this sense, they align well with working procedures (living art, anti-art) sponsored by the international Fluxus group in the 1960s and ’70s.

Emphatic or lyrical, such works of improvised marginalia occupy a distinct if undeclared place in modernism. They are made by artists and writers who are soothsayers of the diminutive, who channel inner truth, eschewing the grand and the sweeping. Emily Dickinson, celebrated as a verbal miniaturist, made an art form of the punctuated pause, the interlines, the spaces between words. Fifty-two of her poem-thought-fragments, written on scraps of paper or flaps of envelopes, were

published in facsimile as *The Gorgeous Nothings* in 2012. The rapture that this book produced in me, beginning with its perfect title, warrants its own essay. The envelope poem fragments are enticing testimony to a mind's fertile power of abbreviated association: 'Summer laid/her simple Hat/On its boundless/shelf.' Or 'But are not/all facts dreams/as soon as/we put/them behind/us.' Or 'Our little/secrets/slink/away.' Or 'Clogged/only with/Music, like/the Wheels of /Birds.' The length of the lines, governed by the happenstance of available space, forces a syncopated rhythm on the phrasing.

But beyond the delicate and thrilling power of verbal evocation, these testify, too, to the visual power of words: concrete poetry before its time. Spatial arrangement and the small, marginal form are essential to their meaning. And it is easy to see how the dash, so typical of Dickinson's idiosyncratic punctuation, is born less of syntax and more of something at once dictional and gestural.

Then, there is James Castle, a so-called outsider artist who spent all his life (1899–1977) in Boise, Idaho, born deaf and living and working for decades in extreme isolation. Castle's works come into being from a variety of sources, including his reuse of images derived from printed media—advertising and illustration. Drawing with pronounced energy in soot and spit on envelopes and pieces of card, he also produced idiosyncratic paper constructions and handmade books. He stitched and tied and marked in an idiom that extends beyond—but also mirrors—that of modernism, with his allusions to mass culture (logos, brands, stamps, ephemera), to the larder, the storeroom and the workroom.

Swiss writer Robert Walser, also considered an outsider, was another consummate crafter of the minute and fragmentary. He wrote stories, always in pencil and on the tiniest surfaces—cards, receipts, calendar pages, envelopes—in an encrypted script. The writing of these microscripts is so minuscule that his pages give the impression of being seen from a distance, telescoped: intimacy reversed. More than this, language seems to have become abstract (the punctuated marks of the passage of ants), or indeed, asemic: 'hieroglyphs for which the code has been lost,' in Theodor Adorno's formulation of the 'writing' that constitutes all art.

Walser is a droll, self-deprecating elaborator of short prose, even when he writes novels. Sliding between first- and third-person narrations, his

texts are rhythmic, mysterious, visionary. And they are ambulatory: ('without walking I would be dead,' he says): walking is intrinsic to them, corporealising the act of writing, especially, though not exclusively, in his novella *The Walk* (1917), in which we accompany a writer walking to escape the accusatory silence of the blank page. The point of view of Walser's stories is profoundly internal, a ruined psychic landscape. Diagnosed with schizophrenia after suffering a mental breakdown in his mid-fifties, his writings reveal a compassionate fascination with the ordinary and the limited. Both as sound text and as visual marks on the page, his writing turns the marginal into the main event. 'I was never really a child, and therefore something in the nature of childhood will cling to me always,' says the narrator of his short novel *Josef van Gunten* (1909). 'To be small and to stay small. [...] I can only breathe in the lower regions,' he declares.

Me

I love finding things previously unknown or forgotten among my familiar possessions.

Enraptured with this fragment of drawing that has slipped out of my baby book, I photograph and post it on Instagram with a short text and a few obvious hashtags. In response, I receive a DM from Isabel, an artist acquaintance in Lisbon, who attaches a jpeg of a drawing I gave her in the early 1990s. We had exchanged works: hers was a table sculpture: a long baguette made of resin, with knives deeply buried in its translucent body, at once homely and aggressive. I cannot recall what she chose in return. Receiving her message with its attachment, I am reminded of this series of washy pen and ink drawings reprising the motifs of my childhood, lifted directly from my family archive. I had begun to work with and from family photographs in the mid-1990s.

The subject of the drawing Isabel has chosen comes from one of the earliest colour photographs of me. I am daintily holding open the edges of my dress, as though unfolding a fan. My fingers are securing the frilled hem, and it is important for me, clearly, to display the full range and extent of the swishing flounce. My legs have blurred together in a wash of watercolour, but my feet are visibly splayed like those of a little ballerina.



I remember this dress. It was made of crisp cotton, with small turquoise and white checks. It had two bands across the bodice, incorporating diminutive figures in procession around my flat chest. Together with a green dress—not unlike that in *Little-Me's* drawing—my father bought it for me in London, which was a city steeped in both ritual and glamour. The capped sleeves match the ones I've given the figure of *Mummy* in the drawing that I made at around the same time as I posed for this photograph. Though the forty-something-year-old person who has drawn herself from a photograph is aware of the nested meanings of meta-representations, there seems to be a continuous thread linking the

first drawing with the second: a continuity of fantasised femininity. The earlier drawing, however, is a gift from the past shored up in the present. In that child's drawing, fully identified with my mother, I long for her as she turns her back to me, turns her back *on* me. I express the unmet desires that then defined, and—perhaps, to my dismay in looking at the two drawings together—that continued to define my position, my location, my place in adulthood and in femininity.

Well, at least I have finally escaped the tyranny of the ponytail. I have come to love short hair. Ollie, my hairdresser, gave me a great pixie cut to accommodate the hair loss and reassured me. *Believe me*, he said, *I've seen alopecia many times, your hair will grow again*.

As soon as I see myself in the mirror, I realise that—bald patch notwithstanding—this look accords better with how I now feel about myself, and especially, with a life in which exercise—running and yoga—plays a part, as it did not when I was young.

To my delight, in 2020, in the enforced isolation of the pandemic, the bald patch yields first a reassuring, downy nap; then more robustly, it grows thicker, longer. My lockdown hair is fuller, softer and more lustrous than my hair was in the prehistory of that time, only a few months earlier.

First lockdown, when I still think that my partner P and I have a future together, brings its own surprising intimacies. When P and I have dinner dates on FaceTime, he comments on how my hair has grown, though I know he likes it short. A look passes between us, and I know we are both thinking of the moment when, with no screen separating us, no thin slice of technology wedged between our bodies, we will at first shyly, searchingly, kiss. We will press our oldish bodies together and then he will grab a handful of hair on the crown of my head, and, with this, I will be wordlessly invited to extend my throat in a way that I know he likes, that he knows I like, and he will lick the underside of my chin and then he will kiss my neck. That kiss will be full, both a reward and a promise, and then, with eyes half closed, I will loosen my no-longer-titian hair from his grip and tilt my head up and touch his face with both my hands, and he will remove his glasses, which is always a signifier of that particular intimacy and he will smile and run his hands through my hair and along my neck, and then he'll say: *wow, it really has grown!* and our hearts will be going like mad and I will smile and say yes. Yes.