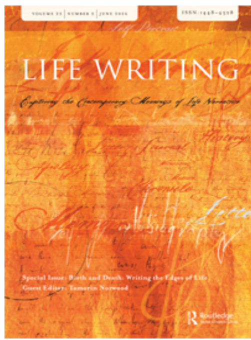

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Belonging/s: An Object-led Reflection on Maternal Loss

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ABSTRACT
In 1982, the eminent art historian J. D. Prown asked how one could and should interpret information 'about culture, about mind' encoded in objects, suggesting an openness to other well-established methodologies but 'not until the evidence of the artifact itself has been plumbed as objectively as possible' (Prown 1982, 1). Through the lens of memory-objects belonging to the author, and conjoining analytical and creative writing practice, this essay asks whether such forms of structured and sequential analysis could have any application to the processes and windows of life writing, and considers how the discipline of material culture can illuminate autobiographical and curatorial narratives associated with maternal grief-writing, and help attend to the challenges presented by writing the edges of life.

KEYWORDS
First shoes; family photographs; maternity clothing; still-birth; birth

Introduction

It is not uncommon for parents to keep mementos of early childhood. My father kept my first baby shoes to the very end and I have them still, in memory of his memory of me. As a former senior curator of fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum, I find that material objects from my own past have a dual resonance; in this case, I can view the shoes with detachment, as I would the accoutrements of privileged babyhood in the museum—elaborate layettes, lace christening gowns, cot covers, embroidered bonnets and tiny leather shoes (some with a slip of paper inside indicating who had worn them)—at the same time as experiencing a sense of wistfulness for my own unexceptional childhood. Objects can conflate and collapse the boundaries between memory and experience, the present and the past, the professional and the personal, and this is particularly resonant with the clothes we wear, and those we leave behind. Through the lens of the aforementioned infant shoes (c. 1955) and a series of home-made maternity smocks worn in mid-life (1990–1993) this essay explores how object analysis can activate memory and help process loss. Prown defined material culture as 'singular as a mode of cultural investigation in its use of objects as primary data, but in its scholarly purpose it can be considered a branch of cultural history or cultural anthropology. It is a means rather than an end, a discipline rather than a field'. (Prown 1982, 1). Although other methodologies and variants have since enriched the field, such as Annette Kuhn's 1995 *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (which I will employ in my reading of family photographs) and Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim's 2015 *The Dress Detective* which, as its title makes clear, focuses on the characteristics of dress, Prown's system still frames much empirical practice.[1] (Mida and Kim 2015) However, the agency implicit in worn garments, their role in defining identity and their proximity to our bodies demands an empathetic linking of material and experience, particularly when associated with life writing about the beginnings and the end of life. As the anthropologist Daniel Miller proposes 'A study of clothing should not be *cold*; it has to invoke the tactile, emotional, intimate world of feelings' (Miller 2010, 41).

Infant shoes (c.1955)

Looking for a way into this essay, I open the glass doors of the cabinet where I confine the small things of life. Its shelves are a reflection of the muddles and overlapping priorities of the past, a combination of

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keepsakes and ephemera that some visitors to the house overlook but others are intrigued by. Distant relative to the 'best china' cabinets of my grandmother's generation, it performs a different function—not to show what is too good for everyday use (in her case it was *never* used), but rather to contain things that are *invocations* of family life, and moreover amenable to being *brought out*. In my 2020 memoir *Patch Work: A Life Amongst Clothes* I wrote about divesting 'the museum', as the family called it, of its contents, 'an accrual based on sentiment and scale', but since then it has been reinstated; in fact, it is as if it had never gone away, nor the objects ever been disbanded (Wilcox 2020, 235). Like a real museum case it has a sense of permanence, immutability; artifact jostles against artifact, material against material—glazed bowl—velvet purse—silver hair brush—brass key—rag doll—but somehow there is always room for more; like memory, the jaws of the museum seem to ever expand to accommodate the lengthening of the years. I know exactly where each trinket and trigger is placed, and by keeping them in sight I can manage their emotional pull. Yet, when I do bring the shoes back up to my study, one in the palm of each hand, time slips. I'm in the doorway, watching my father as he sits at his desk, my own self standing close beside him.

The shoes are brittle and yellowed with age, weightless as a brace of dead sparrows; I put them down carefully, align them, true left and true right. Apart from photographs, they are the sole evidence of the life I lived before the time of memory and, alongside the baby shoes that I have kept of my own children in the same cupboard, and some reminders of my parents, attest to the generational births and deaths that followed. For a pair of objects so small and charming (*doubly* charming) infant shoes are freighted with meaning, for their particularity is that they mark such a brief stage in a child's development. The moment that we take our first, precarious steps towards autonomy also marks the beginning of the slow process of letting go of the emotional dependencies of childhood. From tiptoeing on bare feet, to feeling the solidity of the ground through the medium of cloth and leather, the child steps forward, one foot following the other, into the strides of adulthood and then the plateau of older age, when our foot-hold on earth begins to weaken, we again become unsteady on our feet and, in the end, don't need shoes at all. This journey leaves traces. What could be more individual or telling than the shoes that ground—or destabilise—us along the way.[2] In her memoir *Inventory of a Life Mislaid* Mariner Warner describes the pair of brogues that her father ordered for her Italian mother in their first year of marriage. 'The brogues would plant her on—they would *transplant* her to—British soil' (Warner 2021, 85). But as Warner continues although 'they located her', and she kept them (complete with cedarwood shoe trees) in her wardrobe until her death, 'they were not her kind of shoe, and never became so' (Warner 2021, 90).

Material culture

It is over four decades since Prown asked how one could and should interpret information 'about culture, about mind' encoded in objects, advising an openness to other well-established approaches and praxes, but 'not until the evidence of the artifact itself has been plumbed as objectively as possible'. In order to systemise this he proposed an analytical framework employing three distinct stages:

(1) *description*, recording the internal evidence of the object itself
(2) *deduction*, interpreting the interaction between the object and the perceiver
(3) *speculation*, framing hypotheses and questions which lead out from the object to external evidence for testing and resolution (Prown 1982, 7–10).

It's possibly taking a sledgehammer to a nut, but I decide to apply this method to my baby shoes, inconsequential though they are, and moreover enquire whether this form of structured and progressive analysis with its three-fold tensity could have any application to the processes and windows of life writing.

Description

Prown warns against 'the intrusion of either subjective assumptions or conclusions derived from other experience', advising the analyst (I like the psychological undertones) to maintain their objectivity. (Prown 1982, 8). It strikes me how similar the preoccupations of the curator and life-writer are; a desire to untangle histories, look between the folds, allow narratives to slowly evolve based on observation,

experience and imagination and then to 'show' them either in the vitrine or between the covers of a book. Having been momentarily diverted by this thought, I return to my task to give an account of the dimensions, material, and 'articulation of the object' and go and look for a tape measure. Each shoe is 10 cm long by 6 cm wide and the heel back is 4 cm high; the perimeter of the ankle strap when held as if fastened is 10.5 cm, presumably the circumference of my infant ankle. The ankle-straps fastened with a single button, now lost, so I have to imagine them (milk glass, metal loop on reverse, perhaps); traces of the securing thread remain. The uppers are a dirty cream, with matching lengths of ribbon interwoven through neat slits on the rounded toes, creating a checkerboard pattern effect. The once flexible canvas soles are flat and stiff.[3] I confess that despite having been aware of the shoes all my life, for they first dangled from the rear-view mirror of my father's Morris Oxford, then hung from the cork pin-board in his study and were finally suspended from his desk lamp, I had never really paid them that much attention. Bringing them closer, I notice faint blue lettering on the inner soles, almost entirely obscured by a layer of dust. I decide not to decode it.

Deduction

Prown now allows me to 'inject' myself into the investigation, but reminds me that the 'process remains synchronic', that is, the shoes are not what they were, and of course I am not what I was either, but when I have them before me somehow these dual time frames commingle and overlap, offering a constructed experience—rather as an old-fashioned stereoscopic image blends two images together to create the appearance of three-dimensionality.[4] In *After the Archive: Remapping Memory* the cultural psychologist Jens Brockmeier challenged 'the idea of memory as storage, an archive' and discussed the 'meaning and implications of the dismantlement of the traditional notion of memory, a process that at the same time opens up new possibilities to conceive of what we call remembering and forgetting' (Brockmeier 2010, 20).[5] Rather than a stable archive that can be relied on not to mutate, memory, he argued, as informed by neuronal research, is not sequential but fluid. This reminds me of the Japanese craft of **Suminagashi** or 'floating ink' where the marbled pattern is drawn off the surface of the water by the same paper that it transforms, at a moment of 'stilling' that cannot be recreated, for the ink is constantly on the move, and each subsequent capture, although related to the previous one, is a one-off. Perhaps life writing can also be seen as a still end of remembering, the words on paper with which every 'dip' into memory is recorded constituting a recovery that is unique to that moment, despite the multivalency of its source. Such recoveries are both common and profoundly complex, for as Brockmeier writes: 'every act of remembering mingles elements of experience from the past with elements of experience from the present. Its very operation is based on the fusion of elements of realistic imagination with elements of fictitious imagination, elements of 'experienced memories' with elements of 'imagined memories' (Brockmeier 2010, 24).

I bear these words in mind as I pick the shoes up one by one, turn them round and over, compare them (like the stereoscopic images they are uncannily close in their mirroring, but not identical), feel their texture. I imagine how they felt in my father's touch (like a sensory highway into the past, this instantly summons up my own experience of holding his hands, which we did till the last), and wonder if he had trouble buttoning up the straps although, as a clarinettist, he had nimble fingers. I try to project how the shoes must have felt to the child I was; constricting perhaps, after the freedom of bare feet, but also dangerously enabling. I knew he felt fearful for me from an early age. I then carried that burden too, apprehensive about the unknown both for myself and, in turn, for my own children. Our father—daughter worries seemed to exist alongside each other, almost companionably, for we knew each other's frailties. I believe we both felt that to think that way was a form of preventative wizardry, but were of course unable to pre-empt what was to come, nor was he able to protect me from heartbreak following the loss of my first child during childbirth, and the absence of both my father and his grandson that lies at the heart of this narrative.

Speculation

Stepping out from the interiority of these thoughts, I see the shoes were cheap; they are plasticised and the grain is not real leather. Unlike the material I had been used to handling in the museum they don't *resonate* quality. I feel a little saddened, but it's no surprise; I was born in a London council flat and a visit to a proper

shoe shop would not have been on the cards. They probably came from the haberdashery and baby goods shop that my parents ran in North Kensington, at the time an area of real deprivation. I interrupt my train of thought again and reach up to the high shelf where I keep shoe boxes full of old photographs. This incessant restarting of the story, the *inevitability* of distraction, the stray threads that get left behind and then demand to be picked up again, all seem to be a condition of life writing. 'Where can I begin all the things that might be said … ?' wrote Virginia Woolf in a letter to the composer and writer Ethel Smyth with whom she had an extensive correspondence about autobiographical writing in the 1930s (Marcus 2017, 265). Perhaps all these intersecting potentials, of not quite knowing where one is going (as in this essay) can be likened to sentences written in the dark which, when day breaks, have strayed beyond the edge of the page so that the final words, which would have explained everything, are lost, and we have to start again. Enlighteningly, Liz Stanley wrote in her Introduction to *The Auto/biographical I* that 'social life, lives, and the writing of lives, are all intertextually complex and that to every statement about them should be appended another beginning "And also . . ."' (Stanley 1992, 18; Sandino and Partington 2013).

In *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* cultural theorist and feminist Annette Kuhn describes memory work as 'a practice that begins with the practitioner's own material—her memories, her photographs—[it] offers a route to a critical consciousness that embraces the heart as well as the intellect, one that resonates, in feeling and thinking ways, across the individual and the collective, the personal and the political' (Kuhn 1995, 9). I have so few photographs, compared to the plethora of images that we take today, yet still they cover my desk. I see one of my father sitting on a park bench fastening my T-bar sandal as I look up at the camera, more than a toddler but still young enough to need help with my shoes, and assume it's over-optimistic to think that I'd find anything shoe- related from earlier in my then short life. But then I see an envelope marked 'b&w photos from grey album in order in which they were stuck in'. I had removed the photographs and then regretted it; the captions were still there, chalked onto the stiff black pages but the frames were empty, my father's careful methodology as the family archivist undone. I prise the photos apart—some are a little sticky—and, without fanfare, spot a series of small, square images of me wearing the very shoes I see before me. Susan Sontag's famous passage comes to mind: 'All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt' (Sontag 1977, 15).

Looking at images of myself is puzzling, more so the further back in time's melt I go; as Sontag points out, it would not have been possible to have tracked the evolution of my appearance—my face—in this way before the age of photography, and I wonder how much help a small black and white photograph taken nearly 70 years ago really offers to life writing when compared to the sparkling chambers of memory, although I want it to. I seek assistance from Kuhn who asks me to ask the following:

> … Where, when, how, and by whom and why was the photograph taken? … What photographic technologies were used? What are the aesthetics of the image? … Who or what was the photograph made for? Who has it now, and where is it kept? Who saw it then, and who sees it now?

For Kuhn, subjectivity takes priority over description and Prown's language ('inject', 'plumb' etc.) is replaced by her less invasive terms: 'Consider the human subject (s) of the photograph … you may visualise yourself as the subject as she was at that moment, in the picture'. What I find particularly useful in terms of switching perspectives is that Kuhn, interlinking object study and life writing, suggests the use of the third person: '*she*' *rather than* '*I*'. (Kuhn 1995, 8)

I lay the three photographs out in the order in which I think they were taken, left to right.

> In the first, her father stands holding her. They are not exactly smiling, perhaps the photographer did not choose the best moment. In the second, her mother and father sit beside each other, looking at the camera; she is disinclined, struggling to break free from her mother's arms. In the third she is 'walking'. Her shoes are brand new, the ankle-straps firm. Her father supports her by her upheld arms. She leans forward, unaware of her precarity.

The next day, I look again at the photographs, troubled by something and think, though it is difficult to see, that the ankle strap fastens with a buckle, not a button; nor can I detect the checkerboard pattern on the toes. My intersubjectivity has led me astray. I realise that the shoes my father kept may not have been my very first walking ones after all, but an iteration. It's reasonable to think that I would have had more than

one pair, just as there will have been more than one story about how I learnt to walk, and what it meant, although there is no one alive to tell it now.

Windows of seeing

It happens that the past often re-surfaces in the autumn of life, and no surprise that in the wake of this unexpected offering we sometimes try to document its essence, while we can, and as I did in *Patch Work*. Whatever stage we are at, and whatever has triggered this compulsion, the Dutch memory author Douwe Draaisma suggests that life writing 'activates the same two poles in time as remembering', and that something happens to the past in the process, whether rewarding, like the **Suminagashi,** or disappointing, like a wet pebble that looks beautiful on the shoreline but dulls into ordinariness by the time we get it home. Herein lies the pleasure and plight of the life-writer:

> The things that need to be described are in the past, whereas the writing happens in the present. But something else follows on from this contact. The memories that are recalled must be set down on paper. Memories that, as memories, could have remained what they were—a smell, a feeling, a mood, an image—now have to be put into words and, for the sake of readability, made part of a story. Perhaps writers are more painfully aware than anyone that language is not only a necessary step towards the reader but also a step away from memory. Writers know they are creating worlds out of words … . (Draaisma 2013, 112–113)

In light of Draaisma's words I begin to wonder about the connection between *deciding* to remember—for example when crafting memoir, perhaps with the help of objects as I do in this essay and *spontaneous* memory which can be triggered unexpectedly, perhaps by the unlatching of a casement window, a glimpse into a lighted sitting room from the top of a bus or even the strictures of a life writing course. I went on one last year in an ancient hill-top castle in Tuscany, organised by the Oxford Centre for Life Writing.[6] Most of the sessions took place in the *portego*, a large reception hall on the first floor with private rooms (in this case a library, bedroom and small chapel) leading off from it. The hall ran the width of the building and had vast, arched windows that overlooked the valley, providing ventilation to the rest of the building during the heat of summer. The windows were formed of hundreds of circlets of Murano glass which start as bubbles. These are then flattened into discs by the glass maker and leaded to each other, creating a composite of circular panes that can be scaled up according to need. Each whirlpool of glass (about the size of my hand span) was translucent enough to let some light in, but opaque enough so that the glare was dimmed. The view below was reduced to a series of tiny possibilities, each pane offering a distorted view of the same reality until the windows were flung open and normality was restored. I spent much of the week looking through these portals.[7]

Description, recording the internal evidence of the object itself

Each disc bears the traces of its making, the circles and ripples culminating in a pontil where the glass maker's scissors (*tagianti*) have sheared the molten glass—see it in hand blown glass flagons and the foot of wine glasses—see the tiny bubbles within—suspended—immobilised. I peer through one pane then another then another, and each time the green and the white house opposite wavers as if seen through a heat haze and when I move my head the view shifts and changes as if the house itself has become molten too.

Deduction, interpreting the interaction between the object and the perceiver

A bee samples the possibilities of each pane, one by one; although each offers the same lack, the bee persists. It bumps and lurches, just as it does against the flowers in the garden below. It does not learn, but tries again and again, misled as if it was a gigantic vertical tapestry with each pane a flower. I'm pleased to discover *poliflora* is the name for this type of multi-light window and then realise I am wrong, it's *polifora*.

Speculation, framing hypotheses and questions which lead out from the object to external evidence for testing and resolution

I shift and sort the past, imagine the panes shifting too, sliding one on top of the other like glass counters. No one can see in for the windows are so high, except for the bees and the swifts. If they could, they might

see our diminished figures, bent and wavery through the concentric ripples of glass. Few shadows fall through this cathedral of circles, with its lens upon lens of possibilities.

Memory, managed or unruly, single track or multitudinous, can be mediated by the *practice* of life writing, which after all has spurred a plethora of retreats, online courses and academic qualifications, just as I think the practice of object curation as situated within museum studies or by individuals can be employed as a way-finder to cultural memory. Both have the potential to allow conscious and unconscious elements, the visible and the hidden, to play against each other. There is also the question of the life-writer's positionality, their determinants, which side of the roundel (or telescope, kaleidoscope, stereoscope or other optical metaphor) they look through. As Tamarin Norwood observed 'The writer [and I will add the curator] will always have had to make decisions about what to include or exclude, or add. And they will have had to make decisions about how to put all that onto the page. All those decisions *do something* to the pane of glass we're looking through'.[8] (Norwood 2024)

At the start of this essay I suggested that methodologies such as Prown's and others' might help illuminate the processes of life writing and, in the context of writing the edges of life, also help navigate the fraying of certainty around death. Perhaps it's obvious to say, but objects stay, although they may degrade and fade, and their stories be lost or altered through time. My baby shoes stayed where I'd put them in the display cabinet, just as they had stayed on my father's desk, and I always knew where to find them. The past, however, is impalpable, slips through the fingers, resists order, which is perhaps why we cling onto objects, imbue them with significance, hold them in museums and display cabinets, wrap them up for their own safety.[9] In *Souvenirs and Forgetting: Walter Benjamin's Memory-work* Esther Leslie compared Benjamin's affection for glass snow-globes (even though they are now made of plastic, who can resist shaking a snow globe and watching the tiny flakes of pretend snow swirl and settle onto the miniature scenes held within them) to the experiences that he described as 'individual expeditions into the depths of memory' from the viewpoint of a child in his memoir *Berlin Childhood around 1900*[10]. 'These baubles are like miniature exposures of significant experiences … ' Leslie writes,' … an attempt to preserve possibilities, lives and promises that were losing currency.' (Leslie 1999, 120).[11] While working on this essay, and at the same time preparing a paper on vitrines, crystal balls and other glass enclosures I learnt that the interlocking vignettes of *Berlin Childhood* proved so slippery to fuse together that the work as a whole remained unpublished until a decade after Benjamin's death in 1950 (Wilcox 2025).[12]

The difficulty of ordering memory is that certain life-events can upend the logic of time, as if one of the panes of glass becomes suddenly crystal clear, nets random details (a remembered outfit, an uttered sentence) or skips over significant moments in the interest of minutiae. I can, for example, remember the blue selvedge of the white hospital sheet that I lay on during childbirth and the crispness of its texture between my fingers but can't say why it assumed such importance. Unable to compose a sequential memoir, I wrote *Patch Work* as if it was exactly that, pinning and tacking together a collection of short prose pieces that had accrued over five years. As it neared completion, I shuffled and shook the pieces again and again, in the hope of finding some arrangement that would hopefully allow the reader to see through its multiple panes, however wavery and however remote the view. The key to each piece was a garment or textile which was sometimes front stage, and in others just a speck on the horizon. Many of the pieces were telescoped, distillations of far longer composition, but the one that I felt to be most 'true' was expansive, reflecting the slow days of life on a Scottish island. A toddler's hand-knitted cardigan acted as the kernel for the narrative but by the end it too had receded into the distance and, even though I still had the garment, the revelation was that I didn't actually need to get it out of the attic. The memory had become crystallised and, like a glass roundel full of tiny bubbles, or a snow-globe, I could imagine turning it over and over again in my hands, activating it, and seeing my daughter wearing the cardigan on a wind-swept beach, far away in the past.

Maternity smock (1990–1993)

The maternity smocks my mother made for that first expectancy were inspired by a flared tunic belonging to a colleague of mine at the V&A. Helen was a wonderful dresser, as was my mother, although in quite different ways (Wilcox 2020, 161).[13] But it was difficult, taking a paper pattern from a worn garment, for the grain of the fabric had stretched and the once-taut seams had begun to undulate. My mother unpicked and then

re-machine-stitched it exactly along those same tramlines as best she could, washed and pressed it and then returned the tunic, before transforming the pattern into a series of maternity smocks for me. Through this common project, these two women helped shape the maternal identity that I would proudly adopt as I transitioned into pregnancy, and sailed the forty—week passage of time towards delivery, my baby vital and kicking and ready to be held close in our arms and live that life he was meant to live.[14] None of us could possibly have anticipated what was to happen. I asked my mother to let Helen know that my son had inexplicably died during labour; I can't imagine how difficult it was for them both. He had got so close to taking his very first breath.

> Past and future are different from each other. Cause precedes effect. Pain comes after a wound, not before it. The glass shatters into a thousand pieces, and the pieces do not re-form into a glass. We cannot change the past; we can have regrets, remorse, memories. The future instead is uncertainty, desire, anxiety, open space, destiny, perhaps. We can live towards it, shape it, because it does not yet exist. Everything is still possible … Time is not a line with two equal directions: it is an arrow with different extremities. Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (Rovelli 2019, 19)

Time dulls when I think about my descent into what felt like an irrecoverable chasm of darkness. The fearful dislocation of bereavement was compounded by the fact that my body, the incubator of this new life, had also been the agent of its suffocation. Gone was the vitality and wonderment of maternity—*O love, how did you get here? O embryo*—Sylvia Plath calls out in her poem to her son, 'Nick and the Candlestick'.[15] Instead, I replayed the hours leading up his death, yearning for a different ending, stuck on a nightmarish loop. I felt stuck trying to tell this desperate story too. I simply didn't have the *practice.* In the years that followed, I tried to compose a history of maternity wear because I thought it was important and that the rigour of academia might help me frame what had happened, but couldn't complete it, for every corner I turned revealed maternal loss and infant death, particularly before the introduction of antisepsis in the late nineteenth century. I then wrote about this failed project in an essay called *Covering Up* (Wilcox 2013, 153–159). I discovered that within the discipline of oral history the re-telling of stories, especially those that had acutely felt emotional resonance, was regarded as fruitful and forgivable: as political psychologist Molly Andrews wrote, and I learnt through the passing of time, 'Herein lies the impetus to return to data: the more vantage points from which we view phenomena, the richer and more complex our understanding of that which we observe' (Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou 2008, 87).[16]

My return to data came in the form of my medical file. A decade or more later I recalled it, and it arrived in the post with a great thump, the envelope slightly torn with the weightiness of its contents. I wondered what temp was assigned to laboriously photocopy its many pages before bundling it up, slightly out of order, into its buff file. The file entirely relates to the history of my maternity and the notations, at first unremarkable, become, with the turn of a page, stark. The record of my son's entry into the world should, of course, have read 'time from delivery to first breath; immediate'. It did not. No one needed to tell me, for still-birth is silent. The agony of his absence followed me home, became a part of me. I watched from the upstairs window as my father and brother carried the Moses basket out to the car, and I stepped past, averting my gaze, as the pile of baby clothes gathered dust, bar the blue romper suit we buried him in. Hiding from the world, I became as abstracted and as silent as a ghost. Tamarin Norwood writes in *The Song of the Whole Wide World* about her own experience of grief that 'The silence had a centre that was very still—so still, it took up space in the house. It did not have a fixed place but was often with me, close to my chest, pressing against a shoulder, pressing a cheek. This bundle of stillness was like the silence in the way it described precisely the absence of what there should be' (Norwood 2024, 82).

> What are you writing about, he said, resting his hand on my shoulder.
>
> I'm writing about you, I said.[17]

The attic is the home of the awkward and the out of sight. Here sit the files from school, an old brass bed, unmarked boxes and black plastic bags, but here are also important things. I bring down a box of textiles—the dress that I carried back from Afghanistan in 1973, with its stiffly embroidered breastplate; some children's clothes that had particular memories, and one of the maternity smocks. I unfold it; it is cold, creased, a little dusty. The mother of pearl buttons that fasten down the front, themselves chosen from the button box that stretched back through generations of women, hang heavy on the thinning black fabric. I hold the

garment up against me, re-view it in the mirror; its narrow shoulders, made to fit flatteringly close, swell into the expansion of the skirt. Can one garment hold an entire history? I think it can, as can its many iterations, for in a sartorial reclamation of my own history, I wore a version of it on my wedding day; the finest white linen this time, negating the dark shadow of the original.

Laura Marcus, one of the foremost theorists of autobiography, wrote that 'autobiographical writing is seen to act as a window onto concepts of self, identity, and subjectivity, and into the ways in which these are themselves determined by time and circumstance' (Marcus 2018, 2). Time and circumstance sometimes propel us back into the past without warning. This year in Oxford, I visited Helen who had moved from London to look after her own grandchild, just as I was looking after mine. I sat at her kitchen table for more than an hour before she said, 'look, there's your mother's dress pattern'. I turned and there it was, hanging from a peg just behind me, the template that she created to house my expectancies, marked in faint blue biro with her handwriting in the language of construction: *grain, pocket line, front, cut 2, centre front, interline seam, fold line.*

(1) ***description*, recording the internal evidence of the object itself**
twinned smocks, one black (extant), one white (in storage), featuring mother of pearl buttons (hidden in the front placket) and patch pockets; the black one (*enceinte*) shows distinct signs of stretch, the white one (*marriage*) is, from memory, pristine apart from underarm sweat stains and is smaller in size. They appear to be home-made, albeit with skill.
(2) ***deduction, interpreting the interaction between the object and the perceiver***
the perceiver wore the objects (the black smock on numerous occasions; the white smock only once); her role has shifted from owner-wearer to owner-archivist and narrator; the smocks were recently reunited with the template (dress pattern) from which they and other iterations originated
(3) ***speculation*, framing hypotheses and questions which lead out from the object to external evidence for testing and resolution**
the black smock has emotional freight being associated with both still-birth and live-birth, and therefore occupies a centre ground from which both narratives can unfold; the white smock has emotional freight having been worn on a single occasion as a wedding garment while evoking and transcending other iterations associated with maternity including the wearer's black smock

Reflection

It took three decades before I was ready to string the pieces together that make up *Patch Work* and even longer to embark on this essay. *Patch Work's* nascence was linked to the death of my parents, the growing up of my children and a feeling that I had no choice. I could think of nothing else, it almost felt physical, a pressure on the abdomen, a heaviness so that in the end I could delay no longer. I composed entire paragraphs in my sleep and tried to capture them before they evaporated, over-writing my own scrawls so that the scattering of papers that I found on waking resembled the cross-hatch correspondences of the past, where letters have to be turned around and around in the hand in order to be read. Then, without really having had a plan, I found I had written a strange memoir, half dedicated to the fabric of the museum I had worked in my entire life, half dedicated to my family, those lost and those present, and as populated with objects as an old curiosity shop—draped cloth, old dresses, a dusty sofa, a mermaid with black hair, a porcelain cup plucked from the ocean floor; a pair of baby shoes. Hidden in it, through winding passageways of memory and folds of material slept the child that did not live, protected with language that alluded to his death, but did not compromise him, or me, for the intersubjectivity of life writing is that we can write our own life stories, blend truth with imagination, recall sights, sounds and sorrows, and crystallise them on the page so that they cannot ever again be altered or degraded by time.

Notes

1. Mida and Kim replace Prown's terms 'Description, Deduction and Speculation' with 'Observation, Reflection and Interpretation' and the term 'analyst' with 'detective'.

2. When I was a teenager, a school friend died in a motor bike accident. I visited her mother sometime later, and was horrified when she said I could take a pair of my friend's shoes if I wanted.
3. First shoes usually have soft soles designed to imitate the benefits of barefoot walking.
4. A stereograph is a pair of photographic images of the same subject taken from slightly different angles. When viewed through a stereoscope this gives the illusion of a single three-dimensional image.
5. With thanks to the oral historian Linda Sandino for drawing my attention to Brockmeier's work.
6. https://oclw.web.ox.ac.uk/home downloaded 02 May 2025.
7. Castello di Galbino near Anghiari, Tuscany.
8. Norwood, T. workshop notes (unpublished), Oxford Centre for Life Writing, Wolfson College, Oxford, January 2025.
9. I found that when I got stuck curating my V&A exhibitions a visit to the object store would always help.
10. The quote by Benjamin is from Howard Eiland's Foreword page xii to *Berlin Childhood around 1900.*
11. *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. The smashed snow globe in the final 'rosebud' scene in Orson Welles' 1941 film *Citizen Kane* also comes to mind.
12. Wilcox, C., *Window Dressing,* paper given at *Multiple Identities: telling life stories through objects,* a study day organised jointly by the Oxford Centre for Life Writing and the Centre for Fashion Curation and Cultural Programming, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. Wolfson College, Oxford, 29 April 2025.
13. I also wrote about this in 'Dressmaking' in Wilcox (2020).
14. M. J. Wilcox made four maternity smocks for me between 1989 and 1992: black cotton for day to day, one made from slightly stiffer purple grosgrain, a smart, heavier weight wool mix in brown for cold days, very lightweight dark blue silk for best. In 1992, using the same pattern but amending it, she used the finest white linen from Liberty's & Co. for my wedding dress (with matching skirt). All had mother-of-pearl buttons from the family button box.
15. First published in *Ariel*, 1965. Reprinted in *The Collected Poems*, 1981.
16. The quote from Molly Andrews was also included in my essay *Covering Up*.
17. The opening line of an imagined biography of Francis Wilcox Stair, stillborn 21 March 1990.

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