

open up. The Japs are slain. The side of my hand goes through them and cuts them down.

There is a cheer. A meld in spades has been played. It is the final play.

By the mouth of the cave, the survivors gather in dawn's light. They pick up their comrades. They will bury them in the cave and seal it with a grenade. The commando is awarded the wool fibers. They fit in his helmet, where the mold has left a thin seam. They are feathers, and throughout the war he will wear them in his helmet.

Pheasant.

Worn Worlds

Clothes, Mourning, and
the Life of Things

PETER STALLYBRASS

For the past two years I have been writing about clothes. In fact, I've been doing so without even knowing it. I had no inkling that I was writing about clothes other than as a by-product of my interest in sexuality, colonialism, and the history of the nation-state. Then something happened which changed my sense of what I was doing. I was giving a paper on the concept of the individual when I was quite literally overcome. I could not read, and an embarrassing silence ensued. I cried. I had a close friend sitting next to me, and he simply took the paper from me and read on.

Later, when I tried to understand what had happened, I realized that for the first time since his death, Allon White had returned to me. Allon and I were friends; we had shared a house; we had written a book together. After his death from leukemia in 1986, his widow, Jen, and I had both, in our different ways, tried to invoke Allon, but with remarkably little success. For others, there were active memories, active griefs. For me, there was simply a hole, an absence, and something like anger at my own inability to grieve. What memories I had seemed sentimental and unreal – quite incommensurable with the strident, loving articulacy that was Allon's. The one thing that had seemed real to me was the series of long conversations I had with Jen about what to do with Allon's remains: with the hat that still stood on the bookshelf in his study, a hat that he had bought to conceal the baldness that had arrived long before the physical humiliations of chemotherapy; with his glasses that had been beside the bed and still looked at you. For Jen, the question was whether and how to reorder the house, what to do with Allon's books and with all the ways in which he had occupied space. Perhaps, she

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thought, the only way to resolve this problem was to move, leaving the house once and for all. But in the meantime, she gave away some of his books and some of his clothes.

Allon and I had always exchanged clothes, having for two years shared a house, in which we were communal in just about everything except our filth – that alone, paradoxically, seemed irremediably individual, the object of the other's disgust. When Allon died, Jen gave me his American baseball jackets, which seemed appropriate enough, since I had by that time moved permanently to the United States. But she also gave me the jacket of Allon's which I had most coveted. He had picked it up in a secondhand shop down from Brighton station, and its mystery was, and is, simple enough to describe. It is made of a rather shiny black cotton-and-polyester weave, and on the outside it's still in good shape. But inside, much of the lining has been cut out and the rest is in tatters, as if several angry cats had been at work with their claws. Inside, the only remnant of former glory is the label: "Made Expressly for Turndorf's by Di Rossi, Hand Sewn." I've often wondered if it was the "Di Rossi" that attracted Allon, as he adored the Italian look from his childhood; but most likely it was just the fit of the jacket.

Anyway, this was the jacket which I was wearing when I read my paper on the individual, a paper which was in many ways an attempt to invoke Allon. But at no time in the writing of it was my invocation answered. Like the paper, Allon was dead. And then, as I began to read, I was inhabited by his presence, taken over. If I wore the jacket, Allon wore me. He was there in the wrinkles of the elbows, wrinkles which in the technical jargon of sewing are called "memory"; he was there in the stains at the very bottom of the jacket; he was there in the smell of the armpits. Above all, he was there in the smell.

So I began to think about clothes. I read about clothes, I talked to friends about clothes. The magic of cloth, I came to believe, is that it receives us: receives our smells, our sweat, our shape even. And when our parents, our friends, our lovers die, the clothes in their closets still hang there, holding their gestures, both reassuring and terrifying, touching the living with the dead. But for me, more reassuring than terrifying, although I have felt both emotions. For I have always wanted to be touched by the dead; I have wanted them to haunt me; I have even

hoped that they will rise up and inhabit me. And they do literally inhabit us through the "habits" which they bequeath. I put on Allon's jacket. However worn, it has outlived its wearers and, I hope, will outlive me. In thinking of clothes as passing fashions, we repeat less than a half-truth. Bodies come and go; the clothes which have received those bodies survive. They circulate through secondhand shops, through rummage sales, through the Salvation Army; or they are transmitted from parent to child, from sister to sister, from brother to brother, from sister to brother, from lover to lover, from friend to friend.

Clothes receive the human imprint. Jewelry lasts longer, and can also move us. But even though it has a history, it resists the history of our bodies. Enduring, it rebukes our mortality, which it imitates only in the occasional scratch. On the other hand, food, which, like jewelry, is a gift which joins us to each other, rapidly *becomes* us and disappears. Like food, cloth can be shaped by our touch; like jewelry, it endures beyond the immediate moment of consumption. It endures, but it is mortal. As Lear says disgustedly of his own hand, "It smells of mortality." It is a smell which I love.

It is the smell which attaches a child to its comforter. A piece of cloth, a teddy bear, whatever. Cloth that can be put in the mouth, chewed upon, anything but washed. Cloth that bears the teeth marks, the grime, the bodily presence of the child. Cloth that decays: the teddy bear's arm falls off, the edge of the cloth frays. Cloth that endures and comforts. Cloth that, as any child knows, is *specific*. Once, when I was looking after Anna, a friend's child, I attempted to "replace" her lost comforter with a piece of cloth that looked exactly like it. She, of course, knew immediately that it was a fraud, and I still remember her look of distrust and disgust at my betrayal. The comforter, however much it stands in for absences and loss, remains irrevocably itself even as it is transformed by touch and lips and teeth.

As I thought about cloth, I rethought my own work on early modern England. To think about cloth, about clothes, was to think about memory, but also about power and possession. I began to see the extent to which Renaissance England was a cloth society. By this I mean not only that its industrial base was cloth, and in particular the manufacture of wool, but also that cloth was the staple currency, far more so than gold

or money. To be a member of an aristocratic household, to be a member of a guild, was to wear livery. It was to be paid above all in cloth. And when a guild member was set free, he – or, more rarely, she – was said to be “clothed.”

Let me clarify what I mean by a cloth society. In its most extreme form, it is a society in which values and exchange alike take the form of cloth. When the Incas incorporated new areas into their kingdom, the new citizens “were granted ‘clothes to wear . . . which among them is highly valued.’” But the gift was not, of course, disinterested. This “gift” of textile was, as John Murra puts it, “a coercive and yet symbolic reiteration of the peasant’s obligations to the state, of his or her conquered status.” In exchange for this supposed gift, peasants were obliged by law “to weave cloth for crown and church needs.” To the surprise of the European invaders, while some state warehouses contained food, weapons, and tools, there were “a large number holding wool and cotton, cloth and garments.” Similarly, in the court of Emperor Akbar, there was “a special department for receiving the shawls and dresses (*khelats*) given as tributes or pledges by different notables and regions.” As Bernard Cohn has argued, “the gift of dress was the essential act of homage and rule within the Mughal system of kingship, effecting the incorporation of the subject into the ruler’s body.”

In a cloth society, then, cloth is both a currency and a means of incorporation. As it changes hands, it binds people in networks of obligation. The particular power of cloth to effect these networks is closely associated with two almost contradictory aspects of its materiality: its ability to be permeated and transformed by maker and wearer alike; its ability to endure over time. Cloth thus tends to be powerfully associated with memory. Or, to put it more strongly, cloth is a kind of memory. When a person is absent or dies, cloth can absorb his or her absent presence. The poet and textile artist Nina Payne writes of sorting through her husband’s clothes after his death:

Everything to be saved was stored in an upstairs closet, jackets and trousers that Eric or Adam might eventually use, sweaters, ties, three shirts made of soft-checked cotton, blue-grey, brick red and yellow ochre. I saw that the grey one had been worn once after

ironing, then replaced on its hanger to be worn again. If I pressed my head into the clothes, I could smell him.

“I could smell him.” Dead, he still hangs there in the closet, in the shape of his body impressed upon the cloth, in a frayed cuff, in a smell.

What is most astonishing to me about insights like Nina Payne’s is that, in societies like ours – that is to say, in modern economies – they are so rare. I think this is because, for all our talk of the “materialism” of modern life, attention to material is precisely what is absent. Surrounded by an extraordinary abundance of materials, their value is to be endlessly devalued and replaced. Marx, for all his brilliant insight into the workings of capitalism, was mistaken in appropriating the concept of fetishism from nineteenth-century anthropology and applying it to commodities. He was, of course, right in insisting that the commodity is a “magical” (that is, mystified) form, in which the labor processes which give it its value have been effaced. But in applying the term *fetish* to the commodity, he in turn erased the true magic by which other tribes (and, who knows, perhaps even we ourselves) inhabit and are inhabited by what they touch and love. To put it another way: for us, to love things is something of an embarrassment. Things are, after all, mere things. And to accumulate things is not to give them life. It is because things are *not* fetishized that they remain lifeless.

In a cloth economy, though, things take on a life of their own. That is to say, one is paid not in the “neutral” currency of money but in material which is richly absorbent of symbolic meaning, and in which memories and social relations are literally embodied. In a capitalist economy – an economy of new cloth, new clothes – the life of textiles takes on a ghostly existence, emerging to prominence, or even to consciousness, only at moments of crisis. Yet such moments of crisis occur again and again as the trace elements of material life. Vladimir Nabokov, for instance, in his last novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*, describes how Vadim, after the death of his wife Iris, feels the need to banish those objects of hers which would overpower him:

A curious form of self-preservation moves us to get rid, instantly, irrevocably, of all that belonged to the loved one we lost. Other-

context by the act of handling them start to become bloated with an awful mad life of their own. Her dresses now wear their own selves, her books leaf through their own pages. We suffocate in the tightening circle of those monsters that are misplaced and misshapen because she is not there to tend them. And even the bravest among us cannot meet the gaze of her mirror.

How to get rid of them is another problem. I could not drown them like kittens; in fact, I could not drown a kitten, let alone her brush or bag. Nor could I watch a stranger collect them, take them away, come back for more. Therefore, I simply abandoned the flat, telling the maid to dispose in any manner she chose of all those unwanted things. Unwanted! At the moment of parting they appeared quite normal and harmless; I would even say they looked taken aback.

Here, Nabokov captures the terror of the material trace. For Vadim, the life of these objects is bloated, monstrous, as if they themselves have usurped the place of their wearer. The dresses "now wear their own selves." But even as Vadim exterminates the monsters, they take on a new life: not just "normal and harmless" but "taken aback" – taken aback, perhaps, at his inability to take them back.

At such moments of crisis, these trivial matters, the matter of matter, seem to loom disproportionately large. What are we to do with the clothes of the dead? This question is addressed by Philip Roth in his autobiography, *Patrimony*. There he describes how, after his mother died, his father "disappeared into the bedroom and started emptying her bureau drawers and sorting through the clothes in her closet. I was still at the door with my brother, welcoming the mourners who'd followed us back from the cemetery." Roth, disturbed by his father's refusal to perform the usual social functions, pursues him into the bedroom:

The bed was already strewn with dresses, coats, skirts, and blouses pulled from the closet, and [my father] was now busily chucking things from a corner of [my mother's] lowest bureau drawer into a plastic garbage bag. . . . "What good is this stuff anymore? It's no good to me hanging here. This stuff can go to Jewish relief – it's in mint condition."

Like Vadim, Roth's father wants to erase the trace because the trace seems empty, a reminder of all that has been lost. The clothes are only, and merely, themselves, with a specific material value. For Roth, there is something almost heroic in this repudiation: his father, he writes, "was now an old man living alone and . . . symbolic relics were no substitute for the real companion of fifty-five years. It seemed to me that it was not out of fear of her things and their ghostlike power that he wanted to rid the apartment of them without delay – to bury *them* now, too – but because he refused to sidestep the most brutal of all facts."

Similarly, Laurence Lerner writes in a poem called "Residue" of his father getting rid of his mother's clothes after her death:

My mother dying left a wardrobeful,
A world half-worn, half-new;
Old-fashioned underclothes; a row of shoes,
Soles upward, staring; tangles of rings,
Impatient opals, bargain bangles, pearls;
And, flowered or jazzy, rayon, cotton, tulle,
A hundred dresses, waiting.

Left with that ragged past,
My poor truncated father sold the lot.
What could he do? The dealer shrugged, and said
"Take it or leave it – up to you." He took
And lost the fiver at the races.
The empty wardrobe stared at him for years.

There is an important sense in which the clothes *are* the pain that the father feels. The dresses hang there, "waiting," they endure, but only as a residue that re-creates "absence, darkness, death; things which are not." Yet even when they are gone, turned into instantly disposable cash, the wardrobe re-creates the ghostly presence of the dresses that are no longer there. There is, indeed, a close connection between the magic of lost clothes and the fact that ghosts often step out of closets and wardrobes to appall us, haunt us, perhaps even console us.

Yet there is nothing *given* about this radical separation, this discarding of cloth, this relegation of it to the merely symbolic. And I want to try to

attend to the different ways in which clothing figures in, and figures, the ruptures of our lives. Let me return now to the three shirts which Nina Payne preserved after her husband's death, and which she stored away for future use. "The checkered shirts," she writes, "reappeared two years later":

Jessie and Emily started putting them on over turtlenecks, tucking in the shirttails, rolling up the bottom of the sleeve, the way a woman will wear a man's garment and expand, playfully, upon the shape of their difference. My daughters made outfits out of a scattered assortment of clothing in which their father's shirts became an emblem and a sign. Eric was working nights at a restaurant that year following his graduation from highschool. His schedule made it possible for him to avoid everyone in the family most of the time but we generally ate supper together on Sunday evenings. Once, when we were sitting round the table, he told the girls how ridiculous it was for them to be wearing shirts that were much too big for them. He said that he himself planned to wear the shirts and he didn't want them all worn out before he could fit into them. His sisters responded indignantly. The argument gathered undertow. I heard anger, accusation, and an exasperation bordering on despair. Under ordinary circumstances, I might have been called upon to give an opinion but no one dared ask for one. The phone rang. Adam got up to clear his plate and we all scattered for cover.

The shirts continued to be worn. When he left home, Eric took the grey one with him. The next time I saw it, I recognized the fatal pink of red dye that has seeped into a load of wash. For a moment, I felt as though everything would lose its original color, bleach out, disintegrate. But Eric smiled at my stricken look. "The same thing happened to my underwear in sixth grade, do you remember?" and he opened the door to the cellar to bring up more wood.

The title of Philip Roth's autobiography is, we may recall, *Patrimony*, and that title takes on a peculiar and powerful resonance in Payne's writing. In Roth's account, the mother's clothes are given away, but the father's legacy remains to be inherited (and dislocated) by the son. But

struggle between her sons and daughters. Or rather, between the elder son, Eric, who wants to put on the father's patrimony for himself, and the daughters, Jessie and Emily; the younger son, Adam, is the uncomfortable witness (he "got up to clear his plate"). Yet Eric, it seems, fails in his attempt to take the grief and the power of loss and of persistence to himself, since "the shirts continued to be worn." And when he leaves, taking only one of them with him, the wornness by which presence is transmitted will be transformed into the wornness of the worn-out. Eric, who didn't want the shirts "all worn out before he could fit into them," discolors the gray shirt he takes with "the fatal pink of red dye." "For a moment, I felt as though everything would lose its original color, bleach out, disintegrate," Nina Payne writes. Eric's response is to reiterate the persistence of loss: his father's shirt is transformed, as his own underpants had been earlier. The shirt persists, joining parent to child, yet changing as it is reshaped by its new wearer.

The gendering of cloth, and of attitudes to it, has itself been materially inscribed through social relations: outside the capitalist marketplace, where the male weaver and the male tailor became increasingly the norm, it has been women who were both materially and ideologically associated with the making, repairing, and cleaning of clothes. It is difficult fully to recapture the density and complex transformation of this relation between women of different classes and cloth. But throughout most of early modern Europe and the Americas, the social life of women was profoundly connected to the social life of cloth. In fifteenth-century Florence, for instance, young girls were taken on as servants for five to ten years, and their contracts stipulated that they would be given clothes and food, and, at the termination of their contract, a dowry. In the second half of the fifteenth century, the dowry was usually of eighty *lire*, a dowry that was nearly always paid not in money but in clothes and bed linen.

Men, of course, were also paid in livery, but they were rarely so consistently involved from early childhood in the production of cloth. As late as the nineteenth century in the United States, most young women were expected to have made twelve quilts for their dower chests before they were ready to marry, and the thirteenth was called the

also, as Elaine Showalter has argued, a means of producing counter-memories. A New England mill worker, herself professionally engaged in the production of cloth, recorded her own life in the quilt she made. She writes in *The Lowell Offering* in 1845:

How many passages of my life seem to be epitomized in this patchwork quilt. Here . . . are remnants of that bright copperplate cushion that graced my mother's chair. . . . Here is a piece of the first dress I ever saw, cut with what were called "mutton-leg" sleeves. It was my sister's, . . . and here is a fragment of the first gown that was ever cut for me with a bodice waist. . . . Here is a fragment of the first dress which baby brother wore when he left off long clothes. . . . Here is a piece of the first dress which was ever earned by my own exertions! What a feeling of exultation, of self-dependence, of *self-reliance*, was created by this effort.

The quilt thus bears the marks of conflicting social structures: the materials of family-arity; the materials of self-dependence and wage labor.

And the quilt itself takes on a complex social life of its own. "Annette," its maker (probably Harriet Farley or Rebecca Thompson), after becoming a mill worker, gives the quilt to her sister for her marriage, thus returning it from the sphere "of self-dependence, of *self-reliance*" to the sphere of marriage. It is beneath this quilt that her sister dies, coughing up her medications, so that when the quilt is returned to Annette, there are "dark stains at the top of it." The quilt is made up of pieces of cloth that bear the traces of her history; and, in its use, the quilt comes to bear the traces of others, of her sister, of death.

Elaine Hedges notes how widespread in the nineteenth-century United States was the transmission of fabrics which "bound together members of dispersed families." In 1850, Hannah Shaw writes to her daughter Margaret: "I have been looking for something to send you, but I could not find anything that I could send in a letter bitt [*sic*] a piece of my new dress." Other dress scraps are sent from mother to daughter, from sister to sister: "Here is a piece of my gingham Lydia made me"; "a piece of my dress of delanes"; "a piece of my bonnet trimmed with green plaid ribbon"; and "some pieces of my new dresses for patch work." Hannah writes to Margaret that her daughter Rebecca "will now

peace [*sic*] up your grandmother's dresses in quilts," after the grandmother had died. "Piecing" as "peacing": pieces that make peace between the living and the dead. A network of cloth can trace the connections of love across the boundaries of absence, of death, because cloth is able to carry the absent body, memory, genealogy, as well as literal material value.

But it is striking that, as cloth loses its economic value, it tends to lose its symbolic value. There seems, for instance, to be a connection between the ability to sell or pawn second-hand clothes and the careful transmission of clothes through wills. In the Renaissance, the pawnbroking accounts of Italy and England clearly show that clothes were by far the commonest pledge, followed by tools. As late as the 1950s, in the film *Some Like It Hot*, the jobless musicians played by Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon begin by pawning their overcoats, even though it is the middle of a bitter Chicago winter. Once that money is gone, Curtis tries to persuade Lemmon to pawn their bass and saxophone, but Lemmon protests that those instruments are their livelihood. Clothes first, tools second.

A pawnbroker will only accept pledges for which there is a market. One can only pawn clothes if they're worth something. In Renaissance England, a single livery for the court dwarf, Ippolyta the Tartarian, cost more than the highest salary for a court lady. And when Philip Henslowe bought plays by writers like Shakespeare he usually paid about £6 for a play, whereas he paid £20 10s. 6d. for a single "black velvet cloak with sleeves embroidered all with silver and gold." A single jerkin bought for the earl of Leicester cost more than Shakespeare's grand house in Stratford. The sheer value of textiles until the manufacture of cheap cottons explains the extraordinary care with which they were itemized in early modern wills.

At one level, and particularly among the aristocracy, the leaving of clothes was an assertion of the power of the giver and the dependency of the recipient. Such is the chilling implication of the earl of Dorset's bequest of his wife's own clothes to her in 1624: "Item I doe give & bequeath to my deerlye beloved wife all her wearing apparel and such rings and jewels as were hers on her marriage and the rocke rubye ring which I have given her." His own apparel was divided by the earl among his servants.

The will of Dorset's wife, Anne Clifford, on the other hand, is far more detailed and moving in its association of apparel with memory: she leaves to her grandchildren "the remainder of the two rich armors which were my noble father's, to remaine to them and their posterity (if they soe please) as a remembrance of him." And to her "deare daughter," she leaves "my bracelett of little pomander beads, sett in gold and enamelling, containing fifty-seven beads in number, which usually I ware under my stomacher; which bracelett is above an hundred yeares old, and was given by Philip the Second, King of Spaine, to Mary, Queene of England [and by her] to my greate grandmother, Anne, Countesse of Bedford: and also two little pieces of my father and mother, sett in a tablett of gold, and enamelled with blew; and all those seaven or eight old truncks and all that is within them, being for the most part old things that were my deare and blessed mother's, which truncks commonly stand in my owne chamber or the next unto it." Here, the transmission of goods is a transmission of wealth, of genealogy, of royal connections, but also of memory and of the love of mother for daughter.

It was not only aristocrats who bequeathed their clothing and other possessions with such care. A master's typical legacy to his apprentice was the gift of clothes. Thus Augustine Phillips, an actor and sharer in the King's Men, made bequests in 1605 not only to fellow sharers like Henry Condell and William Shakespeare but also to the boy actor who had trained under him:

Item, I give to Samuel Gilborne, my late apprentice, the sum of forty shillings, and my mouse-colored velvet hose, and a white taffeta doublet, and black taffeta suit, my purple cloak, sword, and dagger, and my bass viol.

The clothes are preserved; they remain. It is the bodies which inhabit them that change.

What are the implications we can draw out from these wills bequeathing clothing? First, clothes have a life of their own: they both are material presences and they encode other material and immaterial presences. In the transfer of clothes, identities are transferred from a mother to a daughter, from an aristocrat to an actor, from a master to an apprentice. Such transfers are often staged by the Renaissance theater in

scenes where a servant dresses as his or her master, a lover dresses in the borrowed garments of another lover, a skull inhabits the clothes which have survived it. In *Twelfth Night*, brother is transformed into sister and sister into brother through the costume identified as Cesario/Sebastian. Here we move closer to today's narrower meaning of *transvestism*, one that connotes cross-gendering. But what I want to emphasize is the extent to which the Renaissance theater, and the culture more generally, was fixated upon clothes in and of themselves.

It is only, I believe, in a Cartesian and post-Cartesian paradigm that the life of matter is relegated to the trashcan of the "merely" — the bad fetish which the adult will leave behind as a childish thing so as to pursue the life of the mind. As if consciousness and memory were about minds rather than things, or the real could only reside in the purity of ideas rather than in the permeated impurity of the material. It is about that permeated impurity which Pablo Neruda writes so movingly in *Passions and Impressions*:

It is worth one's while, at certain hours of the day or night, to scrutinize useful objects in repose: wheels that have rolled across long, dusty distances with their enormous load of crops or ore, charcoal sacks, barrels, baskets, the hafts and handles of carpenters' tools. . . . Worn surfaces, the wear inflicted by human hands, the sometimes tragic, always pathetic, emanations from these objects give reality a magnetism that should not be scorned.

[Our] nebulous impurity can be perceived in them: the affinity for groups, the use and obsolescence of materials, the mark of a hand or a foot, the constancy of the human presence that permeates every surface.

This is the poetry we are seeking.

In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, an account of her working-class childhood, Carolyn Steedman writes about these permeated surfaces with pain and anger, as well as with love. Pain and anger, because in the erasure of the material is embodied the erasure of her mother's life and her own from the significances of history. "It was with the image of a New Look coat that, in 1950, I made my first attempt to understand and symbolize the content of my mother's desire." But the New Look coat

was precisely what Carolyn Steedman's mother could not afford. Her face was pressed against a store window through which she saw, but could not grasp, what she desired:

[My mother] knew where we stood in relation to this world of privilege and possession, had shown me the place long before, in the bare front bedroom where the health visitor spoke haughtily to her. Many women have stood thus, at the window, looking out, their children watching their exclusion: "I remember as it were but yesterday," wrote Samuel Bamford in 1849, "after one of her visits to the dwelling of that 'fine lady'" (his mother's sister, who had gone up in the world):

she divested herself of her wet bonnet, her soaked shoes, and changed her dripping outer garments and stood leaning with her elbow on the window sill, her hand upon her cheek, her eyes looking upon vacancy and the tears trickling over her fingers.

What we learned now, in the early 1960s, through the magazines and the anecdotes she brought home, was how the goods of that world might be appropriated, with the cut and fall of a skirt, a good winter coat, with leather shoes, a certain voice; but above all with clothes, the best boundary between you and a cold world.

As Carolyn Steedman puts it, her mother

wanted things. Politics and cultural criticism can only find trivial the content of her desires, and the world certainly took no notice of them. It is one of the purposes of this book to admit her desire for the things of the earth to political reality and psychological validity.

Clothes, then, are a form of memory, but they are also the stepping-stones upon which one walks away from an unbearable present – the present of childhood, for instance, when one is made over by one's parents. I remember Jen White telling me of a pair of shoes her parents bought her for school: sensible, practical shoes; shoes you wouldn't want to be caught dead in. It is difficult to take seriously enough the agony of such moments: the rage, the anguish, the despair. An all-too-visible identity is there on your feet, mocking you, humiliating you. For you

have been made up, made over by another, put into the livery of abject dependency. And it is the ecstasy of release from such livery which Annette so finely captures in her memories of "the first dress which was ever earned by my own exertions." "A feeling of exultation," she calls it.

Many of us sense that feeling most powerfully through its negation. When Sasha Jansen goes to Paris in Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, she thinks: "My dress extinguishes me. And then this damned fur coat slung on top of everything else – the last idiocy, the last incongruity." And later, working in a fashionable Parisian dress shop, she fantasizes buying the dress that will set all to rights: "It is a black dress with wide sleeves embroidered in vivid colours – red, green, blue, purple. It is my dress. If I had been wearing it I should never have stammered or been stupid. . . . I start . . . longing for it, madly, furiously. If I could get it everything would be different." Sasha never gets the dress.

Allon White died at home, wearing his pajamas, in exactly the posture in which Lucas, the protagonist of the novel he wrote many years before, died. "Lucas was on his left side with his knees drawn up tight and his hands pushed down between his thighs. A blanket was pulled up over his shoulder." A blanket: as Carolyn Steedman puts it, "the best boundary between you and a cold world." But it is hard for us to live with the dead, not knowing what to do with their clothes, in which they still hang, inhabiting their closets and dressers; not knowing how to clothe *them*. Florence Reeve, a Mormon, died on 10 February 1887. Alice Isso writes: "I went to assist in laying her out. On the 11th we made her clothes. We worked all day, then packed her in ice. On the 12th, in the evening we dressed and repacked her." What will we do? How will we dress the dead? Not at all? In their most disposable clothes? In their best finery?

When Philip Roth's father died, his brother, searching a dresser, found "a shallow box containing two neatly folded prayer shawls. These he hadn't parted with":

When the mortician, at the house, asked us to pick out a suit for him, I said to my brother, "A suit? He's not going to the office. No, no suit – it's senseless." He should be buried in a shroud, I said, thinking that was how his parents had been buried and how Jews

were traditionally buried. But as I said it I wondered if a shroud was any less senseless – he wasn't Orthodox and his sons weren't religious at all – and if it wasn't pretentiously literary and a little hysterically sanctimonious as well. . . . But as nobody opposed me and as I hadn't the audacity to say, "Bury him naked," we used the shroud of our ancestors to clothe his corpse.

Then, one night some six weeks later, at around 4:00 A.M., he came in a hooded white shroud to reproach me. He said, "I should have been dressed in a suit. You did the wrong thing." I awakened screaming. All that peered out from the shroud was the displeasure in his dead face. And his only words were a rebuke: I had dressed him for eternity in the wrong clothes.

In the wrong clothes.

A necessary feature of transmission, if it is to take place at all, is that it can go astray: the letter does not arrive, the wrong person inherits, the legacy is an unwanted burden. Yet even in the wildest of transmissions, something always does arrive at its destination. For the last two years or so, my mother and father have increasingly been thinking and talking about the pieces of furniture they treasure, about what will happen to them when they die, about who will want them. Who will take in the desk of my mother's mother? Who will care for it? Who will have the portrait of my father playing the recorder with his brother? At first, I found such questions tiresome. To a good post-Cartesian, it all seemed rather grossly material. But, of course, I was wrong, and they were right. For the question is: who will remember my grandmother, who will give her a place? What space, and whom, will my father inhabit? I know this because I cannot recall Allon White as an idea, but only as the habits through which I inhabit him, through which he inhabits and wears me. I know Allon through the smell of his jacket.

Learning to Drive

WILLIAM H. GASS

My father was happiest behind the wheel. And he always managed to own a vehicle of substance and standing. For many years he drove a Packard which he had bought second-hand from one of those proverbial little old ladies who had never unwrapped the spare or let the car roll down her drive. The traditional lie may have been true this time, for that is how the car behaved. Indeed, it was a beaut, and sported (this was the detail I loved most) a shiny metal figure, winged at head and heels, leaning out ahead of the car's hood: Mercury in a helluva hurry. The running board was high, the headlights huge, rounder than eyes. Its paint was as deep and black as outer space, its chrome shone even at night as if it had absorbed and saved light during the day. The grill was grand and cleaved the air like a set of silver knives. To this day I cannot understand why people want to sit as close to the road as road kill, because I remember how wonderful it was – short as I was, too, I suppose – to be perched where I could see the world around me whiz by through the car's wide windows.

And because my father loved to drive we took trips. The shortest might be two or three days, the longest the customary vacationer's two weeks. They were an opportunity to get away from an increasingly disagreeable routine, to fill the eye with fresh sights, and a chance to exercise a skill which gave him pleasure, while assuring him he wasn't a total cripple yet.

We were motoring through New England. I was probably twelve or thirteen. My aunt was not along with us on this trip. We were all relieved. My father kept track of our daily distances and miles per gallon. If either were good he was greatly gratified. He liked knowing that he'd been down this or that road, and, for many years afterward, would re-