“Melancholic Things”

Volume 1: The Major Work

“The Things She Owned”

and

Volume 2: The Exegesis

“Objects as Markers for Identity Transformation in Fictional Grief Narratives”

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“Melancholic Things”

Volume 2: The Exegesis

“Objects as Markers for Identity Transformation in Fictional Grief Narratives”

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Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.

These are the tears of things, and our mortality cuts to the heart.

Virgil, Book I, The Aeneid

The things we own can own us, too.

Henry David Thoreau

Introduction

As an inescapable transition in life, it is inevitable that, over the ages, death and grief have featured in literary narratives too numerous to count. Death, absence, loss, grief and mourning form a universal story, a fact of life.

Matter is the stuff of the universe, and in that sense, matter, things, and objects, are also universal. We are all made of matter, and matter surrounds us all. This is another inescapable fact of life. It is likely impossible to discover a single literary narrative that does not feature matter, things or objects. We relate to and with the world, and all living things in it, through things and objects.

I propose to cover new ground in this exegesis by combining aspects of bereavement theory — especially those relating to the objects of death, as researched by Margaret Gibson — with psychoanalytical theory, which examine the ways in which a thing reflects the psychological condition of its possessor, observer or contemplator, and by contextualising this within the framework of Thing Theory. By doing so I will be able to compare the different stages of grieving and concomitant identity reconstruction of the bereaved alongside ideas about relationships between subjects and material objects. Using this process, I have theorised the use of objects — their placement in fictional grief narratives and their relationship to protagonists that have suffered loss — by suggesting a loose schema for the classification of those objects. These classifications are made according to the different ways in which they reflect the state of identity reconstruction in those protagonists and the way they are written into the narrative. I group such objects under the categories of *fossil-objects*, *talisman-objects*, *fetish-objects* and *totem-objects*, and will discuss these in greater detail in Chapter 3.

My struggle to choose a focus for this exegesis reflected, perhaps, my reluctance to examine the difficult feelings surrounding the death of my mother. Things, objects, are what

provided me, as a writer, with enough sense of safety— the security of things, rather than ideas (Brown, 'Thing Theory', 2) — to take the creative component of this thesis in the direction it finally flowed, and to commit to the subject I eventually chose to explore in this exegesis. All but two of the objects described within the narrative of my creative work are actual objects in my possession. They were once owned by my late mother before they were passed to me, her only child, after her untimely death. I curated these objects for the purpose of this novel, presenting them as objects are presented in a museum, with italicised ekphrases punctuating each of the narrative segments in which Erika's story is told. I wrote these real objects into a fictional form in order to maintain a safe distance from the complex feelings they evoke and to be able to see them unclouded by excessive emotion. I see after the fact of writing that these ekphrases anchor the story in the same way the actual objects in my possession have acted as psychic vessels of containment for unresolved grief in my own life, and how my changing relationship with these objects — including the writing of them into this fiction — reflect different stages of reconstructing a new identity in a worldview changed by the death of my mother. I use the phrase, "after the fact of writing", because the motivations for writing in this way, at the time, were not clear to me, and as so often happens in creative writing, were set into motion by a less-than-conscious drive.

The objects also hold within them the ambiguous and fraught feelings surrounding a mother-daughter relationship and through death, its too-sudden and unresolved ending. These objects hold, and have held, many other meanings besides, depending on their location and the different moments at which I observed them.

Since my mother's death, I have noticed the different roles and uses I have given to them, as does Erika within "The Things She Owned". In each case, the things act as protective talismans against loss of cultural identity or against the extremes of grief unleashed after the death of a mother; stored away out of sight untouched, not-dealt with — fossilisations of grief or of nostalgia for eras lost; as talismans for protection against emotional pain, their familiar use and comfort allowing for normalisation, continuity and

safety in a newly chaotic world; as fetishes — cathexic or transitional objects — that present a threshold to their possessor, a liminality that allows internal adjustments to occur and effect transitions from one emotional state to another; and totems, not always, but often, items of nature, such as stones, leaves and shells, but also any object into which the possessor projects their sense of identity. It may be one that is in flux, but which represents and anchors the possessor's sense of self at any given time, providing a springboard into new perceptions of life and the world and in some ways, a declaration of that newly constructed self.

The objects would have meant different things, still, to my mother who once owned them — as they would have in different ways to Michiko — and those meanings would have changed for her within the trajectory of her life. These meanings embedded within them are, and will always remain, ephemeral, ambiguous, inexplicable. In writing these objects into an alternative existence and containing them within a work of fiction, I have attempted to make them more concrete, more permanent, to give them some security of meaning in a universe which at times seems devoid of it; to find a stability yearned for during the chaos wrought after the death of someone loved. As with all things, these objects will most likely one day atrophy, disintegrate, enter landfill or a stranger's possession — particularly as I have no siblings or children of my own to whom these objects can be handed on — whereupon the meanings I see within them will be permanently erased. It is my attempt to find safe anchor in a life that at times seems bereft of continuity or meaning, that I recreated them ekphrastically in the body of my narrative, in order to anchor them into a sort of permanence, and in order to weave around it a work of fiction.

I will also demonstrate how these objects become markers for the reconstruction or transformation of identity — my own, through the writing of the work, as well as that of my main protagonist, Erika — after a mother's death. I will do this by examining aspects of bereavement theory that posit that when a loved one dies, the identity of the bereaved is fragmented, and that the psyche of the bereaved, through a process of grieving, struggles to reconstruct a new identity which incorporates the absence of that loved one from its world. It

is often a world which seems no longer to make sense. I will also examine this in the light of Thing Theory and psychoanalysis, as well as of research conducted into the way the bereaved deal with objects of the dead.

In this, the critical component of my thesis, I will demonstrate how the partly-subconscious process of writing "The Things She Owned" — along with the decision to use ekphrastic descriptions of objects to punctuate the narrative — also allowed me to examine the transforming value and transformative power of objects within the context of grief, absence, mourning and loss, and the different ways in which objects are used in works of literary narratives that address such themes.

"The Things She Owned" is, in essence, a fictional grief narrative, one in which Erika's grief is navigated around the ekphrasised objects. Since there is a vast body of literary work that includes narratives of death, grief, absence, mourning and loss, I have limited myself to the comparative analysis of one principal comparative work, Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*. A fictional grief narrative, its objects and works of art play significant roles in the mitigation of the main character Leo's grief, objects which also help him navigate around his sense of loss. Leo is a professor of art history and visual theory, and the significant losses that he suffers — the death of his son, followed by the loss of his wife who leaves him not long afterwards, the death of his closest friend, Bill Wechsler, an artist who uses objects in his work, and the loss of a relationship with Bill's son through shocking circumstances — challenge his facility, which he once trusted, to make sense of a world that seems to have lost any reason through the works of art and the objects that he observes.

A few additional works were helpful in contextualising my own and Hustdvedt's work. I will refer to them briefly, in passing: Michael Redhill's *Martin Sloane;* Edmund de Waal's *The Hare with the Amber Eyes* and Joyce Carol Oates's *Mother, Missing*. While *The Hare with the Amber Eyes* is a work of non-fiction, I have chosen this work since it is a narrative anchored by objects: De Waal's collection of *netsuke*. De Waal's argument for the value of framing objects is also pertinent to the closing section of this exegesis.

With regard to theory about things and objects, I have referred briefly to the work of Bill Brown, who first presented his ideas on Thing Theory in a specially edited issue of *Critical Inquiry* in 2001, as well as to Peter Schwenger, on his text *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*. I have limited my analysis of Thing Theory to the context of the creative and comparative works contained in this thesis, since the breadth of the topic is more extensive than the remit of this exegesis will allow. The intention is for this work to contribute to the field of Thing Theory.

With respect to grief theory and the role the possessions of those who have died play in the lives of the bereaved, I will refer to the work of sociologist Margaret Gibson, and her research into how those who have experienced loss interact — or do not interact — with what she calls "objects of the dead": a term that incorporates all manner of material artefacts of the dead that are left to the living, from photographs, clothing, jewellery, household items, artworks and furniture to death objects as remnants and relics of the body itself: locks of hair, teeth or cremated remains.

I will also briefly examine certain psychoanalytical theories, particularly those of Freud and D.W. Winnicott, regarding the relationships of the grieving to objects, and explore notions of melancholia, nostalgia, loss and grieving through human attachment to such objects.

"The Things She Owned" is a work of literary fiction falling within the genre of the grief narrative. The novel follows a non-linear trajectory and is split into three sections: a short Prologue, in which the reader is introduced to the two main characters, Erika and Michiko, through a flashback told in subjective third person from Erika's point of view. Part One contains two interwoven narratives; one follows the life of Michiko over the course of several decades, and is a retrospective, third-person, objective narrative; the other, a third-person, subjective narrative, depicts the life of Erika over a period of a several months in contemporary London. Part Two is introduced by a first-person narrative in the form of a long journal entry written by Erika when she is in Okinawa, Japan, followed by a short third-

person subjective episode from her lover Archie's points of view. The novel ends in a third-person omniscient narrative.

Having obeyed the machinations of my subconscious mind during its creation, I have taken real objects —significant to the relationship I had with my mother and to her death, and to my relationship to Japan, where I was born and raised, and from which I became exiled — and given them to Erika as transformative or transitional tools, while encasing them within my novel to keep them safe, to make them more permanent, to make them more "real" by highlighting them within the novel, and to present them, curated, as if the creative work were some kind of literary vitrine.

It is worth noting that, while there is research regarding the role of writing grief narratives in rebuilding the self following bereavement, mostly focussing on memoir, there appears to be little analysis relating to the role of objects in identity reconstruction following bereavement in either grief memoir or in fictional grief narratives. This exegesis seeks to rectify this by framing its analysis of the reconstruction and, at times, complete transformation of bereaved identities in fictional grief narratives within the context of grief theory, Thing Theory and the literary works selected for contextualisation of the creative component of this thesis, "The Things She Owned".

Chapter 1. The Story Behind the Story

Something ruptured and began bleeding in my chest when I bent
over my mother, when I saw my mother in that way. It will happen
to you, in a way special to you. You will not anticipate it, you cannot
prepare for it and you cannot escape it. The bleeding will not cease for a long time.

Joyce Carole Oates, from *Mother, Missing*.

Though drawing from many elements of my own, and my Japanese mother's life, "The Things She Owned" is a work of fiction. The feelings it evoked during its writing, however, were intensely personal. Having overcome writer's block through meditative techniques, most of it was written in free-flow; that is, without consideration or planning — typing what came into my mind at each moment. Only in this way was I able to prevent anxieties wrought by complex emotions from bringing my writing to a halt. The writing of the creative work required an intense focus, an attention that excluded excessive deliberation. Some events in the creative work came as a surprise; I did not know, for example, that Erika would pick up a stone, then plunge into an Okinawan waterfall until I'd written the first few sentences of the paragraph in which this occurs. In writing "The Things She Owned", I identified closely with Brian Castro's idea of the novel as transitional object, "a cathexis or investment in writing-as-object, which has never left the scene of its grieving" (258).

My mother was born in Central Tokyo in 1938, on the cusp of the Second World War. She was a gifted storyteller who shared her wartime childhood experiences with me — running home from school at the sound of the air-raid siren and seeing strafe bullets exploding dust off the road; of American soldiers entering the city with gifts of chocolate, chewing gum and stockings; of young men drinking bottles of soy sauce to avoid military conscription. She spoke rarely of the family's near starvation, perhaps finding recollections

of this period too traumatising, but would erupt in blind rage if I refused or wasted food, particularly if that food was rice. She could not bear to hear the call of the roasted sweet potato seller as he wheeled his charcoal burner past our Tokyo home, since sweet potatoes were all she had eaten for a prolonged period during the war. She would tell me the mere thought of them made her gag.

She also spoke frequently of the cruelty of her father.

Along with my mother's stories, Hayao Miyazaki's animated film, *Grave of the Fireflies*, a tragic story of unrelenting misery, was also a great influence on the creative component of this thesis. My mother had asked me to watch it so I could understand her childhood experience of the war. Setsuko, who along with her older brother is one of the main characters in the film, is the same age my mother had been during the war, and looks much as my mother had done at that age, as I see from a rare photograph I have of her from those years.

Another source of inspiration for the Japanese sections of narrative was the long-running series on the Japanese television channel NHK, *Oshin*, which follows the trials and tribulations of a woman born into the impoverished family of a tenant rice farmer in Northern Japan. She experiences the Allied bombing raid of Tokyo and the ensuing firestorm on the night of the 10th March 1945 (McNeill, 1), and later, the privations, propaganda and suffocating social pressures that engendered an environment of paranoia where it was deemed unacceptable to voice doubts about the war, even within the privacy of one's home. Its tone is one that is anti-war and humanitarian.

As the youngest daughter of a poverty-stricken tenant farmer family, Oshin is seen as the greatest burden and of least "use" to the family, and is sold into cruel servitude at the age of seven. My mother, in contrast, was born into a relatively affluent merchant family, but as the youngest daughter, occupied a similar position in the familial hierarchy. While not sold into servitude, her role was to serve her own family until the time came for her to marry, whereupon she was expected to serve the family of her husband.

To give as accurate a reflection as possible of the atmosphere and circumstances of wartime Tokyo, I drew on a number of seminal texts written on Japan and the war, such as that by John W. Dower on Japan in the post-war years. I should note here that my research was limited to texts written or translated into English. While I speak fluent Japanese and read *hiragana* and *katakana,* the basic phonetic Japanese scripts, my level of knowledge of the more complex *kanji* characters is not sufficient to allow the reading of Japanese historical or academic texts. I am aware that works written in English, on which I have relied for research into wartime Japan, are likely to give a more occidental view of the war, and the role Japan played within it. For the purposes of my creative work, therefore, I relied most heavily on memories of anecdotes related to me by my mother, my grandmother, my mother's friends, and my extended Japanese family.

I travelled to Okinawa, a series of islands to the south of the main Japanese island of Honshu, to conduct research for the scenes in "The Things She Owned" which are set there. My visit to the main island of Okinawa during the writing of the creative work was crucial not only for an accurate portrayal of location, but also to my understanding of the role these islands played during the war and to the suffering of its people at the hands of both the Yamato Japanese government and the American military during that time, something that continues, in varying degrees, to this day.

There is no known or immediate family connection to Okinawa, although my maternal grandmother was born and raised in Kyūshū, the southernmost islands of Yamato Japan and closest to Okinawa, and had some of the facial features typical of Okinawan women. My reasons for choosing Okinawa as a setting in my creative work include its liminality; it is part of Japan, yet not of it; Okinawan people embody a culture distinct from that of the Yamato heartlands (Kerr, 15). It is a marginalised area for reasons of geography and politics and has the largest concentration of American military bases relative to landmass within the nation of Japan (Molasky and Rabson, 12). It has a distinctly female aspect to its spiritual culture (Sered, 129) and there is much mystery, from an outsider's point of view, in the ancient

shamanistic and pantheistic culture of the islands. As a visitor, I sensed there was something of the gateway about these islands, not only geographically, but spiritually. Okinawa appealed to me as a place of transition.

My maternal grandfather came from a long line of merchants in Tokyo. My mother was one of three children, and as in most traditional Japanese homes in the heart of the city, shared limited space with her siblings. Everything had its place, and everything was precious. In the centre of the home, in its specially built alcove, was the *butsudan,* the Buddhist shrine on which the family's ancestral tablets were placed, and at which incense, food, and prayers are offered. This, and the family's most prized possessions, were packed into earthenware jars and buried in the ground to keep them safe from Allied bombs during the war, and having survived, became ever more precious. Material things, along with food, were scarce during the war, and those seen to have an abundance of such things were viewed as unpatriotic and greedy, insensitive to the plight of young men sent to fight in the war, or corrupt, suspected of dealings on the black market. In the post-war years of American occupation, Japan, suffering from hyperinflation, suffered extreme shortages of every kind, from food, to paper, to textiles, to *tatami* straw matting (Dower, 116).

Valuing food and material goods and giving importance to the reusing and mending of things is common amongst those who have experienced deprivation, particularly during the war. My mother was no exception and, later in life, she had a tendency to hoard food and material goods. She was orderly and precise in the way she kept every scrap of paper or piece of string in case it came in useful, and stored left-over food in the fridge — often until it was past its best — since she could not bear to throw food away. Over the course of her married life, a period of twenty-six years, she moved house nine times, between five different countries. The things she packed and took with her from place to place were her one constant, her stability, and many of these things carried specific memories for her, some of which she would share with me. As the youngest daughter of a traditional Japanese family, however, it was not her place to inherit anything from her parents' home, since it was her

older brother, the heir and future head of the family, who had the right to take it over, along with all its material contents. My mother did, however, treasure things bought for her by her mother, especially those associated with cooking and eating — porcelain cups, earthenware bowls, enamel containers. I have in turn inherited some of these kitchen items and use them still. Her mother — my grandmother — also died relatively young, when my mother was about forty-six. My mother felt the loss deeply.

My mother continued to value the things she owned until the end of her life; gradually accumulating more as she moved from one end of the world to the other, from Japan to Hong Kong, to Singapore, back to Tokyo, to London, to France, and her final move back to London before her death. As she was estranged from my father when she died, her belongings passed to me, her only child.

After my mother's death, my perception of the spaces I inhabited and the things within it seemed forever altered and I was thrown into confusion. Whatever comforts the small familiarities afforded me by my itinerant life and its attendant cargo of possessions evaporated. The things my mother had owned, now mine, arrived in my home, the sight of these objects triggering painful feelings. I had, and still have, a lacquer memorial tablet and small urn in a casket on a replica antique Korean cabinet, objects I have given Erika. I inherited the Wedgewood tea set, the gold heart padlock necklace, birth certificate and crystal Bodhisattva. Like Erika, I had my mother's kitchen knife, my mother's and my own rice bowls, exactly as described in "The Things She Owned" —and a plastic *onigiri* rice ball box. These last few things were the only objects that I could bear using in everyday life. I kept most of the other things packed away in boxes, out of sight. While I could not bring myself to discard these objects, I could not deal with them either.

My attachment to objects, and my enduring curiosity about them, started in childhood. As I grew up through the late 1960s, early 1970s and through to the 1980s, the burgeoning post-war economy of Japan manifested in an explosion of consumerism (Gordon, 29). The rise of Sanryō products designed to appeal especially to young girls — amongst

them those bearing the "Hello Kitty" brand, still popular to this day —gave me, and other girls my age, something to covet. We lived to trade Sanryō goodies with one another at school, swapping things become dulled by ownership with novel, thrilling ones: figurines, miniature boxes, lip salves, pencil boxes, handkerchiefs, comb-and-mirror sets, notebooks.

When I was sent at eleven to an austere northern English boarding school, my parents moved simultaneously from Japan to Hong Kong, severing my ties with everything I knew. A way to maintain a link to a familiar past in what had become a rather threatening new world, was through the few objects I was to keep from my Tokyo childhood.

At boarding school, each pupil was given a 'uniform list', which determined what was to be packed in her trunk for the school term. It included the required quantities of different items of school uniform, but also a list of possessions each schoolgirl was permitted to have; toothbrush, drinking cup, hockey stick, bath towel, washing flannel, one soft toy. The house matron checked each girl's trunk on arrival at the start of term, and anything that was not on the list was confiscated until thirteen weeks later, when it was returned at the end of term. Not realising the strictness of these rules, I had some home comforts confiscated at the start of my first term. Not having the familiar things from my childhood home in Tokyo around me at school — nor my parents, friends, family, food, language or environment — provoked a painful sense of loss and estrangement, and helped to trigger my fixation with things.

I did not return to my old home in Tokyo for my first school holidays, but to a new one I'd never seen before, in a country I didn't know: Hong Kong. My parents had moved there shortly after I was sent to school. My mother had, in that move, discarded most of my possessions: my bed with its red chenille bedspread, my desk, my yellow clock in the shape of a monkey, my bedside table and Holly Hobby lamp — as well as most of my books, toys and clothes. I slept in a room containing two beds, which previously had been in the guest bedroom of my old home. Although I never asked her the reason for her actions, I suspect that, along with the practical need to reduce the quantity of things that had to be transported from one country to another, my mother may have thrown away my things so as not to be

reminded of the absence of her only child. I did not know this purging of my possessions was to happen. Along with the disconnection from my native country, my home, my family and friends, this severance from familiar and treasured things escalated my fixation with objects into an obsession, and later, led to a tendency to hoard.

By my fifth year at boarding school I was permitted more personal items. I had graduated from a hospital-ward-like dormitory shared with twenty-six girls to having my own room, albeit a small one. I took full advantage, decorating every inch of the space with figurines, pictures and trinkets, a few of which were from my old life in Tokyo but most of which I had collected from my native city during subsequent visits. It was during this time that I wrote about this room. I still have this short piece of prose, dated "Summer '83". Written with the effusiveness typical of a fifteen year old about the talismanic and totemic objects I had arranged in my room, it contains the following lines:

> 'Junk' is an insensitive word — my sentimental trivialities. Without my material nothings I would float off gently into the blue sky, with nothing to hold me down… I could stay within this comfortable womb forever…no inch of space wasted, every corner has my mark of identity. [1]

Released from the restrictions of space imposed by school, and later by university life, I entered adulthood encumbered by too many things. Each house move was a torturous affair, my inability to get rid of superfluous possessions causing great inconvenience. I had a pathological anxiety about throwing things out. Margaret Gibson, in her study of the possessions of the dead, writes: "Discarding personal and household items is part of the trajectory of self-identity and embodiment" (Gibson, *Objects of the Dead,* 14) and cites Hawkins and Muecke: "Getting rid of things is one of our most quotidian experiences of loss. Expelling and discarding is more than a biological necessity — it is fundamental to the ordering of the self" (14).

When my father left my parents' marriage, he asked me to help my mother pack what she wanted to take from the house they had shared in France. Since he had left her for someone else, my mother, in her rage, insisted we take everything that held any memories of our family in happier times. There were a lot of things. Bringing everything back with us to London and trying to fit it all into a greatly reduced space was overwhelming for both of us. I took some of these things into my own home, both of us reluctant to get rid of them entirely. After my mother died, I took the remainder of these objects into my home and struggled to deal with them all. In the twenty years since her death, I have managed to process the majority of these things, giving them away, selling or discarding them, but there are certain objects which I have found almost impossible to deal with. Most of these objects are those that appear in "The Things She Owned".

In early versions of the manuscript — then with the working title "Consuming Ayako" — the urn, the dusty Korean chest, the rice bowls and Wedgewood tea set appeared within the narrative, but there was no particular focus on objects at this point, nor did I consider it a subject warranting exploration in this exegesis. I had not yet dreamed up the ekphrastic passages as thresholds between Michiko's and Erika's narratives.

Roughly twenty thousand words in to the work, I found myself unable to write further. Each time I attempted to make progress, I became nauseated and anxious. I believe the reason for this paralysis lay behind the initial thoughts I had on how to approach the exegesis — informed largely by the research proposal I prepared in my first six months of candidature — and how those thoughts affected my creative work. What remobilised progress is what eventually came to be examined in this exegesis: giving attention to the way objects play different roles in fictional narratives of grief and loss.

Explorations of hybrid identity were initially a central focus for both the major and critical works of this thesis. In my research proposal, I stated my intention to situate the concept of cultural liminality and the 'lone hybrid' — that is, an individual not part of a larger 'hybrid' community — within the general fields of hybridity theory and orientalist attitudes.

Erika is, like me, half Japanese. Like me, she had an ambivalent relationship with her war-damaged mother — despite the powerful love she feels for her — with her cross-cultural identity and with Imperialist Japanese history, particularly in relation to the brutality of the Japanese military forces during the Second World War. In my early drafts of the novel I portrayed Erika as melancholic, experiencing life from the margins due to her conflicted dual cultural identity, something with which I closely identify. However, this focus was unable to sustain my writing. I felt there was something more powerful at work which needed to be addressed.

When my mother died, the connection I had to my Japanese self was broken. When I was a small child, her presence beside me ensured people saw the Japanese half of my identity. I was born looking white, though with the eye and hair colouring characteristic of those with mixed Japanese and white European heritage. Her interactions with me identified her as my mother, and people understood that I was half-Japanese. Later, once I had become an adult, people often mistook her for a friend and were astonished whenever they discovered we were mother and daughter. Away from her presence, my half-Japanese identity was hardly apparent unless I offered up the information myself. It made me feel protective about the half of my identity that had formed first, through my experience of growing up in Tokyo amongst my extended Japanese family, as a young child who spoke only Japanese for her first few years of life. It engendered a deep need to feel understood as a half-Japanese, half-English identity. But there was no *hafu*[2] community around me in England, and until the discovery of a *Hafu-Japanese* Facebook group in 2012, there was no other with whom to share this sense of liminality, for I could neither identify with wholly English nor wholly Japanese friends.

While still a child, and then a young adult transplanted to Europe, I was able to keep this Japanese side of myself alive by remaining in my mother's orbit. Although she had been a tough mother when I was a child: strict, prone to unpredictable moods and intense rages, with a tendency towards the sadistic behaviour she herself had experienced at the hands of her

own father — I should note here that my mother was not as monstrously selfish, damaged or cruel as Michiko — we formed a strong bond after I had been sent away to boarding school, and even more so once I was a young adult. She continued to relate stories from her earlier life with me, and we shared our memories of Tokyo. We spoke Japanese with one another, and devised a private Anglo-Japanese vocabulary only the two of us understood. After I was sent to boarding school, the Japanese objects I was eventually permitted to take acted as cultural anchors, as well as objects of comfort and familiarity in strange surroundings. They helped to hold together an increasingly fragile sense of cultural identity that threatened to disintegrate under the weight of the restrictions of a 1970s English boarding school, one that had rarely seen racially-mixed children in its ranks of students. This looming sense of disintegration became even more urgent following the death of my mother.

As I focussed more on the idea of the lone hybrid, my creative work began to be driven by my exegetical reading. Looking at 'lone hybrid' representation in literature and writing in relation to my own work meant the focus on my personal life became more intense. As the narrative grew uncomfortably close to my own experiences, and particularly to the way Erika was dealing — or not dealing with — her mother's death, the narrative trajectory began to impinge on my own protective, and at that point, subconscious, mechanisms, and it led, ultimately, to creative paralysis.

I discarded what I had already written and began again, hoping this new direction would provide me with a new focus for my exegesis. There was little in what I had read about hybridity theory that accurately reflected Erika's and my experiences, and my online interactions and eventual meeting with twelve members of the *Hafu*-Japanese Facebook group while researching for my novel in Japan confirmed to me that in focussing on lone hybridity I was presenting myself with an impossible task. As we shared a meal and a few drinks in a Tokyo *izakaya*[3], we knew we all had our 'half-Japaneseness' in common, but our respective experiences of *hafu*-ness were extremely varied. These variations depended on myriad factors: which parent was Japanese; the nationality of the other parent; whether one had

grown up in Japan or outside it; whether one had siblings; whether one spoke Japanese; whether one had gone to a Japanese or non-Japanese school; which country one currently lived in and whether one had lived in Japan at all; on gender; on age; on whether one lived in city or country; on whether one had married a Japanese, non-Japanese person, or even another half-Japanese person — the list of factors was endless, and there was little that unified us beside our single commonality — that of being half-Japanese. I no longer felt my 'lone hybrid' ideas were workable for an exegesis. I waited to see if my creative work would reveal a new exegetical idea to me.

Around this time I attended a Vipassana meditation course. These courses, conducted free of charge around the world, last for ten days. During this time, participants are not permitted to talk, read, write, or make eye contact, but are guided through up to eleven hours of silent meditation each day. It is designed to gain discipline over the mind, and to show how attachment leads to suffering. It is taught purely as a Buddhist technique of meditation, without the trappings of anything akin to religious practice.

This process freed me from the convolutions of emotion that had bound me in my creative work, and upon my return from the course, after an initial period where I completely lost the desire to write, I began to work prolifically and quickly. Over the next three years, I attended a further three courses, and each time, I made further progress with my creative work as I learned to write in a more free-flowing style, unencumbered by over-analysis. In Chapter Two, I will discuss further how this practice also helped to shape my ideas for this exegesis.

Elated by the positive impact meditation had on my writing, I explored the idea of the role meditative practice played in the creative process, thinking this might form a keystone to a new direction for this exegesis. The meditation gave me an acute awareness at times, however, of my subconscious mind at work: I began to realise how difficult it was to deal with the subject of maternal loss and marginalised cultural identity. I was able to observe the physicality of the emotional reaction to the subject of this loss — how I embodied my grief — and begin to understand how fundamental a rupture this had been in my psyche, both as a

daughter, and as a *hafu* child raised in Tokyo, a young adult maturing in London, and an expatriate now living in Australia, and wondered how I would ever be able to write about it without grinding, once again, to a halt.

It was around this time that I began yearning to return to work on a creative side project begun many years before beginning my PhD candidature: a collection of non-fiction prose pieces entitled “The Things My Mother Owned”. My compulsion to work on this, rather than the creative manuscript during this period of my doctoral work, seemed to me more than a matter of simple procrastination, and I discussed this with my supervisor, Sue Hosking. Each of these prose poems was prefaced by an ekphrastic description of objects once owned by my mother, much like those printed on cards accompanying museum exhibits. Like the exhibition curated by the British Museum entitled “A History of the World Through 1000 Objects”, I was curating a history of my mother through a dozen objects. Using these objects as lifebuoys, I was able to navigate my way through the stormy seas of unresolved grief, and tell my mother’s story, my relationship to her, and to her death in an indirect and less painful way. The first of these prose poems, written in 2002, was called “A Crystal Bodhisattva”, and in writing it, I was surprised at how much easier it was to return to one of the most difficult scenes of my life, that of my mother’s death, by approaching the subject sideways, through a meticulous description of an object, the crystal bodhisattva in my possession. The piece reads as follows:

> It’s a quartz crystal Bodhisattva, simply etched with abbreviated features. Roughly the same size and shape as my thumb, it has a little glass bubble of a head with a tiny ear on either side, and curved dashes, as if left by a thumbnail, translating into a gentle mouth and closed smiling eyes beneath yielding brows. Such light marks make a sweet, childlike expression. The body is a softened cylinder, with five lines etched for a robe, and the arms are left to the imagination.

> Cold, clear and hard, like glass or ice, it carries no trace of place or mark of time. It takes on the colour of whatever is near, and warms to the blood when held for long enough in the palm of the hand, into which it snugly fits.
>
> There was once a time when it was constantly warm, perfectly hidden in the palm of my sweating hand. Only it and I knew it was there, hidden for some weeks. When I no longer cared what Zen voodoo it revealed to business-like English doctors, I took it out of my hand and placed it on her unconscious breast, where, taking on the blue of the woollen blanket it lay upon, it rolled gently with the rise and fall of her slowing breath, growing cold in sympathy with her, its face mirroring hers.
>
> I thought it might carry the warmth of my hand for her, as she travelled that November morning to a cold place, away from the quiet room of sighing machinery. I felt her leave, watched over by her little Buddhist sentinel, flying away liberated, taking her own and my birthright back home to Tokyo where she began, and where she began me.
>
> In my London room the little crystal Bodhisattva stands, with its enigmatic smile, unchanged and unmarked. It is cold and transparent except for its light covering of dust. I don't look at it much.

Once the decision to incorporate the idea of these prose poems was made, I realised that many objects of significance were already embedded within the narrative of the creative work on which I was working. Deciding to focus on these objects provided the final impetus I needed to complete the first full draft of the creative work. It also gave rise to a new title for the novel: "The Things She Owned". The crystal Bodhisattva described above appears on page 43 of the creative work, though it does not have its own ekphrastic introduction. Perhaps this is because it lies at the epicentre of the story of my mother's death; the place of rupture and the core of the grief that planted the seed for the creative component of this thesis, and

because in writing the prose poem, I had already touched upon the memories of this painful moment in my life that had remained safely put aside — packed away like the objects I associated with her, and her death — until that moment. That the death of Michiko, and her relationship to Erika, differs profoundly to that of my own mother, and my own relationship to her, might be another factor in avoiding too great a focus on the Boddhisattva in my creative work. It was a real object that bore witness to a real event, whereas the other objects "The Things She Owned", all but two of them real, formed the core around which a fictionalised work was woven.

By bringing certain of these objects to the fore in a fictionalised way — literally and metaphorically unpacking those that belonged to my mother — I was able to cast a spotlight on them without having directly to confront the complexity of feelings that arose in me whenever I contemplated them in 'real life'.

The idea for "The Things She Owned" first arose while cleaning my London flat back in 2002. I was 'zoning out' as one often does when concentrating on simple, practical tasks. An idea popped uninvited into my head as I vacuumed my London apartment: a character deals with unresolved feelings surrounding the death of her mother — with whom she had an ambivalent relationship — by eating her ashes. I was at once repelled and compelled by the thought.

At the time I was between jobs, and longing to write, but was blocked. I had produced a few short stories, but had a suspicion they were somewhat contrived. This was confirmed by feedback from a writer whose opinion I trusted[4], and who also happened to be a psychoanalyst. She quizzed me about my background and persuaded me to talk about my mother. She told me, emphatically, that the only way to get over my block and find an authentic voice was to write about my mother, about my love for her, as well as my ambivalent feelings towards her, and about my unresolved grief over her untimely death. It was a story, she said, that had to be told. I remember my visceral reaction to her words, my stomach twisting itself into a knot. All I could do was agree that yes, she may be right. The

thought of doing anything about it filled me with unease. While my memory is hazy, I suspect my moment of inspiration while cleaning the house came not long after this conversation, but it was only once I began work on this thesis, more than a decade later, that I was finally able to tell the story, the one that 'had to be told'. While "The Things She Owned" is emphatically not autobiographical — in that the character of Michiko, as mentioned previously, is very different in nature to my mother, and that the character of Erika is very different to my own, and the incidents occurring within the work entirely fictional — the feelings contained within it are very much what could be called the 'real' in fiction. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Two years ago, I moved house. As always, this necessitated a re-evaluation of the objects in my possession, and while my practice of meditation made it easier to discard objects to which I had been resolutely attached previously, it appealed once again to the interest I had always felt about objects, particularly those in one's possession. It also, as it had done with each one of the fifteen times I have moved house in my adult life, brought back memories of earlier wranglings with possessions which are so much a part of that process. It always reminded me how very attached I had been to objects, growing up, and writing this exegesis made me question why this might be.

When migrating from London to Adelaide in 2008, I was forced to examine each of my possessions and choose whether or not they were worth the expense of filling a shipping container to Australia. Unpacking these objects some thirteen years after my mother's death lent them a peculiar aura of newness-with-nostalgia. I could now look over them with a somewhat dispassionate eye, as if I were a curator preparing them for an exhibition. They had initially been associated with my mother's living days, had been given context by the uses she had for them in her daily life; and then in the aftermath of her death, became unbearable to look at, reminding me as they did of her absence. Only after a decade of keeping these objects hidden away, or using them in day-to-day life, was I able to appreciate them, transmogrified as they were from familiar signifiers of grief into less fraught objects. In

doing so, it also became evident that they had kept contained within them unacceptable feelings I harboured from the time of my mother's death. By looking at them again, I was reminded of those feelings from that time, but was able to observe the feelings through the distance afforded by the passing of the years.

Previously hidden objects, when brought into the light, transformed their meaning; acquired new values and a new life. They seemed more vivid. Their patina of grief diminished enough for me to be able to discard some of them to make way for a new life in Australia. There was a sense that these things had kept, safely locked away inside them, the intensity of the grief experienced over a decade before. They became, and still are, vessels of containment for feelings too difficult to process, but are accessible at any time courage allows more considered contemplation. Over time, these objects have had their meanings and associations transformed, while remaining, materially, exactly the same. While solid, the objects' meanings are mutable. Rendering these objects in words through ekphrastic descriptions makes them seem more concrete, while allowing a distance that encourages an objective perception of whatever meaning may have lain behind them at a fixed moment. It serves as a kind of frame, that, even with the distance created by putting them up on a pedestal, behind glass, or into a vitrine, this very act creates a particular focus by putting them under a spotlight, by turning them — however banal the origin of the object — into a work of art that asks to be examined and pondered over. In their ekphrastic descriptions, they occupy temporal spaces of their own, located nowhere except in the contemplation of the observer, the reader.

Unpacking my mother's things long after her death and experiencing a shift in my perception of them, in some ways, represented hope to me, and a sign of having moved on. However, there remained certain objects I was unable to let go, despite not having any use for some of them in my daily life. These were the things that, one by one, I began to make concrete through words, through the prose poems of "The Things My Other Owned",

allowing me to tell my mother's story which, until that point, had been too difficult to approach.

Entrenching this mild fixation with objects was my initial academic path: art history and visual theory. My studies encompassed objects as well as paintings, and studying the surrealist movement, as well as the theories of John Berger, Roland Barthes and others in my formative years, had set up a long-standing curiosity about the dynamics between the artist, the viewer and the object. Marcel Duchamp turned a found object, a discarded *pissoir,* into a work of art called *Fountain,* simply by declaring it to be one, and putting it on display. Looking at this object in Tate Britain, where it was displayed at the time, triggered many questions in me: what makes a thing a work of art? What is the artist trying to say when they present an object in this way? It interested me, how something so everyday and banal, and otherwise barely appreciated, became an object of aesthetic interest when 'presented' as a work of art.

This exegesis, then, is an examination of my motivations behind the 'presentation' of objects in my possession, rendered into ekphrasised works of verbal 'art', and how this treatment of objects compares to those in other fictional grief narratives.

Chapter 2. The Things Behind The Things

In this chapter, I intend to examine the practices and theories that have influenced both components of this thesis.

Meditation and detachment

Regarding my practice, the creative component of this thesis could only progress once I had achieved a certain level of detachment as the writer, in order to circumvent obstacles set in place by over-analysis or triggered emotion. This was made possible by four Vipassana meditation retreats over the course of the three years of writing "The Things She Owned". As mentioned in Chapter 1, the practice involves up to eleven hours of sitting meditation conducted in complete silence throughout the course of eleven days, and is taught purely as a technique that rejects any intellectualisation of the practice. In its pure form, the meditation builds the mental discipline to observe, in a detached manner, any physical, mental or emotional feeling that arises during a sitting, during which one is asked carefully to scan the body in its entirety from head to toes and back again. Over so many hours of sitting, and so many days with limited external input and distraction, considerable physical, emotional and mental pain is experienced. It is the detached observation of this pain while scanning the body, the care taken not to react in any mental or physical way to the pain, that — in my experience and that of other Vipassana meditators — curiously causes the pain to dissipate and vanish. In essence, the technique teaches the lesson of non-attachment, in that it posits that all feelings and emotions contained within the body, felt as visceral sensations — indeed, the body itself — are ephemeral and fleeting, and that therefore, any attachment to such temporary sensations is not only senseless, but potentially damaging to the health and happiness of a person, and those that surround them (Hart, 45-46). By learning to disengage from the human propensity to react to the visceral sensations that immediately precede

emotions that rapidly follow (the rush of heat to the head and the pounding of the heart before rage erupts, the heavy feeling in the pit of the stomach before an attack of anxiety, or the tightening in the chest before bursting into tears are examples), one can begin a process of mental and physical liberation. In some ways, Vipassana meditation could be seen as a sort of rehearsal for death, since repeated practice of it invites the experience of nothingness, a liberation from suffering and a sense of mental and physical dissolution, a stage called *bhanga* (Hart, 122).

After my first Vipassana course, I discovered a curious side-effect of the meditation: my desire to write disappeared. This was short-lived, however. The moment the absence of the compulsion I had felt since childhood began to alarm me, the desire to write quickly returned, and with it, a new, easier feeling of flow. The timely award of a Varuna Residential Fellowship shortly afterwards allowed me to write for a fortnight in the Blue Mountains without interruption. Writing in this free way, without planning or analysis, I believe I allowed my subconscious motivations to shape my work. By examining how these subconscious motivations seem to manifest in my work — the completion of the manuscript allowing a more objective analysis of the way in which I had used the objects originally intended for the collection of prose poems, "The Things My Mother Owned" — I was able to begin laying the foundation of this exegesis.

Contemplating objects

While it may be commonplace to talk of writing as therapy, there is no doubt that in writing "The Things She Owned", and by weaving a new fiction around objects of emotional significance that I actually owned, I was able to re-connect with difficult memories and feelings. It made me curious about the power of objects to contain, or perhaps reflect, the emotions of those that possess and observe them, especially within the context of grief and loss; how they can both transform and be transformative, and how objects, and descriptions of objects, can be used in works of fiction to portray a narrative which presents the way a

character deals with — or does not deal with — the loss of someone loved, and beyond that, to a contemplation of their own mortality. I began to think of objects I had encountered in galleries, museums, churches and temples; of fossils and relics, of fetishes and talismans. In the Vipassana discourses, the teacher observes how an abject object can become a relic or talisman, depending on the context in which it is seen (Goenka, 14). Strands of hair detached from the head and lying in a sink are likely to inspire disgust. And yet, that same hair, from a beloved — especially if that beloved is absent — can become a relic, an object of adoration and potent symbol of love. The fingernails of a saint contained in a golden reliquary may inspire divine thoughts and worship, while those same fingernails strewn about a dinner table would mean little to the observer except a certain lack of hygiene and consideration, and quite probably inspire revulsion.

The objects in "The Things She Owned" and in Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved* function as props in the drama of a struggle to reconstruct a new, or changed identity that allows a bereaved character to function in a world forever altered by their loss, a world in which mortality has become an ever-present reminder. Katrin Den Elzen's study of grief theory in relation to narrative theory with respect to the identity reconstruction of the bereaved lays out the different stages of identity reconstruction, told through metaphor, within grief memoir narratives. Applying Arthur Frank's schema to identity reconstruction in illness narratives to grief narratives, she outlines the stages of chaos, restitution and quest (Den Elzen, 4). In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how these correlate with objects placed strategically within my own and others' fictional grief narratives, and how those objects reflect different stages of identity reconstruction following bereavement.

Contained within the very neutrality and material 'thingness' of these objects is something perhaps too complex to describe in words: a feeling of intense loss and melancholy. They contain intimations of our own mortality, of nothingness. In his examination of the melancholy in objects, Schwenger quotes Ponge, who ruminates: "*underneath* is what I am concerned with…[which]…is only death" (29). There is a Japanese

term, *mono no aware,* that is loosely translated as the 'pathos of things', referring to the feeling raised in the one who perceives an object, of the transient nature of the thing, and thus, a reminder of their own impermanence. The poetic melancholy of *mono no aware* has inspired many a *haiku,* the impermanence suggesting a melancholic beauty. It has its roots in the acceptance of impermanence which lies at the heart of Buddhism.

In Joshua Glenn's and Carol Hayes' *Taking Things Seriously,* an intriguing catalogue of significant objects assigned particular meanings by their owners, the novelist Lydia Millet describes an object embodying this *mono no aware* quite literally. It is a plastic toy found at a flea market, a bloodhound with a large, drooping face with a tear dropping from one eye, which Millet describes as having an

> utter mournfulness…like the purest, highest note of a great aria. Is it not in the artistic expression of grief that we find our most sublime communion? The dog had a miserable nobility… When we stood the dog on our nightstand, overlooking the bed, and saw with what solemn despair it regarded our barely competent fumblings, we tasted in our mouths the bitter ashes of our own deaths." (166)

Contextualising within the framework of Thing Theory

In a special edition of *Critical Inquiry* in 2001, Bill Brown "crystallized [sic] a new topic at the intersection of several disciplines…bringing together unexplored archaeologies with new questions about how objects produce subjects, about the phenomenology of the material everyday, about the secret life of things." (*Things*, rear cover). This he named "Thing Theory" (*Critical Inquiry*, 1).

Leaving aside the existentialist aspects of Thing Theory for the purposes of this exegesis, since its limited scope cannot do justice to the field in its entirety, what *is* valuable is Brown's analysis of the way in which objects reveal interiority through the light of attention, both in literature and in the world at large. By placing objects onto fictional

pedestals, highlighting them within a narrative, the writer invites the reader to make the transition from merely seeing a thing, to looking *into* it. Brown states that "As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture — above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things" (*Critical Inquiry*, 4). He relates this to Vladimir Nabakov's idea that the act of looking at an object, rather than just seeing it, transforms it. He cites Nabakov: "When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object" (4).

In "The Things She Owned", the ekphrasised presentations of the objects first invite the reader to look and imagine their materiality. As these same objects reappear, later, within the body of the narrative, the reader is invited to look *through* that object, to see what its interiority reveals about Erika and where she is in the process of her identity reconstruction following loss.

Brown states that it is the notion that ideas exist in things, that give things a human interiority, a void, a space (*A Sense of Things,* 7). He cites Lacan, who "discovers the Thing that names the emptiness at the center [sic] of the Real" (7). Brown talks about the need to penetrate an object, to see the idea in the thing and give it a subjectivity so that its deeper meaning can be revealed. He describes George Poulet's way of circling a statue "in order to detect some interior, to find 'the entrance to a secret chamber'" (11), and compares it to the act of reading a book — in itself an object. "…insofar as *literary* [Brown's italics] modernism structures the doubleness of objects by the inside/outside dichotomy", he writes, "it illuminates the material specificity of reading, of engaging with things — books — that have ideas in them." (9)

The objects depicted in "The Things She Owned" are real, and in my possession, but it was only by writing them into fictional meta-objects that their interiority was revealed to me. Within the one object (a book), these additional objects are highlighted for attention and

examination by both writer and reader. Through Erika's eyes, and the reader's eyes, I am able to circle these objects as Poulet does a statue, and find the secret chambers within.

It follows, then, that unless objects are processed in some way — brought into the light of attention — they lack any interiority. It could therefore be said that the act of highlighting an object in a fictional grief narrative invites the reader to examine the object's interiority, allowing a glimpse into a character's process of grieving and concomitant rebuilding of identity. In the case of "The Things She Owned", the writing of real objects into fictional meta-objects allowed me to examine my own process of identity reconstruction.

In *A Sense of Things* (2003), Brown states: "my overall aim is…to determine what literature does with objects" (16). Through the following analysis and categorisation of objects in fictional grief narratives, and the way in which fiction highlights and thereby reveals objects' interiorities, it is the intention of this exegesis to contribute further to the field of Thing Theory.

<u>Cathexic and transitional objects</u>

The ekphrastic passages introducing each of Erika's narrative segments are designed to engage the reader's attention on each item as an 'object'. At the same time, those same objects appear throughout the subsequent narrative as mere 'things' in Erika's world, things that have safely remained in the periphery of her experience, things she barely glimpses until her cousin's visit forces them out into the light of her reluctant attention. Until then, these things had remained hidden in dusty corners, or packed away in boxes — the Wedgewood tea set, the antique replica Korean chest, and Michiko's remains — or had been rendered harmless through the familiarity or banality of every day use — the *onigiri* box or the kitchen knife.

The 'things', when owned by Michiko, may have been 'objects', but the painful memories they triggered in Erika after her mother's death led to their being packed away and ignored, or turned into banal utensils. Perhaps the only 'thing' that Michiko owned may have

been her own daughter, Erika, a child she merely glimpsed in the periphery of her life, rather than focused her attention upon. The sense that the 'She' of the creative work's title could apply to Michiko as well as Erika, where the idea of the bereaved inhabiting the object of loss, one becoming the other, will be further explored further in Chapter 3. It is especially pertinent in the context of mother-child dynamics seen through a psychoanalytical lens — one instigated by Freud in his treatise, "Mourning and Melancholia", and further developed by D.W. Winnicott, who proposed the concept of the transitional object as playing a crucial role during the process of mother-child separation, and the recognition by the child of the first *not-me* (97-98). Through birth and weaning, the development of childhood independence, the child establishes its separateness from the mother and later, through the permanent separation brought about by death of the mother, or mother-figure. Gibson also refers to the concept of the transitional object as pertinent to the bereaved (*Objects of the Dead,* 34).

Gibson uses the psychoanalytic term *cathexis* to frame "the emotional life of objects and transitions of attachment and detachment to them" (*Objects of the Dead,* 32). "Cathexis," she writes, "refers to the psychic charge or emotional stimulus attached to love objects and figures of identification" (32). She cites Winnicott's reference to childhood objects "such as teddy bears, dolls and comfort blankets" as "transitional objects…invested or charged with cathexis… Like the transitional objects of childhood, the bereaved also use objects to negotiate the loss and absence of a loved one" (32). Gibson describes the way transitional objects

> buffer the anxiety of separation and bodily detachment from the mother. The objects help to fill in or cover over that psychic and existential gap which opens up within the self and between one self and another. Thus, the child not only experiences the loss of being conjoined with the mother psychically and bodily; it also experiences a sense of being split and incomplete. Transitional objects are not just mediating between 'I' and 'you', 'self' and 'other', 'here' and 'there'; they materialise while trying to 'fill in' the

> psychic experience of this gap or spacing. In other words, there is an existential dimension to transitional objects, in that they mediate nothingness. If the child negotiates the outside world and the existential anxiety of absence partly through transitional objects, it is not surprising that the grieving may also negotiate their lost object with emotional props and buffers. (197)

Objects of the dead, objects of death

Thing Theory encompasses a wide spectrum of approaches to material culture that includes an examination of objects as commodities and desirable tokens of consumer culture. Where objects relating to the dead are concerned, however, Gibson demonstrates the inseparability of spirit and matter through stories of grief and mourning. She shows, through her research into the relationships held by the bereaved with the objects once belonging to their lost loved ones, how it

> grounds the spiritual in the material, offering an antidote to the gloss and gleam of consumer objects. It shows another face, or side, to objects that our visual commercial culture rarely shows. It is about those other objects, deeply connected to memories of self and others, that gain or lose particular meaning and value in death. This other life of objects — private, sometimes secret, and often unarticulated — is in some ways more pressing, more penetrating and more affecting that the desirable objects in magazines or behind shop-front windows that are supposed to occupy our thoughts and desires most pervasively…they also conceal the other story and meaning of objects in relation to death, mourning and memory." (*Objects of the Dead,* 11)

Gibson cites Sartre in his examination of the relationship between subject and object – the existential aspect of possession —positing that it is an

> elemental drive in the human struggle to experience itself as complete. Possession is thus fundamentally linked to consciousness of mortality and avoiding a sense of nothingness…. An object is something through which a subject projects its self in order to procure a sense of substance, and a sense of dwelling and enduring externally, beyond the body… Precisely because I am always somewhere outside of myself, as an incompleteness which makes its being known to itself by what it is not, now when I possess, I transfer myself to the object possessed. I am…nothing other than pure and simple possession, an incompleteness, and insufficiency, whose sufficiency and completion are there in that object." (Gibson, *Objects of the Dead,* 20)

In a footnote to this passage, Gibson writes how Sartre, along with Heidegger, Nietzsche, Lacan and Derrida, position this 'lack' as a relationship to death, where death completes and fulfils being — and while "religious thought and belief tend to redeem this lack, saving the subject from mortality", the insecurity of a godless existence can also lend freedom (591-592).

In this sense, possessing a significant object can at times be seen as a sort of fetish, an object which contains and manages the existential anxieties inherent in the human condition. An object of grief, therefore, reminds the possessor not only of the absence and mortality of the person who has died, but also of their own mortality.

Seeing objects as artefacts

As an undergraduate, the first half of my degree was in Chinese Studies. I examined the ancient dynasties of China through its artefacts, visiting the Museum of Taipei, the British Museum, the Victoria & Albert. Bronzes, mirrors and sculptures were used to illustrate a way of life long forgotten. Knowing, as a child raised between two cultures, that "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (Berger, 8), I pondered on how artefacts change meaning over time. And as I grew older, I noticed how my perception and interpretation of the things in my possession also changed.

The second half of my undergraduate degree was in Art History. It further crystallised my interest in paintings, sculptures, and decorative objects, and how, as artefacts, they revealed — through their interiorities — the contexts and cultures in which they were created, and their histories. It became clear, too, that the contemporary culture in which I existed created the lens through which I interpreted these artefacts, and further, I saw how my own cultural background and personal history influenced my perception. A Masters degree in Modern British Art followed, prompting an even more intensive study of visual and art theory. Together with my fascination with the transitory and subjective nature of objects' interiorities — and how those in my possession reflected a personal trajectory of identity construction and reconstruction — this long-standing interest in objects as artefacts, and my understanding about the mutable nature of seeing, is what prompted the manuscript and exegesis contained in this thesis.

<u>Dealing with the objects of the dead</u>

When my mother died, I had no siblings with whom I could share her possessions. My father and I had not been close during the years of their separation, and it did not feel right at that point to relinquish my mother's things into the household he now shared with his new partner. To my mother's sister, brother, nieces and nephew in Japan, I gave small items I knew held special memories of her for them. Otherwise, I was utterly overwhelmed not only by the sheer volume of things but by the way the sight of them triggered unbearable emotions. I unpacked all her possessions from wherever they were kept in her house and, with the landlord claiming back her apartment in a few days, I called upon her friends to take what they wanted. I could hardly bear to go through these things and decide what to do with them. Gibson writes about the disposal of possessions after the death of a loved one: "So much loss of identity, place and family history takes place in this transition. This is an added grief for many people" (*Objects of the Dead,* 34). Hardest of all to deal with were her clothes. I

packed many of them away, unable to get rid of them. Others, such as the bathrobe she wore in hospital just before her fatal surgery, I began to wear, and still wear to this day.

Margaret Gibson, in her book, *Objects of the Dead,* examines the way in which objects of the deceased pass into the possession of the bereaved, and explores the different ways in which people deal with the possessions of their loved ones. Interviewing people on the subject, she found that some took their time, holding onto every item once owned by the deceased for decades. Others wasted no time in discarding as many items as possible. She writes on this latter action:

> While getting rid of objects quickly is a response to grief, even an act of grief, it is also a way of blocking emotion and a contemplative process. The psychology behind this action may be a temporal-spatial confusion between subject and object; by getting rid of objects quickly, people think that they are moving forwards, when in fact it is they who are left behind. Making objects of the dead go away doesn't make grief go away — there is no magic wand, no 'out of sight, out of mind' solution. Furthermore, quick and early disposal of possessions can be interpreted as a type of 'acting out', in which the bereaved gain some control over a subject through their objects. By repeating the experience of loss, by making objects go away through their own volition, they indirectly and symbolically enact death and what it brings — loss and disappearance. (17)

She adds: "In grieving, as in childhood, transitional objects are a means of both holding on and letting go. This was exemplified in a number of interviews [she had conducted with her research subjects], and the objects were often those that cover the body, especially clothing" (17). In her article, "Melancholy Objects", she describes how "when the intensity of grief changes so too does the meaning, value and emotional effect of the transitional object" (288) giving as an example one of her interview subjects, who wore a sweater that belonged to her

late husband for many months until it no longer held the extremes of feeling it had embodied immediately after his death. At this point, the woman packed it away. When asked whether she would wear it again, she said she would not, despite feeling unable to discard it (288). Painful memories associated with my mother's bathrobe have faded: it has become just a bathrobe I wear every day. I am still, however, unable to discard it, despite its frayed sleeves.

What of objects associated with feelings whose intensity does not diminish through daily use or display, or through being unpacked again after the initial period of grieving has passed? They are still too significant to discard. Another of Gibson's interview subjects lost her mother to suicide, and "has kept many of her mother's possessions, including her diary, and clothes that have a strong presence of her. Indeed, this presence is so powerful that Isabel keeps them in a wooden chest, 'out of sight, out of mind'. She said: 'The feeling of her being attached to them hasn't faded over time. I think possibly this is due to the tragic nature of her death'" (*Objects of the Dead,* 122). Through the retention of these objects, and their being hidden away in a wooden chest, the unresolved — and possibly unresolvable — anguish over the loss of the interviewee's mother in such tragic circumstances, their occupation of a dark, hidden place in her home, mirrors the permanent shadow her mother's suicide has left on her life. In this sense, they are fixed, unchanging; fossil-objects of painful emotion buried away.

It seems that bringing such objects into the light again after time hidden away, making use of them, or discarding or passing them on altogether marks a moment of transition, of letting go. I see — now the creative work is complete — that framing these real objects in my possession within the fiction of "The Things She Owned" afforded me such a transition. I will explore this in more detail in the following chapter, on the different ways objects can effect a transformation on the fragmented identity of those who have suffered traumatic loss.

In my experience, the objects that were the most difficult to deal with were my mother's physical relics: the lock of her hair, her cremated bones, her clothes left draped on the back of a chair at home which still bore traces of her scent. Central to "The Things She Owned", and to my own life, are the cremated remains of a mother. How to deal with such a

relic of the dead is often fraught with complexity, and forms a central point of tension in "The Things She Owned". The idea of mortal remains as object, of the still living, also, as relics of the dead, will be also explored further in the next chapter.

The grief narrative

Such was my denial of feelings arising from the trauma of my mother's death that, at first, I did not recognise "The Things She Owned" as a grief narrative. I had instead seen it as narrative of a woman's suppressed interiority, told through a sequence of ekphrastically described objects.

Once I acknowledged the creative work as a grief narrative, the path forward for this exegesis became clearer. I saw that the objects in "The Things She Owned" were markers for the progress — or non-progress — of the reconstruction of Erika's fragmented personality following the death of her mother. It was then that I also came to a realisation — regarding other fictional narratives that I had chosen to analyse alongside my own — that they, too, had similar motifs: of objects as markers for a character's progress through the process of grieving a loss. I had chosen these narratives initially because they had at their heart a core of loss and grief, and also featured objects in the narrative, either ekphrastically, as with Michael Redhill's *Martin Sloane*, or with which grieving characters enacted particular dynamics, such as in Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*. However, I only saw how the two were connected once I understood how the placements of these objects within the narratives opened those objects' interiorities, and how those interiorities reflected whatever stage of the grieving and identity reconstruction process protagonists were undergoing.

It is generally acknowledged that there has been an upsurge of interest in grief-themed narratives (Dennis, 801; Niemeyer, 2). In recent years, Joan Didion, Helen Macdonald, Joyce Carol Oates, Antonia Fraser, Julian Barnes, and many others, have published non-fictional accounts of the death of a child, a husband, a father, a wife, a mother, continuing to evoke C.S. Lewis's meditation on grief published in 1961. Michael Dennis observes that "it appears

that we are in the midst of a large resurgence in writers' and readers' interests regarding death and grief, perhaps in response to the 9/11/2001 terrorist stacks that traumatized millions" (803). He goes on to quote Gilbert, author of *Deaths' Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve,* that "in its literary overcoming of social taboos, 'death is the new sex' (Munger, 2006)" (803).

The field of scholarship in relation to the genre of the grief narrative has been growing since the early 1990s (Dennis, 801). Frank (1995), Bregman and Thiermann (1995), Simonds and Rothman (1992), and later, Dennis (2008), Arnold (2009), Brennan (2012), Den Elzen (2015) all examine grief within fictional and non-fictional narratives of personal illness and of the death of loved ones. Dennis identifies "the grief account" (801) as published narratives of "grief, its meanings, and its inevitable mystery" (802) which relate the narrator's or protagonist's "struggles to accept, understand, assimilate, overcome, manage, or cope with grief…as are the perceptions, messages, strategies, and activities used toward these purposes" (802). He examines "the role of stories as vehicles of information and instruction for fellow citizens in the community of grieving" (802), and justifies his use of the word "account" so as to include the implication of the verb: one of "reckoning and consideration, explanation of one's conduct, indication of value or importance, and determination of outcomes" (802).

In my experience, witnessing my mother's death was as transformative as it was traumatic, and my personal grief account, that is, one of reckoning in relation to the nature of her death and the reconstruction of my identity following her loss, continued for decades after the event. Being present at the moment of her death was a stark reminder of one of the two great immutable facts of life, birth being the other. My perception of the world outside of the hospital room where she lay dying faded to irrelevance, so that when I finally emerged to find the sun still rising, the birds still singing in the trees, and people still on their way to work, the dissonance between the dead and the living was shocking. On the other side of the emotional pain of witnessing the painful death of someone I loved, was an awareness of the transience and day-to-day trivialities of life. Not long after, a friend gave birth to a daughter, reminding

me that — despite unthinkable personal trauma — life continued on. In the weeks and months to come, this awareness heightened into a strange sense of euphoria that rose and fell intermittently between bouts of grieving. Reading grief accounts such as Helen McDonald's *H is for Hawk*, even two decades after my mother's death, reflected these and other of my experiences, and mirrored my own "struggles to accept, understand, assimilate, overcome, manage, or cope with grief" (Dennis, 802). This provided comfort in the knowledge that my suffering had not been a solitary experience, and I would suggest that I am not alone in finding the reading of such a grief account a comfort.

This sense of all but the starkest facts of life — birth and death — falling away during periods of intense grieving, is echoed by the narrator of Andrew Holleran's *Grief: A Novel*:

> …grief is like Osiris; cut up in parts and thrown in the Nile. It fertilizes in ways we cannot know, the pieces of flesh bleed into every part of our lives, flooding the earth, till eventually Life appears once more (129-130).

He uses the metaphor of ancient mythology to portray the circle of life: of birth, death and regeneration. This may present a further clue to understanding the rise in popularity of grief narratives. I suggest that the effect of fast-paced digital media consumption today may contribute to a sense of life somewhat removed from the real. In a world full of uncertainties, the certainties of birth and death may, perhaps, be the only certainties we have. For readers who have not yet experienced bereavement, a grief narrative may present a 'rehearsal' for the pain they will one day experience; and for those who have lived through the experience of bereavement, it may represent the solace they seek in the commonality of grief, and provide an opportunity for the writer and reader to share "the space of the story for the other" (Frank, 18). A closer examination of why grief narratives are becoming more popular may present further opportunities for research.

For the purpose of this exegesis, it is only possible to speculate why this surge in interest has occurred. As Dennis states, the global witnessing in the media of the terror attacks of 9/11— along with the rise of communal grieving over the death of celebrities such as Princess Diana or David Bowie — may have contributed to the surge. Christine Owen, in her analysis of the object and the role of visual art in the teaching of the principle of 'Show not tell' in university-level creative writing workshops, examines the ways in which multimedia "may be influencing a greater taste in book readers for materiality, in particular via increased Gothic-style representations of embodiment" (9).

She suggests a rationale for the rise of horror in popular genre writing, which I believe may equally be applied to a rationale for the growth in popularity of the grief narratives. She cites Badley, from her analysis of the influence of multimedia on contemporary fiction, stating that it is the group of "'X-generation readers, brought up on fantasy, role-playing and computer games'…[that] look to fiction both for ideas, and for visceral effect". She goes on to repeat horror writer Stephen King's claim that horror "'is necessary…not only for people who read to think, but to those who read to feel…[and that] his writing is all about the taboo subject of death, which he wants his readers to experience as real'" (9).

Lewis, Didion and others have remarked on the compulsion they felt to write out their experience of grief after the death of someone they loved as a way of dealing with it. Following her husband's sudden death, Didion writes to "make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness…about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself" (7). C.S Lewis states that he wrote *A Grief Observed* after the death of his wife as "a defence against total collapse, a safety-valve" (59). For writers, writing about their grief, whether as memoir or fiction, would follow as a natural extension of their self-expression, and that the written text, too, is a cathexic object through which they are able to effect a transition: from inexplicable, chaotic grief, to stepping back far enough to be able to examine their loss. In her analysis of narrative

as an act of healing in grief memoir, Bernadette Brennan notes that the "crafting, narrative distance and…forensic control" of writing an account of grief, allows the writer a measure of control not possible outside the "safety of the frame of tragedy"(19).

Although "The Things She Owned" is a work of fiction, the grieving — interrupted, pathological and otherwise — are all reflections of the real, and for this writer, its writing was just as much as a therapeutic practice as it would have been had the work been a memoir. Mark Lawson's suggestion that grief memoir is "a rare mix of personal and universal — cathartic for writer and reader" (1) could equally be applied to a fictional grief narrative in which the writer has drawn upon personal experiences of grief. While "The Things She Owned" is fiction, the feelings within them are drawn very much from my own experiences.

If anything, the questions raised about the validity — or not — of grief memoir can be applied to my thoughts after writing this work. Writing grief into fiction presents similar challenges: of how to avoid sentimentality, mawkishness, self-pity and self-indulgence; of how to write about an emotion "which can be so stunning, so disorientating, as to feel like derangement" (Stonor Saunders, 1) and of how to verbalise something that is so painfully and viscerally felt. In the case of "The Things She Owned", these challenges were mitigated by incorporating objects into the narrative, as will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Melancholic Things: Fossil-Objects, Relic-Objects, Fetish-Objects and Totem-Objects

While there have been a number of studies relating to the use of metaphor and narrative structure in grief memoir to navigate the process of identity reconstruction in a bereaved writer (Dennis, 2008; Arnold, 2009; Brennan, 2012; Den Elzen, 2015), analyses of grief narratives in which objects are shown to represent different stages of the grieving, or the identity reconstruction process, are notably lacking, and I propose to explore this further in this chapter.

In his review of Joan Didion's *Blue Nights,* the critic Andrew Riemer writes: "grief is essentially mute", repeating Wittgenstein's advice to "stay silent about those things that words cannot adequately capture" (2). I share Riemer's unease, not for fear of being unable to capture the feelings of grief, but for exposing vulnerable feelings in a public way. This unease is what led to me writing a work of fiction in which only certain elements of grieving, or not-grieving, were drawn upon from life. The objects I placed in the narrative — real objects — symbolised what was real within the fiction.

Fictionalising allowed a distancing from the raw viscerality of grief; and the use of objects within the narrative allowed a further layer of insulation to protect me from that sheer rawness of feeling. My process of writing the creative work, much of it subconsciously-driven, reflects, through the selection and arrangement of the ekphrasised objects, the way in which I regarded those objects at different stages of negotiating my feelings following the loss of my mother. The way Erika deals with some of these objects within the narrative is often a reflection of the way I dealt with those same objects in reality, and I noticed for myself how my reaction and relationship to these significant objects changed over the course of the years following my mother's death. Realising this after the fact of writing increased

my understanding about my own process of identity reconstruction following the loss, and so has allowed a degree of healing.

In her book, *On Grief and Grieving,* Elizabeth Kubler-Ross reinforces the idea of the shattered identity and the need for its reconstruction following profound loss: “The more of your identity that was connected to your loved one, the harder it will be to…try to live…in a world where our loved one is missing” and that as we heal, “we start the process of reintegration, trying to put back the pieces that have been ripped away” (25). Den Elzen states that the self is shattered when “our experiences can no longer be understood within the current framework of our narrative self-understanding, leading to loss of meaning and worldview” (5).

Objects in fictional grief narratives and grief memoir act as markers for the process of identity reconstruction following profound loss. Cathexic and transitional objects could be said to help affect reintegration of identity, in that they reflect the stages of reconstruction the bereaved subject is undergoing, through the way in which the subject interacts — or does not interact — with those objects. Examining the way these objects act as markers in fictional accounts of grief reveals the intention of the writer to present a particular trajectory for the bereaved in the narrative. In my own case, examining the objects marking Erika’s trajectory reveal, perhaps, a more subconscious force at work.

Using a loose schema, I have classified the use of objects in fictional grief narratives depending on the way in which a protagonist interacts — or does not interact — with them. The intention is to highlight the different ways in which these objects — and the way they are written into the narrative — reflect the various stages of a grieving protagonist’s identity reconstruction. I group such objects under the categories of *fossil-objects*, *talisman-objects*, *fetish-objects* and *totem-objects*.

It should be noted that I do not intend for these classifications to be rigidly applied; indeed, some objects may perform dual roles, and whatever roles they play can transform rapidly from one to another, mirroring the cyclical nature of grieving and the

rapidly changing states of the bereaved. Brennan cites Lewis's "observation that in grief 'nothing stays put'. Grief is cyclic and surprising, never *chronological"*(18). Despite its relative material immutability, an object can be perceived in a multitude of changing ways by multiple observers. It holds, therefore, that an object can transform from one classification of marker to another within a narrative, to reflect the changing state of a protagonist undergoing a process of identity reconstruction after loss.

I have chosen to apply this schema to Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*, as well as to my own work, since Hustvedt's complex and multi-layered work has as its narrator a professor of art history, Leo Hertzberg. My own background in art history particularly drew me to this novel, since the narrative revolves around an art historian and his artist friend, and concerns itself largely with analyses of perception. It is also a strong example of a fictional grief account as related by its narrator, and contains objects to which the schema I propose to outline can be applied.

Leo relates his story of multiple losses retrospectively, from his perspective as an old man. The narrative winds its way through his marriage to his wife Erica, the birth of his son Matthew, his friendship with the artist Bill Wechsler and his wife Violet, and the development of his relationship with Bill's son, Mark. Leo's voice is dispassionate and analytical, befitting the voice of an intellectual and senior academic, but in the face of a succession of multiple and profound losses he finds himself unable to make sense of them. His traumatic losses begin with the sudden and accidental death of his young son during a canoeing trip at summer camp; later he becomes estranged from his wife, loses his friend Bill to illness, and becomes a victim of Mark's unstable personality. This final event is harrowingly described, and unseats him from any sense of certainty he may have had about his way of seeing the world. He becomes unable to analyse, and ultimately — symbolically — unable to see, due to macular degeneration. The narrative is rich with examples of objects used to reflect grief, or not-grieving, and is full of insightful observations about the nature of perception, of seeing and meanings in art, objects and people.

Fossil-objects

Objects that I categorise as fossil-objects are those that represent immutability, of emotions frozen and locked in to the past, and in the case of objects of death, containers for the stalled, fossilised grief of the protagonist. Fossil-objects fall under the category of narrative representing Frank's 'chaos' aspect of identity reconstruction following illness — or as Den Elzen states, following profound loss (4). The objects represent a lack of movement out the state of confusion, the stage where the bereaved feels there is no way out of their grief, and as such, represents stasis. This stasis can be represented as numbness and incomprehension. In *What I Loved,* Leo's emotional paralysis and numbness is illustrated by his incomprehension at his wife's grieving over their young son's death, and his inability to cry. Numb and unable to grieve or comprehend, Leo angrily watches his wife Erica enter fully into hers.

> …Erica turned to me. 'You don't cry, Leo. You haven't cried at all, not once.'
>
> I looked at Erica's red eyes, her wet nose and trembling mouth. She repulsed me. 'No.' I said. 'I haven't.' She heard the supressed rage in my voice and her mouth dropped open. I turned around and stalked into the hallway. I walked into Matthew's room and stood by his bed. Then I put my fist through the wall. The Sheetrock buckled under the blow and pain shot through my hand. The pain felt good — no, more than good. For an instant, I felt intense soaring relief, but it didn't last. (143)

His rage and his pain from punching his son's bedroom wall temporarily relieve his numbness, but he still remains unable to mourn.

In "The Things She Owned", Erika is also numb. Despite a number of years having passed since her mother's death, her grieving process is in a stalled state. She keeps to a manic work schedule, and the only suggestion of suppressed emotion is her reluctance to get

into the water on a day visit to the seaside with her friends and work colleagues. While Leo cannot comprehend why he cannot comprehend; Erika simply does not want to look, or see.

> Only the dark antique Korean cabinet, topped with its sombre arrangement of objects, stood neglected in its alcove. It was furry with a thick layer of grey dust. Erika hadn't cleaned it. She hadn't cleaned it in years. (11)

Erika is unable to rid herself of her mother's things, her subconscious mind recognising there is much that has yet to be dealt with. Erika's treatment of her mother's objects could also be said to provide, at first, a layer of protection against that same raw feeling she is fighting not to feel. Hiding the objects she cannot look at and which she cannot discard in the Korean chest that houses her mother's bones, cleaning everything in her house except for the alcove in which it sits, she remains in an interrupted state of mourning, the objects that once belonged to her mother remaining fossilised, packed away, representing her stasis, her frozen state of grief.

At first, Leo goes into his son's room only to

> touch his things… I never picked up anything. I let my fingers move over his rock collection. I touched his T-shirts in his drawer. I laid my hands on his backpack, still stuffed with dirty clothes from camp. I felt his unmade bed. We didn't make the bed all summer, and we didn't move a single object in his room. (138)

Like Leo, Erika is in an arrested state of grief; that for one reason or another, she is emotionally paralysed, the mourning process somehow interrupted, resulting in a pathology of grief. This state evokes Isabel, from Gibson's study in *Objects of the Dead,* who keeps her

mother's diaries and clothes in a wooden chest, "out of sight, out of mind", following her suicide (122).

Relic-objects

Relic-objects could be considered in a similar category to fossil-objects, in that they also represent a kind of emotional stasis. However, there is a need for the bereaved protagonist to make use of such objects for comfort, for familiarity or for adoration, in contrast to the fossil-object, which contains memories too painful to be addressed and must be untouched and kept out of sight for fear of disturbing unwanted feelings. Relic-objects serve to remind the bereaved of the one that was lost, and what they represented.

Leo's profession as an academic equips him initially with the language and capacity to analyse himself, others and what he sees, and contributes insightful comments on the nature of objects and of seeing, as befits an academic and critic of the visual arts. Early in the novel, Leo's closest friend, the artist Bill Wechsler, creates a series of artworks following the death of his father, with whom he had an ambivalent relationship. These are drawings of his father, upon which he mounts his "keys and papers and debris". (36)

His observations on this exhibition carry within them a premonition of Leo's future losses, the losses which he will find himself unable to analyse, out of which he will find himself unable to make sense:

> …what fascinated spectators was the material Bill had applied over this initial image, which partly obscured it — the letters, photographs, postcards, business memos, receipts, motel keys, movie ticket stubs, aspirins, condoms — until each work became a thick palimpsest of legible and illegible writing, as well as a medley of the various small objects that fill junk drawers in almost any household… Despite these momentary insights into a life, the canvases and their materials had an abstract quality to them, an ultimate blankness that conveyed the strangeness of mortality itself, a

sense that even if every scrap of a life were saved, thrown into a giant mound and then carefully sifted to extract all possible meaning, it would not add up to a life. (45-46)

Leo notes that the works are covered by Plexiglass, turning the canvases "into memorials. Without it, the objects and papers would have been accessible, but sealed behind that transparent wall, the image of the man and the detritus of his life could not be reached" (46). This artist's process emphasises the distancing effect of keeping a relic of the dead as something unreachable, unchangeable and untouchable. As "memorials" they are analogous to sacred reliquaries designed to keep physical remnants of deceased saints away from touching hands, and as objects of focus for worship, and for anchoring the faithful in their beliefs. Gibson states: "For the bereaved, objects can transpose into quasi-subjects, moving into that now vacated, bereft place" (*Objects of the Dead,* 23). Such relic-objects — quasi-subjects — anchor the bereaved during moments of 'chaos' during their process identity transformation.

For Erika, the rice bowl and the *onigiri* box are relic-objects, for what they, as quasi-subjects, represent; the essence of her mother who, despite neglecting her emotionally, took care to feed her well; the rice which her mother desperately lacked and needed during her wartime childhood, but which later became poisonous in large quantities due to her mother's illness. The idea of the rice, symbolised in the bowl and the box, could not be tainted in Erika's mind, and when Frankie takes a bite out of a rice ball and spits out the rest, she reacts with intensity:

Hey!

The tone in Erika's voice made Frankie look up. *What?*

You can't just chuck that out!

I don't want it.

It's rice. You can't just throw it away like that. Erika's throat tightened.

> *Well, you eat it then.*
>
> *It's covered in disgusting old curry and your fucking spit. Oh my god, you don't know anything!* She got up.
>
> *Jeez, Erika, it's just a goddamn rice ball. Lighten up, for fuck's sake.*
>
> *Fuck you, Frank.* (28-29)

Gibson also refers to the bodies of the bereaved as "relics (and reminders) of the dead. Through processes of identification and mourning we encrypt within our own embodied selves the embodied selves of significant others" (*Objects of the Dead,* 95).

On visiting his late friend Bill's studio, Leo sees a "withered ghost" of Bill gazing out of the window, smoking a cigarette. This "ghost" is wearing his dead friend's clothes; a ghost that turns out to be his widow Violet — who does not smoke — holding and smoking the cigarette in exactly the same way Bill used to. She explains:

> One afternoon, I went to the cupboard and took out his pants and shirt and the cigarettes. At first, I just looked at them and touched them. His other clothes are still at home, but most of them are clean, and because they're clean, they're dead. These have paint on them. He worked in these clothes, and then after a while, I didn't want to just touch them anymore. It wasn't enough. I wanted his clothes on me, touching my body, and I wanted to smoke the Camels. I've been smoking one a day. It helps. (261)

Gibson includes the living body of those that grieve amongst her 'objects of the dead'. "As repositories of mourning and by extension memorialisation, bodies are living crypts of the dead." She continues, citing Fuss: "'the subject becomes a veritable cemetery of lost, abandoned and discarded objects'" (*Objects of the Dead* 137).

Violet takes the relic-objects of her dead husband's clothes and cigarettes, using them as transitional objects, to embody and gain comfort from the proximity of these relic-objects that once belonged to the man she grieves for so intensely. This correlates, as Gibson says, with Freud's observation of impersonation, "and the moment when an infant realises it is no longer a part of its mother's body, and the accompanying sense of loss — while it strives to achieve mobility and control of its environment. The concept of mourning and melancholia are central to this idea: we liken ourselves to what we have loved and lost" (*Objects of the Dead,* 134).

Nikki, the central character in Oates's *Mother, Missing*, a lover of second-hand shops, states that she is "drawn to old things, as if what was new, raw, untested and 'not-yet-loved' hadn't any appeal" (22). She needs to "acquire things that had already belonged to someone else as if I wasn't sure of my own judgement and had to follow where others had been" (22). This uncertainty is characterised in her life of "drifting" (35), and she continues to prevaricate over career and choice of lover until her mother is murdered. Her sister Clare, "predictable and sensible" (9), is at first energetic and business-like in her approach to their mother's possessions, attempting to dispose of them all immediately. Nikki resents this, and soon afterwards — while Clare falls apart — moves in to their mother's house and, refusing to carry out her sister's plans to dispose of their mother's things, lives surrounded by them instead.

> *The house where the lady was murdered* was also the house where Gwen Eaton had lived, and her family had lived with her, and their memories of the house were happy ones, and did not deserve to be obliterated. The house was my house now and I would not shun it, as I would not shun my mother. (231)

Nikki discovers her mother's calendar on the kitchen wall, and in it, the appointments and weekly commitments that made up her mother's regular routines. Gradually, Nikki begins to

take on these activities, activities uncharacteristic for her: visiting her mother's old friends whom she had previously avoided, swimming at the Y at precisely the same time her mother would have gone (359), wearing her mother's clothes, putting on her mother's apron (335) and baking her mother's bread recipes (323), even taking on her mother's "cheerleader buoyancy" in her voice when she consoles her mother's friend Alyce (346). It is through this embodiment of her mother, often using her mother's things as fetish-objects, that Nikki is able to effect her identity transformation — while her sister Clare remains stalled in the process.

After a period of paralysis, Leo and his wife Erica begin to clear Matthew's room. Leo remarks on the strangeness of Matthew's clothes, his shirts and underpants and socks, which he observes are "at once terrible and banal" (149). He instinctively picks out several of his son's objects to put into a drawer along with other items signifying losses from his past:

> …a green rock, the Roberto Clemente baseball card Bill had given him for his birthday one year in Vermont, the program he had designed for the fourth-grade production of Horton Hears a Who, and a small picture he had done of Dave with Durango. (149)

Later, Leo notices that he experiences moments when he briefly forgets about his son:

> When he was alive, I had felt no need to think of him constantly. I knew that he was there. Forgetfulness was normal. <u>After he died, I had turned my body into a memorial – an inert gravestone for him</u> [*my emphasis*]. To be awake meant that there were moments of amnesia, and those moments seemed to annihilate Matthew twice. When I forgot him, Matthew was nowhere —not in the world or in my mind. I think my collection was a way to answer those blanks. (149)

Here, as I highlight above, Leo turned his body into a relic, using it as a memorial for his son, while also using his collection of object-relics as ways to focus his mind on his losses, much as saints' reliquaries provide a focus for the Christian faithful to remember aspects of their divinity.

The most obvious relic-object in "The Things She Owned" is Michiko's ashes contained within the carved granite urn. Fragments of bone and other body parts of dead saints contained in ornate reliquaries were used as a focus for worship throughout Europe. In "The Things She Owned", however, the ashes are particularly notable for their mutability. They begin at the start of the narrative as fossil-objects (packed away, dusted and unseen in the Korean cabinet), transforming into relic-objects (Kei removes the urn from the cabinet, dusts it, and offers incense before it), before becoming talisman-totem-objects. This extreme fluidity of category points to the focal point of Erika's identity transformation within the narrative. This will be elucidated further in the following pages.

Talisman-objects

Objects that act as talismans offer the owner or beholder some form of protection against emotional pain and loss of meaning. They can represent hope, as does the military ring in "The Things She Owned", a fossil-object-turned-talisman-object. It represents Erika's hope that by finding her real father, she will be assisted somehow in the process of recovering her lost sense of meaning in the world, of finding her place within it, and of reconstructing her identity. Once its significance is revealed within the narrative, it also becomes a talisman-object for protection against the loss of love: its existence proves that Michiko was once able to love, and had looked to the future with hope.

Like the ring, the gold heart-padlock necklace had also once been a fossil-object, packed away, disregarded, until Erika gives it to Kei. Its provenance is not clear in the narrative, but Michiko's possession of it explicitly symbolises the idea of locked-in-love, underlining the unreciprocated love Erika feels for her mother. In its pure form, it is a prime

example of a fossil-object. It transforms into a talisman-object as soon as it is gifted to Kei, however, becoming a symbol of Erika's love and empathy for her cousin. Erika revitalises a dead object that had belonged to her mother, transforming it into a living one. In that sense, one can see the necklace as representing the love between Erika and her mother also coming back to life. What had ironically symbolised a lack of maternal love becomes one of love, a talisman-object offering protection against the loss of love. Erika gives it to Kei when her own necklace, which had been given to her by her estranged husband —who had taken his love away from Kei — is snatched from her neck at the Notting Hill Carnival.

In *What I Loved*, the roles of objects in Leo's drawer are transformed over and over again. At times he opens the drawer to examine the objects, or closes it and hides the objects from view as he chooses. Considering his wife's socks, hair pins and lipstick that he adds to this collection of objects after she leaves him, he writes: "The absurdity of the hoarding was obvious to me, but I didn't care. The act of closing the drawer on these things that belonged to Erica soothed me" (151). He says of the objects in his drawer: "Talismans, icons, incantations — these fragments are my frail shields of meaning" (364).

Transformation: fetishes as transitional objects

I categorise an object as a fetish when it symbolises something meaningful and powerful that can effect almost magical change. It cannot be seen as static, as it always represents transformation. Since it invokes dynamic change, it can fall within the narrative of quest or restitution, in that the one using the object as fetish is in a process of breaking out of stasis and moving towards some form of identity reintegration.

The knife that Erika uses is one of the few items in "The Things She Owned" that is never a fossil-object. In some ways, it was also a relic-object, until the moment Erika, seemingly unintentionally, cuts her hand with it at work. As such, it becomes a fetish, acts out her subconscious mind's desire to punish herself for her mother's death; for not being the ideal, loveable daughter. It also performs the role of fetish-object in that it instigates further

movement towards Erika's process of identity reintegration; temporarily, it introduces chaos, since Erika has not allowed herself to feel until this point. She has substituted real pain for suppressed emotional pain, to end her numbness, much in the way Leo punches his son's bedroom wall in frustration at his inability to grieve.

This moment of change, reflected by the transformation of an object from one category to another, can be one of exquisite pain. When Leo goes through this moment, where a painting by Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Glass of Water and Coffee Pot* (circa 1761), acts as a fetish-object on the memory of every glass of water Leo had taken to his son at bedtime, he states: "The truth is, I had avoided resurrection because I must have known that it would be excruciating" (148). For Leo, his moment of catharsis that unlocks the stalled grief for his dead son takes place during one of his art history lectures, in which he asks students to talk about Chardin's painting.

In this scene, Hustvedt explores the idea, through Leo's eyes, that an object rendered through art can seem more real through the act of rendering, than the concrete object itself, which Brown would term "a mere thing"; something that is so much a part of the fabric of every day life that it has become invisible. Leo muses on the nature of seeing, of signs and signifiers, and the shifting nature of seeing at the start of his lecture. He remembers how his son Matthew, who had been an aspiring young artist, remarked, one evening shortly before he died, how everyone sees things differently. They had attended a baseball game earlier that day, and Matt was intrigued with the thought that the person next to him would be seeing a slightly different view of the game from him. The memory of this conversation — and every visual aspect of it — comes back to haunt Leo at this moment: he remembers the lamp, the socks on the floor, the blanket pulled up to his son's chin, and the glass of water by his bedside. Having struggled for months to find any way of dealing with his grief, Leo breaks down during his discussion with his students about Chardin's painting. He becomes fixated on the image of the glass of water in the painting; announcing to the class that "The water is a

sign of… The water seems to be a sign of absence" (147), before he falls apart, and asks his students to leave the room. Later, he observes:

> I had brought hundreds of glasses of water to Matt's bedside, and after his death I had drunk many more, since I always kept a glass beside me at night. A real glass of water had not once reminded me of my son, but the image of a glass of water rendered 230 years earlier had catapulted me suddenly and irrevocably into the painful awareness that I was still alive. (148)

In explaining his idea of the transitional object, Winnicott stresses the importance of play and objects. For healthy child development, the mother needs to separate from the child, so that the child recognises the duality of *me/not-me*; this is not possible while the child still identifies as one with the mother. In play, the child recognises the object played with is not the mother, but relates to it as if it were, talking to it and interacting with it. He states: "the use of an object symbolizes the union of two now separate things, baby and mother at the point in time and space of the initiation of their state of separateness" ("Location of cultural experience", 5). While Winnicott applies his theory of transitional objects to child development, it follows that it can equally apply to the process of identity reconstruction following the death or absence of a loved one. Like a child separating from its mother and beginning the drive to develop an identity of its own, the bereaved must find a way to separate his or her identity from the one that is absent, reordering it in the process.

While Bill and Violet — Leo's closest friends — are away from New York for an extended period of time, Leo cuts out a picture of them at a gallery opening from a magazine and adds this to the collection in his drawer. He realises that the drawer with its collection has become a place to record what he missed.

> Despite its morbid qualities, I didn't use my drawer for grief or self-pity. I had begun to think of it as a ghostly anatomy in which each object articulated one piece of a larger body that was still unfinished. Each thing was a bone that signified absence, and I took pleasure in arranging these fragments according to different principles. (191)

He rearranges them over and over as a kind of bricôlage, playing with them, creating different links and meanings in his mind, at first, chronologically, and later, by "more secret, associative systems, playing with every possible connection" (191). He analyses his own actions with the practised eye of the art historian, recognising their therapeutic value for confronting his life's losses:

> Their meanings depended on their placement, what I thought of as a mobile syntax. I played this game only at night before I went to bed. After a couple of hours, the intense mental effort required to justify moving objects from one position to another made me tired. My drawer proved to be an effective sedative. (191-192)

He likens this practice of rearranging the objects to a game, one of magic in which these objects become fetishes for invocation. "The game's moves must be rational," he writes (364).

> I force myself to make a coherent argument for every grouping, but at the bottom the game is magic. I'm its necromancer calling on the spirits of the dead, the missing, and the imaginary.... I invoke ghosts that can't satisfy me. But the invocation has a power all its own. The objects become muses of memory. (364)

Leo is acutely aware and analytical, intellectualising his interactions with the objects, yet the image of him growing tired from the mental effort of the game being "an effective sedative" carries within it echoes of a child tired from play. At the same time, his use of the words "necromancer", "magic" and "invocation" also imply something otherworldly, reinforcing the idea of his collection as fetish-objects. Underneath the intellectualisation, he is using the interplay of these fetish-objects to make sense of the absences in his life, and to find his place within his world rent apart by absence and separation.

At the start of "The Things She Owned", the Wedgewood tea set, the diaries and Michiko's ashes represent death objects as fossil-objects, packed away, frozen containers of grief, disregarded. Kei is the catalyst for transforming these into fetish-objects: Erika unpacks and washes the tea set and puts it to use for her cousin's visit. When Erika chips a cup, this marks the moment she begins to emerge from her benumbed state. The tea set, while wrapped and stored away, represented something fossilised from her own and her mother's past: using the set, and chipping a cup, the set becomes a fetish, a catalyst for a breaking open of what lies fossilised within Erika herself. Equally, Kei is the catalyst for moving the diaries from the category of fossil-object to transformational objects. What they reveal lays the foundation for Erika's narrative to move from 'chaos' to 'quest', instigating her journey to Okinawa. Her cousin Kei's arrival forces Erika to examine what lies within the Korean chest and to examine her feelings around her mother, and her mother's death. It is Kei's arrival that effects the transformation of the things Erika's mother owned into fetish-objects, objects which act as markers for Erika's identity reconstruction.

It is not until later in the story that the reader discovers the reason for Erika's subconscious need to punish herself with the knife. Her ultimate surrender to her inner emotions follows a sequence of events: the visit to Okinawa, the meeting with the *noro,* and the plunge into the waterfall, where she picks up a stone. Finally, on her return to London, contemplating this totem-object from Okinawa — the stone —while eating out of her mother's rice bowl, she drops it so that it breaks the rice bowl. This cathartic moment, the

breaking of the relic-object of the rice bowl, leads her to a powerful subconscious urge — the consuming of her mother's ashes.

Mother and daughter are finally united in a way that had only been possible when the child was still within the mother's womb. The separation during infancy had been too sudden, too extreme, and Erika is left forever wishing to return to it. After her mother's death, the only possible solution she has to mend this rupture is to consume what is left of her mother's ashes. Erika illustrates Gibson's idea of the body as relic-object, especially the body of a daughter. Not only does Erika, as a daughter, inherit her mother's genes, displaying physical similarities of all kinds, she ends her narrative by literally becoming one with her mother again, but on her terms. Having consumed, absorbed and become one with her mother, Erika now creates a totem-object from the internalised ashes.

Gibson describes an 'acting out' as part of the anger than frequently attends feelings of grief, a stage Kubler-Ross also names as one of the stages of grieving. This anger, again, echoes the role of the transitional object in infancy: it is safe for the infant to act out its rage — at being cast away from its mother's body — on an object to which it has transferred its attachments instead. Erika's consumption of her mother's ashes is a complex act: cannibalistic and angry, an act of revenge. At the same time it reflects a deep desire for her to become one with her mother's body again, an act of longing and love. Whatever her motivations for consuming them, the ashes are a fetish that effect the greatest transformation in Erika's identity reconstruction, one that is totemic.

Erika's consumption of Michiko's ashes could be seen as 'acting out' from anger, while also attempting to incorporate the loved one that was lost. It is also a solution to Erika's dilemma of how to deal with them at all. Gibson notes through her research that it is often women who "take responsibility for keeping body relics; that it is the woman who keeps the first lock of cut baby hair, the first lost tooth… It is not just that women tend to be held responsible for caring for the bodies of others but that, as mothers, women embody and tend

to value the idea that bodies are essentially interconnected (the maternal body is paradigmatic).” (*Objects of the Dead,* 166)

When Gibson speaks of these “ post-death remainders [human remains], which include ideas of soul or spirit, [they] are significant because they are calculations against total loss and annihilation” (*Objects of the Dead,* 153). At this point, it feels relevant to divulge personal information. I have not had, and will not be able to have, children of my own. The embodiment of the lost mother ends with me, and the ultimate responsibility of dispersing my mother’s remains stops, also, with me: once I die, my mother’s remains will simply become meaningless and abject. Adding to this fact that I have no siblings, there is no obvious path for the objects she passed on to me to be passed on to others with any meaning. This is one of the purposes for framing some of these objects in the creative component of the thesis: by writing them into an alternative existence, I have attempted to make them concrete, to frame them within a narrative that might help keep some of their meanings alive, even if those meanings will only have ever been true to me at a given time, as ephemeral as they are. This idea of framing the object will be discussed briefly towards the end of this exegesis.

Totem-objects

Totems are most commonly described as manifestations of nature: elements, stones, plants, animals (Jones, 7). The role of the totem in indigenous cultures is one of a sacred representation, a declaration of identity (Jones, 15), and for the purposes of this exegesis, I will categorise totem-objects as ones that symbolise a presentation and solidification (however temporary) of identity. The totem-object also has the potential for transformation and reordering, but it is most closely related to the restitution narrative, the stage of acceptance in the grieving process and the reconstructed identity which can now place itself in a world of changed meaning.

The most obvious totem-object in “The Things She Owned”, if following the idea of the totem as manifestation of nature, is the stone Erika picks up from the waterfall. As it is

something brought in to the narrative from a space outside Erika's previous experience, and as it is an object that did not belong to her mother, it does not have an ekphrastic passage of its own. She picks it up first, perhaps, as a talisman-object, something that will protect her, remind her of her true nature and possibly the origins of her mother's family. Throughout her recovery from her accident, it lies forgotten in her rucksack, a fossilised moment of transition in nature, until she finds it again, and is compelled to play with it. While it represents something of her new-found identity as someone possibly with Okinawan ancestry — a piece of the land to which she finally belongs, and where she was conceived — it also acts as a fetish-object. Dropping it, Erika breaks open her mother's rice bowl, a relic-object symbolising all that was painful to her.

> That evening Erika cooked herself a simple meal of rice, miso, pickles and grilled fish. She wasn't sure why she chose her mother's rice bowl over hers. It felt right. As she ate, she played with the smooth round stone she found again in the rucksack she'd taken with her to Okinawa. As she ate, she turned it over and over in her hands. She thought of the waterfall and felt no fear.
>
> It was as she went to put it back down on the table that she dropped the stone. It fell with a resonant, hollow sound on the edge of her mother's rice bowl. And as it landed on the table, the rice bowl fell open, splitting into two perfect halves. (181)

In *What I Loved*, when Bill's son Mark finally destroys Leo's faith in all he thought to be certain and good, Leo realises that not everything can be understood, analysed or processed. As he grows up, Mark becomes increasingly unreliable, erratic and emotionally unstable. As Mark seems increasingly lost to him, Leo finds himself in a Manhattan apartment with Mark's seemingly psychotic — and possibly murderous — mentor, artist and notorious New York club personality Teddy Giles. Taking a wrong turn in Giles' apartment, Leo is shocked to see a portrait of Mark as a toddler playing with a lampshade for a hat hanging on the wall. Giles

says he intends to 'use' it in his art. As Giles' art embodies destruction and desecration, this is the moment Leo is forced to contemplate the loss of his innocent view of Mark, and this is reinforced by his discovery that Mark lies, near death, in the bathroom from a drug overdose.

Bill's painting of Mark had been a totem-object, in that it contained within it a strong sense of Leo's perception of Mark's identity, as the son of his late friend Bill, and a memory of how he wanted Mark to be. In this scene, Leo undergoes a reversal, reflected through the destruction of the canvas as totem-object. The reversal illustrates how stages of identity reconstruction in bereavement narratives are never linear, often cycling and reversing.

In his final confrontations with Mark and Teddy in a Nashville hotel, the dark threat of violence from Giles, with Mark's constantly changing demeanour, blow Leo's sense of self apart. He finally accepts that Mark is forever lost to him. The totemic image of Mark he had in his mind is finally destroyed, as Teddy destroyed the totem-object of Mark as an innocent toddler. Leo breaks down to the point where he is no longer able to recognise himself in the mirror, a portent of his identity breaking down once again:

> My hunched and twisted body had aged me terribly, turning me into a shriveled old man of at least eighty, but it was my face that shocked me. Although the features in the mirror resembled mine, I resisted claiming them. My cheeks appeared to have collapsed into my three-day beard, and my eyes, pink from exhaustion, had an expression that made me think of the small terrified animals I had seen so often on Vermont roads in the headlights of my car. (327)

After a fitful night during which Leo dreams of the world around him continually moving ("All night I had motion sickness" [328]), he awakes a changed man. He goes to the hotel lobby the next morning to wait for Mark, who had parted with a whispered request the night before to wait for him so that he would go home with him. Carrying with him the last vestige

of hope, Leo sits waiting, but Mark does not appear. Hustvedt uses the third person narrative, as if Leo has stepped outside himself to observe a man with whom he can no longer identify:

> The man who sat on the bench in that lobby had made Herculean efforts to look presentable… He had combed his hair, and when he sat down on that bench to wait, he had contorted his body into a position he imagined might look normal. He scanned the lobby. He hoped. He revised earlier interpretation of preceding events, made another one, and another. He deliberated on several possibilities until he lost hope and hauled his miserable body into a cab, which drove him to the airport. I felt sorry for him, because he had understood so little. (329-330)

Leo's retrospective telling of the story of *What I Loved* is from the point of view of an old man slowly going blind from macular degeneration. He accepts that he can no longer see, just as he can no longer make sense of his son's death, or of his best friend's son's unstable, unlovable and unreliable character. Recounting the story of what he loved at the end of his life, he states:

> The recollections of an older man are different from those of a young man. What seemed vital at forty may lose its significance at seventy. We manufacture stories, after all, from the fleeting sensory material that bombards us at every instant, a fragmented series of pictures, conversations, odors, and the touch of things and people. We delete most of it to live with some semblance of order, and the reshuffling of memory goes on until we die. (120)

In the creative component of this thesis, the things she — Michiko, then Erika — owned, mark the progress and transformation throughout the narrative of Erika's identity reconstruction. For Erika, still young, her narrative ends as one of restitution, entering the

stage of acceptance, as she moves forward into an unknown but fertile future. It mostly likely will be a future in which she will continue to 'delete' the 'fleeting sensory material' that surrounds her, her 'reshuffling of memory' continuing onwards in a process of eternal identity construction and reconstruction, finding, transforming and discarding totem-objects for the remainder of her life.

On the framing of objects

Through Leo's observations about art and objects, I became aware of the way in which, by highlighting the real objects I have in my possession, I am attempting to make their existence more real (for me), in the way Chardin's glass of water is more real to Leo than the many real glasses of water he has seen since his son's death. I see them afresh in a new context of artifice, of a fictional story, which carries echoes of my own life. This is made particularly pertinent by the knowledge that, without children of my own, or siblings, these objects will no longer carry the stories of my mother, or of my relationship with her, once I am no longer alive. By fixing these objects in a specific moment, showcased as if in a museum, I have kept the stories that accompany them permanently attached.

It is worth bearing in mind, however, the ungraspable nature of reality, and the difficulty of capturing it through words. The fiction that accompanies these real objects is not a mirror reflection of the reality of my own, nor my mother's life. To write a mirror reflection of the reality of my own life, let alone that of my mother's, is an impossibility, given the shifting nature of meaning. It could more accurately be likened to the reflection in a fragmented mirror, in which there are multiple views from multiple perspectives, perspectives which change according to context, such as the time in one's life, or one's state of mind at the time of looking into the mirror. Fixing such a perspective through words — which can only represent a fragmented reflection of reality — is an impossible task.

By 'presenting' these object ekphrastically within a work of fiction and casting a spotlight on them, they in turn become fetish-objects, containing the feelings and meanings inherent within while also helping to effect their transformation from ephemeral, pragmatic object into something iconic. The ekphrasised equivalents themselves become markers in my own identity transformation following the loss of my mother. Perhaps this is a case of magical thinking on my part. In *What I Loved,* Leo observes:

> Whenever an artist dies, the work slowly begins to replace his body, becoming a corporeal substitute for him in the world. It can't be helped, I suppose. Useful objects, like chairs and dishes, passed down from one generation to another, may briefly feel haunted by their former owners, but that quality vanishes rather quickly into their pragmatic functions. Art, useless as it is, resists incorporation into dailiness, and if it has any power at all, it seems to breathe with the life of the person who made it. Art historians don't like to speak of this, because it suggests the magical thinking attached to icons and fetishes, but I have experienced it time and time again." (257)

Michael Redhill's *Martin Sloane* features an artist who creates miniaturised scenes of trauma and significant memory from his childhood, encasing them behind glass in boxes in the manner of the artist Joseph Cornell. Edmund de Waal's inherited *netsuke* collection that forms the focus of his creative non-fictional narrative in *The Hare With the Amber Eyes* is kept in a vitrine; contained within each *netsuke* is a complex and tragic family history. "The Things She Owned" becomes a display cabinet, of sorts, for objects that, in passing, seem insignificant, and yet for me, as the writer, carry profound meaning and feelings.

The ekphrastic passages I have used in "The Things She Owned" create a temporal space in which both I — as the writer — and the reader, can slow the pace of the narrative, in a similar way to the standalone ekphrastic descriptions of the artist Martin Sloane's work in Michael Redhill's novel of the same name. They present the object dispassionately in a '*See?*

Here.' moment in which the object concerned can be contemplated, can be suggested as a marker for the progress — or not — of Erika's, Jolene's (the narrator of Michael Redhill's novel), or Martin Sloane's identity reconstruction following the respective losses in their lives.

Writing real objects into fiction, in effect, 'frames' them. Brown writes that

> …within a novel whose own aesthetic depends so much on habituating the reader to its referents, there is a diegetic account of an altogether different aesthetic that will come to energize the modernist capacity to call our attention to objects — be it the urinal that becomes Duchamp's *Fountain*, or the bicycle seat that becomes Picasso's Bull… Part of the point of such dislocations…is to interrupt the habits with which we view the world, the habits that prevent us from seeing the world — to call us to a particular and particularizing attention. (*A Sense of Things,* 78)

The frame presents a threshold: what is contained within is an invitation to the viewer, the reader, to enter in, interact and interpret. De Waal describes the case in which the *netsuke* were first displayed as a collection, thus: "Charles's vitrine is a threshold" (66).

Thresholds present opportunities for transformation to take place. In this sense, the frame contains the space within which Winnicott's notion of play can occur, within which the objects become transitional, potentially performing the role of fetish-object. It could be said that the writing of "The Things She Owned", and the framing of these real and significant objects in my possession allowed for my own transformation through their role as transitional fetish-objects, the cathexis of the novel being a form of therapy, the crafting of the manuscript a game, much like Leo's game of rearranging the objects in his drawer, or Emmy's children, rearranging the *netsuke* in their mother's Viennese drawing room (187).

De Waal's account of how he changed his mind about the role of vitrines, too, illustrates perfectly the role of the frame, and brings to mind a book whose covers open and close, the objects framed within it observed, played with, rearranged in the mind:

> I spent the first twenty years of my life as a potter earnestly trying to get objects out of the glass cases in which my pots were often placed in galleries and museums. They die, I'd say, behind glass, held in that airlock. Vitrines were a sort of coffin: things need to be out… to be liberated… (65)
>
> But the vitrine – as opposed to the museum's case — is for opening. And that opening glass door and the moment of looking, then choosing, and then reaching in and then picking up is a moment of seduction, an encounter between a hand and an object that is electric. (66)

It is only once the creative work was complete, and my work on this exegesis well under way, that I began to understand how my act of writing may have been one of magical thinking; that by presenting real objects in my possession, significant ones that had once belonged to my mother, I could arrange and rearrange them within the frame and space of my creative work, in order to try to make sense of her absence from my world, and to try to re-order a fragmented identity and find my own place in a world that was forever changed by it.

Conclusion

Brown describes how “words and things have long been considered deadly rivals” (“Thing Theory”, 11) but points out that Dali, in his essay “The Object as Revealed in Surrealist Experiment”, “had faith that they could be fused and that ‘everyone’ would ‘be able to read from things’” (“Thing Theory”, 11).

Gibson cites Harpham: “Human beings constantly transform their identities and histories by projecting themselves into and out of the world of things” and goes on to state that: “Surrounded by things, *we learn to recognise ourselves in them* [my emphasis] to realise and transform ourselves through them, and to draw from them a measure of consolation as we move through time, dying as we go, passing through and eventually out of the world” (*Objects of the Dead,* 21). Placing the objects in my possession into a work of fiction is a way of circumventing the problematic nature of putting their shifting meanings into words; at the same time, I placed them there in the context of the full narrative, in the perhaps vain hope that readers will receive a sense of this feeling the objects evoke in me as I write them into an alternative reality. This was an intention I had while writing; however, there were further reasons for doing so which became apparent only after the writing was complete.

Gibson writes: “Objects matter…because they are part of us — we imprint objects and they imprint us materially, emotionally and memorially. For the bereaved, objects can transpose into quasi-subjects, moving into that now vacated, bereft place” (*Objects of the Dead,* 23). Where the bereaved is the child, and the lost object the mother, the body of the child, especially if a woman, and adult, contains echoes of the lost mother — facial expressions, physical mannerisms, vocal pitch, and often, also, the genetic inheritance also expressed through shared ailments — and becomes another cathexic, transitional object on which the bereaved child can focus its grief. The loss of the mother through death is rehearsed in the child’s infancy through its initial experience of loss through, as Gibson

writes, “separation from the from the mother’s body” when the infant “goes through primary processes of ego formation. It doesn’t just give up or let go of the loved object but preserves it, by way of incorporation” (*Objects of the Dead,* 134). Nikki, in *Mother Missing,* enacts this incorporation by moving into her mother’s house and taking over her mother’s role in the community. Erika consumes her mother’s ashes.

There is an ambiguity of meaning embedded in objects that naturally comes with the subjectivity of those that gaze upon them, interact with them, invest them with memories peculiar to themselves. The universe and all within it is ephemeral; life, of course, but also the meanings invested in material things which live only as long as those who look upon them remember the stories associated with them (even when unable to share the feelings behind those stories in the same way as others before them). Writing my objects into the ‘reality’ and ‘permanence’ of fiction may be my own attempt to stave off mortality, of guarding against ‘nothingness’.

Castro states: “The ‘nothingness’ is essentially a desire to write, not in order to communicate anything, but to grieve for a totality which is now fragmented” (Castro 259). In this sense, “The Things She Owned” has become a ‘thing’ in itself. It has grown from a fossil-object, transformed into a fetish-object, as well as a talisman-object, and become, perhaps, a protection against mortality. It has become a transitional object, a cathexic work, a means of navigating around irreparable loss, as well as a negotiation with mortality, my own childlessness and, perhaps, even nothingness.

Endnotes

[1] A photocopy of this piece is available as reference, though its adolescent fervor would make it somewhat embarrassing to show in its entirety.

[2] *Hafu* is a term coined in the 1970s to describe a person who has one Japanese, and one non-Japanese parent. It is the most commonly used term by those of half Japanese heredity and is generally not seen by those of half-Japanese heritage as derogatory.

[3] A casual Japanese drinking and eating establishment

[4] Albyn Hall belongs to a writing group which includes Andrea Levy. Hall is thanked in the acknowledgements in Levy's *Small Island*.

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