

The Peach Slip

If I wore the jacket, Alan wore me. He was there in the wrinkles of the elbows, wrinkles that in the technical jargon of sewing are called “memory”; he was there in the stains of the very bottom of the jacket; he was there in the smell of the armpits. Above all he was there in the smell. – Peter Stallybrass, ‘Worn Worlds: Clothing, Mourning and the Life of Things’

I remember loving the smell: a curious blend of cheap perfume, dried blush and days-old beer. The dress – peach 1920s satin silk, with two straps and a frayed frill at the bottom of two panels sewn together – had been hanging in the back of your wardrobe for thirty years when I sniffed it out, a strangely olfactory dresser. At the time, I did not ask your permission; but stole it in an illegal move of kleptomaniac madness, a criminal adolescent shaking interior walls and wooden furniture. I was just seventeen, over my smelliest years, but still guilty of a pong or two, with hair that got greasy a little too quickly, and skin that shone with liquid fume.

You were just seventeen, too, when you found it on another rail. You wore it until your adolescence died at the age of twenty-two, when you traded brown beer for black Guinness, and boots for shoes. It first got smudged in Belfast’s The Pound Club, and then again in Bristol at The Cadbury. Its hem has also grazed the flooded fields of Glastonbury.

(It’s always been a night-time dress: easy to slip on, to dance or write in.)

I think of Francesca Woodman, decaying as ‘girl’ at a tender twenty-two, in her second hand, floral dresses. Her dresses look thin, as if you can see through them, as if you can see through her, a transient fabric of flesh. She was a girl before she was a ghost in photographs, a girl who liked to wear old clothes, clothes once worn by another, clothes too big for her slight girl body. Sacks hang loose, buttons fall free, hems seek the floor, in her ephemeral black and white photographs.

In her artist book *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, Francesca wears a white Victorian blouse, dotted with lace panels and snaked by embroidery. Her legs are bare, but she places her left hand over her vagina in a gesture of ownership. And then there is the corporeal gesture of her writing: in handwritten ink that curls like vine, Francesca confesses that *these things arrived from my grandmothers they make me think about where I fit in this odd geometry of time*. Language helps her uncover the love in her things, finding memories in the fabric’s wrinkles.

The peach dress sought me out. It looked like the ripest fruit in the bowl – I wanted to eat it, like a young Alice – but there was no juice inside: my flesh would make it ripple later. It sparkled on the rail, amidst your boring jumpers and 90s shift dresses.

It belonged to you for a time, but it no doubt swung in the wardrobe of another mother before that: I don't want to get special and romanticise its specificity. And yet somehow, I can feel your trace, and sense your skin, the two of us touching, re-joined in collaborative ownership. I convince myself that I can see the impression of your fingertips muddying the hem, a dream no doubt caused by the haunting image of you wearing it in a family photograph that sat on our mantel, the image as crumpled as the dress I continue to hold, both like paper (invocations to write).

elin o'Hara slavick wrote on her childhood dresses in embroidered text for her 1991 *Wall of Incoherent Dresses*, scripts of tacked out words that she then photographed as archive objects. On a cream scrunched slip, slavick scrawled in stitches: *I ATE FOOD IN THE BASEMENT, / I SUCKED LILACS. I KICKED MY SISTER'S SHINS. I PICKED DANDELIONS AND SOLD THEM / FOR A QUARTER*. In writing, she collapses her child body into her adult one, in a material performance of the transience of memory. Wearing the peach dress now is a cannibalisation of your adolescent self, and mine, with additional inscriptions of time past. I sucked on sweets, and sucked boy's faces in that dress, and now it is helping me to suck on writing in this event of remembering and love.

I cannot let it go. I hang onto this flimsy souvenir as a way to divert feelings of loss, of disappearance, to suspend the promise of death. As Susan Stewart writes in *On Longing: We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative.*

I fetishise the slip's history, and also its shape, in a way that is almost sexual. Freud pictured the female 'clothing fetishist' as just another hysteric: sick, warbling and wayward, she was not equipped with the same agency of controlled perversion as was supposedly enjoyed by the masculine fetishist. I fetishise dresses as material and memory; I fetishise that silk in the same way that I fetishise writing: both give me pleasure. Both use my hands in haptic combat.

I gaze at the photographic souvenir. You are eighteen: a year after you found it, and you look weirdly dressed up for a day at the beach, devouring ice cream as readily as you ate silks. A dress is never 'just' a dress, when it is a fragment of a body, a thread of a life.

... clothing is perishable, and because it takes on the body (it takes form, smells, dirt) it makes a "second grave for the loved being," even before death, but especially after death, writes Carol Mavor.

I am writing this text before death. It is a second grave for a loved being that shows the living embodiment of writing.

The dress is an empty container of things once said, once written, and bodies touched. It traps memories and words in its forgotten wrinkles. It works like an absorbent second skin, with rips that forget to heal. As Dodie Bellamy writes of a clothing clash encounter

she once had with a friend over a stolen garment: *Even then I sensed that an appropriated blouse is not just any blouse, it leaves traces of its original owner...* to be perverted in time, and bodily trespass.

Like skin that cannot mend, the peach silk has always been sort of scratched, as if a cat had once got to it, its warp and weft disturbed. I wore it scratched, too, as I slid on my ripped fishnet tights and troweled on the eyeliner, before a night of martini and lemonade would rub it all off. I was somehow you and not you: a delicate simulation and a perverse performance, invading your body, possessing it, re-owning it with sartorial scratches.

The dress dangled empty from its wooden hanger, like the tattered and floating pink dresses of Louise Bourgeois's fabric sculptures. *Pink Days and Blue Days* and *Peach Days*. Caught mid-flight, the dress appeared uncanny and disembodied, locked into a state of enduring transience, before I filled it up with my changing adolescent body, transforming the youthful one it once it draped, before I arrived. I fixed its hem, stitched it fresh, in a longing desire to preserve and pervert her in equal measure.

I appropriated its emptiness with flesh and activity, with feverish intent to make it new and wear it out. Scratch it harder, my Grade II listed slip. Write upon it with a slip of the hand, transforming its narrative.

These fragments arrive like broken stitches, or the parts of a pattern before the dress is made. If, in the technical jargon of sewing, wrinkles mean memory, then could sewing also be a synonym for writing? Because that is how I find them. It is close to how Zoe Leonard found them, too, when she mourned for her friend, the artist David Wojnarowicz, who died from AIDS in 1992, in the sutured shapes of sewn together fruit fragments in *Strange Fruit (for David)* (1992-1997). She stitches torn skins in a desire to get closer to the person she has lost: threading bodies together in a repetitious act of perverse and passionate love.

I've been wondering if this is a memorial to my love of you, or my love of clothes, or my love of writing. Probably all three, like Peter Stallybrass's 'Worn Worlds' lecture to Allon White, or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's collaboratively written conversation with Michael Moon that memorialises Divine, the oversized diva of John Waters's films, who died decked out in fringe and nylon. (Or that's how I have dreamt it.)

Eve begins her Divine text with a dream of her shopping in a department store: she is frightened that they wouldn't have any dresses big enough for her lusciously flabby frame, and then is delighted when they do, the store's symbol sizing revealing an intimate connection with the gigantic garment queerness of Divine. Eve writes in her clothing reverie: *I was dubious about whether they would have any clothes that would be big enough for me, but a saleswoman said they did, adding that rather than being marked by size numbers, each size-group of clothes was garnered under a graphic symbol: over here, she said, were the clothes that would fit me. "Over here" referred to a cluster of luscious-looking clothes, hung on a rack between two curtained*

dressing rooms. The graphic symbol that surmounted them was a pink triangle. I woke up extremely cheerful.

I don't need to dream how Divine's friend, the writer Cookie Mueller, was dressed on her deathbed. The photographic souvenir is a cue to my fantasy. She is a blond Cleopatra, gold in all senses, with bangles stacked up to her elbow, so tight she could not breathe. Flowers framed her face; cigarette butts were thrown like confetti. I struggle to separate how much I adore her clothes with how much I adore her writing: intimate, material attachments.

With her own line of clothing that had embroidered 'COOKIE' labels hidden on the inside, Cookie was a part-time fashion designer alongside her work of writing, the two vocations emerging slyly in her stories, as when she confesses to her tantalising outfit for hitchhiking: *I, the blond, was dressed conservatively in a see-through micro-mini dress and black velvet jacket.* I long to see her, smell her, and touch that transparent fabric, but instead it's her words that touch me, and my writing her ... that makes a second mesh, with hands that sew.

More sombre, Susan Sontag chose a pleated Fortuny Delphos gown for her funeral, ever the full-time writer in love with literary references. Fortuny's dresses are repeatedly described by Proust in *In Search of Lost Time*. But I prefer the smelly mess of Cookie, the ripped red nylon of Divine, the dirty folds of Francesca, the bloodied lace of Kathy Acker. Like you, and like me, they are all adolescent dressers, rebellious in their rejection of time, as they firmly chose old clothes, as ragged as their texts, bodies and photographs.

In her memorial to Kathy Acker's clothes and language, Dodie Bellamy, as fan and author, dreams of her dead friend's lace, her jewellery, her stretchy garments that *pulled tightly across her body*, and all those designer garments she didn't take good care of. Vivienne Westwood constructed corsetry bloodied by the ketchup of a burger. Or Jean Paul Gaultier browned by bolognese. In 'Digging Through Kathy Acker's Stuff', Dodie infiltrates the master bedroom in Kathy's executor's home, and with boxes of her dresses hidden in corners, Dodie imagines what *my piece of Kathy jewelry will look like, ornate amethyst-studded silver like the piece I saw on the table at her memorial ceremony.* Touching her objects in spectral, corporeal intimacy, an intimacy found in writing, Dodie asks herself: *Will Kathy's stuff change me, will it work some spell on my life?* A spell of language, of license, the barefaced permission of the writer to wear, steal, and possess all that she touches in life and writing. In pilfering Kathy's boxes, Dodie pilfers Kathy's way of writing, an attitude that is found in wearing another body's clothes as literary kleptomania.

Carol Mavor, as a lover of Proust (who, as we know, was a lover of Fortuny) has written of the sewing that occurs in *In Search of Lost Time* as being a metaphor for the Narrator's life writing, the novel as a whole. First, she admits, it is the image of the cathedral, which serves as the overriding image of the book's novelistic structure, but by the final volume (*Time Regained*), the Narrator muses upon his mending-writing. He looks upon his

servant's sewing that fixes up old clothes, and sees in each stitch the move of each word, the building of its writing. Proust writes as Marcel: *I should construct my book, I dare not say ambitiously like a cathedral, but simply like a dress.*

For the 2005 exhibition at the Wapping Project, Jules Wright put stolen dresses in an industrial cathedral, of which I am writing here, stitching its pieces together in anticipation of the final garment. I wish I could have been there to touch, graze, and smell those empty silks that galloped around on a carousel inviting wandering hands. Inside the empty boiler room span disembodied dresses, tempting perverse acts of kleptomaniac desire, childhood play or adolescent rebellion. Dresses made like buildings (or texts) moved in a way that showed the movement of their making. Kathy would've loved to get messy with these garments, shoes and hats, dreamt up by young designers like Roksanda Illincic, Gareth Pugh, Preen, Siv Stoldal and Robert Cary-Williams. I long to scratch their spinning fabrics, but instead it is my writing that scratches, the dream of being there lived out here in a text(ile) that mends. I write with a slip of a hand to give shape to the lost bodies that wore them, and helped them speak. I play as I write, as I play when I dress, like when I stole my mother's peach slip and imagined I was the poet Mina Loy, with her lampshade earrings and androgynous slips – roomy enough to write in.

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