Objects of the Dead

MARGARET GIBSON

Death reconstructs our experience of personal and household objects in particular ways; there is the strangeness of realising that things have outlived persons, and, in this regard, the materiality of things is shown to be more permanent than the materiality of the body. In this edited extract from her book, *'Objects of the Dead'*, MARGARET GIBSON examines a poignant, universal and often complex experience—the death of a loved one and the often uneasy process of living with, and discarding, the objects that are left behind. For those who outlive a loved one, the objects that remain are significant memory traces and offer a point of connection with the absent body of the deceased. How and when family property is sorted through after a death is often fraught with difficulties, regrets and disagreements. Objects matter, however, 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.

When a loved one dies, suddenly their personal belongings and defining possessions come to the foreground of consciousness—they are truly noticed. This noticing is complex and often poignant. Death reconstructs our experience of personal and household objects in particular ways; there is the strangeness of realising that things have outlived persons, and, in this regard, the materiality of things is shown to be more permanent than the materiality of the body. Most of us live with traces of the dead in the form of furniture and other objects that have always been there or have entered our lives and households recently. I am naming these *'objects of the dead'* because they were once the personal and household belongings of the living, now deceased.

For those who outlive a loved one, the objects that remain are significant memory traces and offer a point of connection with the absent body of the deceased. At some point in time after a loved one has died, one or more family members or close friends sort through the personal objects. What are the kinds of decisions made, experiences had and memories recalled in and through this process? What is the fate of objects after a death? As remnants of lives and identities, objects of the dead sit in rooms, on shelves and in drawers. They are worn on bodies, are stored away for safe-keeping, or end up in charity shops, auction houses or eBay.

Buying a dress, a shirt, jeans, shoes, a book, a saucepan, glassware—any number and type of object—involves the transference of that object from the market setting of the shop to the setting of the home. The image of the object in the shop, its lure as something of practicality, desire, status or identity, is also transferred, not necessarily without change, to the home. However, when an object loses 'newness' because it has been touched and possessed, it may also lose its lure as a commodity; of course, this depends on the object and the owner. Celebrity objects and possessions, antiques and collectables—these are another story. Antiques and collectables represent a particular type of commodity that has relative value according to its age, origin, singularity or rarity in number, the quality of its material and design, the reputation of its designer and the history of its ownership. It is in the antiques and collectables market that we find the fetish of the celebrity relic—the aura of the fur-collared jacket belonging to Marilyn Monroe captured rather wittily in the film *'The Wonderboys'*, for example.

In entering the home—the sphere of personal space and identity—an object shifts its value and status not only in its objective market value but also in its subjective value, that is, how it is regarded by its owner and user. Of course, it may cease to be noticed, becoming an object amongst other objects, commanding attention only occasionally for one reason or another. Objects matter, however, 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. In sorting through her deceased mother's possessions with her sister, Simone de Beauvoir was struck by the aura and the evocation of her mother's things. In her memoir, *'A Very Easy Death'*, she wrote about the way in which objects can seem to hold a biography. In some sense, memories

through objects are already there and, like photograph negatives, are just waiting to be printed out. I felt this to be the case when my father was dying; I began to notice his things and to write a journal.

blankets. Like the transitional objects of childhood, the bereaved also use objects to negotiate the loss and absence of a loved one. Winnicott's research revealed that 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 that 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.

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The interviewee, Luce, spoke about her father dying when she was just fifteen. Luce's mother died when Luce was in her late forties. During the two hour interview with Luce, she told the story of an object hugged by her mother when she was elderly and dying.

"I am sitting in Dad's chair as I write this. Mum bought him this chair on one of his birthdays...It is probably nearly thirty years old, this big old brown recliner. It's vinyl, circa 1970s, with studded buttons on the back. The armrests are scarred with wear and tear, and bits of foam stuffing are showing through. My father must have sat in this chair (his chair) thousands of times...As I sit here I know that he will never sit here again [he was in hospital]. The association between Dad and this chair is still firmly in place but the practice of that association, the actual living embodiment of that relationship between his bodily self and this chair, has been severed."

While consumer culture encourages a fickle relationship with the objects of lives shared with others, it is nevertheless essential for individual and human development that objects can be let go. Part of growing up is learning how to negotiate our attachments to the world of things. The psychoanalytic concept of cathexis is a useful framework in which to consider the emotional life of objects and transitions of attachment and detachment to them. Cathexis refers to the psychic charge or emotional stimulus attached to love objects and figures of identification. The psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott developed the concept of the transitional object based on his research into childhood development. Transitional objects are invested or charged with cathexis and, in childhood, include things such as teddy bears, dolls and comfort

Illustration: Savina Hopkins

"My mother was in a nursing home in Camberwell, Melbourne. She had a poisoned foot and couldn't walk. She had a catheter in and a catheter bag. Anyway, I put her in a wheelchair with her leg sticking out the front and the catheter bag hanging on the side. I just took her down to Camberwell shopping centre, which is kind of the upper middle class in the eastern suburbs. We went to this place and I bought her a milkshake—we sort of zoomed around and that was beautiful. That was in March and she died the very beginning of May.

It was autumn; the sun was shining and it was beautiful. The place we went to used to be called the Chocolate Box—I don't think it is called that any more. There were these rabbits there: it was just before Easter and they had bunches of Easter eggs around their necks, and my mum said she wanted one and I bought it for her. It was...the sort of thing you do with a child...So there was me, the child, buying this toy really, this beautiful soft rabbit with these Easter eggs for my mother. When she died I said I wanted that rabbit because I bought it for her and my mother sort of hugged it like a little kid."

Luce's story captures how we go through some experiences knowing, then and there, how significant they are and how memorable they will be. The toy rabbit was a transitional object both emotionally and symbolically (in terms of the mother's transitional status of dying); it mediated the mother's relationship with her own impending loss of self. The scene described, between daughter and mother, is one of generational reversal: a child becomes parent to a parent. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Luce has kept the toy rabbit, and she lets children who visit her house play with it.

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, and the objects were often those that cover the body, especially clothing. I kept the blanket that covered my father's body while he was dying and on the night he died. One interviewee, Anna, kept and wore her husband's jumper for many weeks after he died. She described how she used to hug herself when she wore it. After a period of time, she was able to stop wearing the jumper and packed it away. She didn't give the jumper to anyone or throw it out; it still held important memories of her husband, as well as the memory of her own intense grieving.

From childhood to old age, we acquire and gather around ourselves material possessions. It is part of how we occupy space, imagine ourselves and claim an identity. In childhood the acquisition of possessions is mostly performed through the actions and resources of parents, friends and other family. In old age, adult children often assist or facilitate parental decisions about the disposal of possessions. So much loss of identity, place and family history takes place in this transition. This is an added grief for many people, most commonly women, who as widows are left to deal with the practical and emotional stuff of family homes and material histories.

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Everyday objects and personal possessions end up in unexpected places because of natural disasters, war and human travel. The tsunami devastation in South-East Asia in December 2004 showed how quickly human life can be transformed into debris. The objects of disasters and genocide are often experienced as unhomely or haunting, because they are reminders of trauma and its disorder, both psychologically and geographically. I refer to these objects as *'nomadic'* because not only are they signs of the travel and movement of human beings; they too have travelled, losing and changing their place of housing. Of course, all objects are nomadic in the circulation and exchange of goods and commodities. We buy things, bring them home, and when we move house they either go with us or stay. When we die, our possessions move to the homes of family, friends and strangers. Death makes all material possessions nomadic.

One of the defining aspects of modernity is increased human mobility through choice and circumstance. In contemporary Australia, for example, it is unusual for people to spend the whole of their lives in the same house. Paid work, study and love relationships are common reasons for moving house and geographical location. These moves, however, impact on people's ability to keep, in the long term, objects of their deceased family. One interviewee, Justine, lamented the fact that her travels overseas ultimately meant the loss of mementoes of her deceased aunt. She felt very sad about this and wished that, in her youth, she had had more presence of mind to understand their long-term meaning and value. Other interviewees simply accepted the fact that because of increased human travel and movement, modern society places greater limits on holding on to generational property.

However, when movement comes about through forced circumstances, the issue of what can be moved across distances by foot, horse and cart or any other mode of transport becomes crucial. While objects that enhance survival take most priority in desperate and dangerous circumstances of human movement, it is unusual for objects of identity and memory not to be taken as well if at all possible. In his research on transitional objects and refugees, David Parkin (1999) found that:

'...even under...conditions of immediate flight or departure people do, if they can, seek minimal reminders of who they are and where they come from. Alongside items to sell or use in defence en route, and the food, farming tools, mattresses, blankets, medicines...are sometimes the compressed family photos, letters, and personal effects with little or no utilitarian or market value' (p. 313).

Discarding personal and household items is part of the trajectory of self-identity and embodiment. Hawkins and Muecke (2003) write:

'Getting rid of things is one of our most quotidian experiences of loss. Expelling and discarding is more than biological necessity—it is fundamental to the ordering of the self' (p. xiii). The right to dispose of our own property is taken for granted and rarely questioned. Getting rid of other people's possessions, however, is another matter: few people would feel that they have the right to discard the property of living people without consent, and the right to rid ourselves of the property of the dead throws up moral dilemmas; for example, whose self, identity and household have priority—is it the deceased self, now subject to material erasure, or the self of the person dealing with the deceased's property? The fact that objects themselves have differential values, based on the market and on more personal criteria, already orders the relationship and priority of selves and identities. Since it is generally only a small portion of objects that truly hold special value, the living can dispose of most property without feeling that they have privileged their own interests, values and even tastes above those of the deceased.

When people die, the status of owner doesn't necessarily switch immediately (if at all) to the living. The question of ownership, and thus responsibility, can enter a liminal period where property or objects are neither fully possessed nor dispossessed. Of course, taking responsibility for objects, deciding their fate, is not the same as owning them. People can feel 'bad' about getting rid of the possessions of their dead, because something of the person remains attached to the object, but various rituals of dispossession enable people to wipe clean the remainder of another person or disinvest objects of the 'me-ness' attached to them. Thus, washing clothes before giving them away is an important rite and so too is placing objects in detached places and spaces so that people can ease them out of their lives and their sense of self more readily (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005, p. 814).

Pragmatically, most people know that they simply cannot keep everything and that decisions, more or less considered, have to be made at some point in time. An important question is: when? It is not possible or advisable to be prescriptive about this matter, and ultimately people move towards sorting through possessions in their own time; it may not be an entirely conscious decision. Sue, who is in her early sixties, told me about winding up her parents' estate. They hadn't been able to part with anything, she wrote, and had *'a collection of newspapers going back to the 1800s, schoolbooks of their own parents and grandparents, old cheque butts, unopened purchases, receipts, greeting cards'*. Sue *'began culling too early and too quickly'*, and, at the time of our communication, was *'still struggling with regrets and with the ongoing process'*.

A few of the people I interviewed for this research hadn't made any decisions about the belongings of their dead and were in no hurry to. One interviewee said, *'Just because John's dead doesn't mean that I have to remove what's left of him'*. Within months of bereavement, however, the grieving can feel a vague pressure from friends and workmates to show signs that they are coping and getting on with life. One of the causalities of this pressure to appear as if one is 'moving on' is that people can throw out too much too quickly for the psychological benefit of others—friends and family. Later on, they can experience a sense of loss because they no longer have those valuable, intimate objects that trigger and carry memories. This is what happened to a woman who discarded everything of her late husband's, including shared household items. The only important object kept was a photograph. The woman's daughter-in-law told me the story:

"She sold or disposed of all her pots, dishes, even the toaster (a four-slicer) because 'they were too big' and she was now on her own. It was not until about twelve months later when my husband and I visited her that we found she was having some problems adjusting and she told us what she had done. By then she was very remorseful that all she had left was the one photo."

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. As noted by many psychologists of grief, there is usually a degree of anger, even resentment, that the bereaved harbour towards the deceased: *'Why have you left me alone?'* and *'Why can't things be the same?'* These questions represent the sorts of emotional feelings and inner psychological responses that people have. Often, the grieving don't know why they were in such a hurry to make changes to a house and its contents. For example, soon after my father died, my mother chopped down a tree he had planted in the front garden. It was a very important tree for my father, and my sister and I were quite taken aback by the action. Months later, looking at the tree stump, my mother wondered why she had done it.

Louise, one of my interviewees, spoke about her quick response of cleaning out her father's room. Louise

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had mixed, ambivalent feelings towards him: although she said that she loved him, she also spoke about how difficult and cruel he could be. She remembered how he made her feel incompetent and would put her down as a child. During a mid-life crisis, Louise's father left her mother for another woman; as he became older and his health declined, he moved back in to her mother's house, as she had volunteered to take care of him. Louise's father spent the rest of his life there, and much of his time in his bedroom. Louise said:

'When my father died I cleaned out his room. Dad died at home; he died suddenly sitting on his bed, and Mum came in and found him...it was very traumatic for her. I went up there as soon as I found out. I immediately wanted to clean [his] room out, so that it didn't retain that feeling of him being there dead. I sort of wanted to take that away. It was quite painful to have the room where he died...it was all his things, his smell and all that. There were things there that were really touching like his bowls jacket—he used to play bowls...I suppose it seems really cruel; it seems like I whisked him out. I suppose I could look at it that way.'

Thinking more deeply and expansively about our relationship to objects and material life will, I hope, enable more sensitive understandings and responses to grief and death. I discovered that most people really knew about this subject and yet hadn't given it much thought, hadn't articulated their own experiences or stories. Indeed, people found themselves speaking about objects and recognising, perhaps for the first time, that they are worth speaking about.

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