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***A day with things: using object encounters to write the present
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A day with things: using object encounters to write the present and the daily

Abstract

In literary works and creative writing practice objects are often connected with memory, triggering narratives of past times and experiences, but they can also operate as powerful expressions of the present moment, through object encounters. In this fictocritical essay I enact methods and processes by which object encounters can be written and consider how the relationship between writer and objects can be co-constitutive. Focussing on materiality, resonance and chance, and object encounters from the informal archives of the home, suburban street and op shop, the essay takes the form of a daily-life chronicle. As an experiment in autobiography and attention the essay draws on the agency of objects, as expressed in vital materialism and postphenomenology, to represent the ‘material everyday’ and the process of writing with things.

Biographical Note

Vanessa Berry is the author of four books of creative nonfiction. These include the literary atlas *Mirror Sydney* (2017), which won the *Mascara* Avant Garde literary award in 2018, and her upcoming memoir essay collection *Gentle and Fierce* (2021). She is also known for her *I am a Camera* zine series (2000-present) and her zines have been widely exhibited at major institutions. She researches memory, history, archives, and the everyday, and is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Sydney.

Keywords

life writing – postphenomenology – objects – materiality – autobiography

A day with things: using object encounters to write the present and the daily

The first thing I notice is the clock on the bedside table. It is designed to resemble a birdhouse, its case a plastic cube with a peaked top that suggests a roof. I watch the second hand moving over the cartoon image of a dove printed on the clock face. Rather than click from one second to the next the hand glides smoothly, which gives me a vertiginous sense of time moving too fast, although the clock runs accurately, neither fast nor slow. I watch the seconds sweep onwards until a switch clicks to trigger the alarm, a high-pitched, repetitive cuckoo call.

Most days start in this way, with me awake before the alarm, watching the bird clock, waiting for the tinny sound of the artificial cuckoo. But today the start of the day begins an experiment: to write a day of my life through my encounters with things. In works of autobiography that use ‘the day as a unit’ (Blanchfield, 2018), a day is extracted from the continuum of routine and recorded, becoming a container for experiences and a framework for an enquiry. Such works include Christa Wolf’s accounts of the 27th September, which she wrote annually from 1960 to 2011 and are compiled in the anthologies *One Day a Year* (2007; 2017). Reflecting on her descriptions of the day’s activities, observations and thoughts in the first anthology, Wolf described them as ‘a reliable buttress for memory’ (2007: 14), written to consider, broadly, the question ‘How does life come to be?’ (p. 13). Another approach to the daily account is that of poet Bernadette Mayer, in works such as *Memory*, an exhibition which documented every day in July 1971 in poetry, photography and audio recordings and, in 2020, was published in book form. Mayer describes this work as an ‘emotional science’ project, in which she experimented with how a record of a day could ‘include everything’ (2020, p.7). There is similar comprehensive intent in her epic poem *Midwinter Day* (2000), an account of December 22, 1978, in which she charts material and emotional events, attending to how language can be used to record the substance of the day and her shifts of thought. For both writers, the day acts as a constraint and a container, within which the experience of life can be captured.

To write a day through object encounters is an experiment in autobiography, in attention, and in representing what Bill Brown refers to as the ‘material everyday...the daily sensuous encounter with the physical world’ (2010, p. 17). Brown’s ‘thing theory’ (2001), which distinguishes the agentic integrity of the thing from the relational positioning of the object, forms part of a set of ideas that constitute the material turn in the humanities. The fields that constitute this turn – among them new materialism, object-oriented ontology and vital materialism – share a focus on the agency of things and their materiality and power, and a de-centring of the human, acknowledging the vitality of life beyond human subjectivity.

Engaging these ideas in the practice of autobiography, within the form of the daily account, I focus on encounters as a way into representing my life as a co-constitutive relationship between self and things. In practising ‘thing writing’ (Blackhurst, 2015, p. 426), I attend to the momentary and the aleatory, and focus on the dynamics of encounter, acknowledging the material agency of things. Thing-power, as defined by Jane Bennett, is ‘the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle’ (2010, p. 6). If then, as Bill Brown writes, humans are ‘enmeshed’ in the ‘object world’ (2015, p. 9), encounters are a space of potential, where the texture of this enmeshment can be examined, and the life being represented can be one that is shared.

The bird clock continues to sweep up the seconds. I click off the cuckoo alarm as I look out the window towards the grey light of an overcast morning, anticipating how the day might proceed.

S has already left for work and I am here alone; the house feels still around me. I think forward into my usual morning routine and a clutter of domestic items begins to orbit in my imagination. The bird clock, the quilted jacket, the stainless-steel kettle, the mug patterned with seashells, the iPhone, the calendar taped to the side of the fridge, the round mirror with a yellow plastic frame in which I glance every morning as I pass by it in the hallway. I imagine these things itemised, as in Leanne Shapton's *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry* (2009), a novel that tells the story of a romantic relationship in the form of an auction catalogue listing a couple's shared possessions. Or I envisage my morning things arranged as in the cabinets of objects in the Museum of Innocence in Istanbul, the companion museum to the Orhan Pamuk novel of the same name (2008), that uses a mixture of precious, mundane and daily things to present a fictional romantic relationship. In both examples the objects are recast as the material evidence of fictional lives, presented as exhibits. Within the boundaries of the catalogue or the museum cabinet, objects are both subdued and exalted, forming part of 'a strategy of new literary realism' that aims to 'present rather than represent reality' (Jakubowski, 2013, p. 126).

In autobiography objects are often used as expressions of memory, material connections to narratives that comprise a life or family story. These can be central to the text, such as the netsuke collection in *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (de Waal, 2010) or more situational, such as the brass jardinière of David Malouf's *12 Edmondstone Street*, a container for 'everything odd' which has a material and symbolic presence in Malouf's memory of his childhood home (1986, p. 41). Objects of this kind carry a personal significance that is inaccessible to all but those who share the particular memory it represents, until it comes to be narrated.

Inverting the focus, and foregrounding things, challenges the writer of autobiography to determine an approach for balancing self and thing, allowing the thing's expression to present in tandem with their own. An object-focussed approach was formulated in anthropologist Igor Kopytoff's 'object biography', a method in which a biographical form is used to narrate the economic, technical and social trajectories of an object (1986). Object biography can be used within works of memoir or autobiography: de Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, for example, uses this approach in tandem with family memoir (Brien, 2019, p. 39). Another literary interpretation of object biography is Bloomsbury's 'Object Lessons' series, long essays in book form that focus on 'the hidden lives of ordinary things' (2020). These essays, on things including shipping containers, dust, socks, souvenirs, rust, and high heels, often include autobiographical elements, although primarily within a material culture and cultural history framework.

Merging autobiographical and object-biographical approaches – engaging the multiple valency of things as memory triggers, as symbols, as materials, as agents – produces a narrative that is shared between, and co-created by, self and things. What kind of story will my daily things and I tell together? I wonder, as I pull on the black quilted jacket with a red lining and deep pockets that I wear every morning. What if I could be a conduit for things like the bird clock or the jacket, as much as they could be conduits for me? Within the framework of the day, this is my enquiry.

In writing of things three interconnected forms present themselves, from the categorical to the embodied: inventory, still life and encounter. Often these combine. In *Vibrant Matter* Jane

Bennett records an encounter with an assemblage of debris she notices in a stormwater drain grate, itemising the glove, mat of oak pollen, dead rat, bottle cap, and stick that together form a ‘contingent tableau’ of both ‘dead stuff’ and ‘live presence’ that for her produces a ready example of thing-power (2010, p. 5). I often think of her description of the ‘glove-pollen-rat-cap-stick’, the hyphens energetically connecting these unlikely companions, which came to her attention at a specific place and time ‘on a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam’s Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore’ (p. 4).

On an overcast Thursday morning on 8 October 2020 in the kitchen of a house in a suburb built on Gadigal land, I sit at a wooden table looking over an assemblage of dozens of items. Like the contents of the Malouf family’s brass jardinière, many of these things are in some way odd and linger here for this reason. Most are piled up towards the back of the table, with a scattering of more recent or functional items in front, among them: three marigold flowers in a glass-ceramic eggcup, a white plastic digital clock, a foil wrapper for a Tunnock’s Caramel Wafer, a paper bag of walnuts in their shells, a ceramic penguin, and a postcard announcing a reduction in the frequency of mail delivery. I move my attention from one to another of these things as I drink chai from the mug printed with seashells. These table things often surprise me. Before I come out into the kitchen and see them for myself each morning, I wouldn’t be able to reliably predict their arrangement or even what, exactly, would comprise it.

This kind of chance arrangement of tabletop objects was captured by the ‘snare-pictures’ of the artist Daniel Spoerri, who affixed such arrays – often the plates and debris remaining after a meal – to the table’s surface in their chance, askew positions, and exhibited the resulting assemblages hung on the wall as if they were paintings. His *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (2015) provides a literary response to such assemblages. The source objects that form the topography are those that were on Spoerri’s studio table on 17 October 1961. He traced them to form a map, numbered each object, and ‘anecdoted’ them one by one with digressive annotations. A ‘pale green egg cup of very light plastic standing on three tiny legs’ sets off a chain of associations, of egg folklore, of the store where the egg cup was bought, and anecdotes deliberating over how the eggcup had been used that day by Spoerri’s partner Kichka and her preferences regarding eggs (pp. 44-47). The annotations capture the life of the artist, the life of the object, and the life of the book together, as the comments accumulate and digress, and are added to in the processes of translation and editioning, making the book increasingly collaborative as the editions progress.

At the kitchen table my attention settles on the eggcup with the marigolds inside it. Printed on it is a scene labelled ‘Grosser Inselsberg, 916m’, an illustration of a tower with a red and white aerial extending up from green treetops. I’d bought this eggcup from an op shop, attracted to the notion of a souvenir eggcup commemorating a mountain. My present-moment examination of it contains other encounters within it, which I speculate upon. Once someone had visited Grosser Inselsberg and decided on this eggcup as a souvenir of the experience, had brought it back home, used or stored it, until it came to be given away. Aside from my guesses at its provenance the eggcup is a material product of chemical and physical processes, which produced this sturdy, heat-resistant form. It is a solid vessel for a boiled egg, or for marigolds, one of which I notice is withering. I pick out the crumpled flower and carry it over to the compost bucket by the sink, a repurposed Tupperware container that had been designed to hold a head of lettuce.

Eggcup as vase, lettuce crisper as compost bucket. The things of my daily life tend towards the ad-hoc and the provisional, the kitsch, superseded, repurposed and salvaged. I have an affinity with trivial things and things found second-hand, that have already had a life before I come across them. Their inaccessible pasts, chance appearances and the miscellany of their materiality disrupts a sense of complete knowledge, ownership or understanding. There's something evasive about them, in that they exist 'in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects' (Bennett, 2010, p. 4). This is a notion that is central to thing-power, and the withdrawal of objects theorised by object-oriented ontology, in which 'other objects never adequately capture but only (inadequately) "translate" them' (Morton, 2011, p. 166). As Bill Brown draws out the thing/object distinction, he reflects on the kinds of object encounters that bring their agency to the fore:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. (2001, p. 4)

A similar effect arises when objects are used outside of their intended purpose, are come upon out of context, or through the process of chance, as in the second-hand market: these being conditions which interrupt the regular processes of commodity exchange and make thingness apparent.

An encounter with an object can be quotidian – mundane, functional, habitual – but it can equally be a confrontation with its thingness, brought about by the forces of circumstances and chance. In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Jane Bennett considers the productive state of enchantment – a sense of wonder and potential – and how it comes about through encounter. In her definition, enchantment arises from daily experience: 'to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday' (2001, p. 4). Enchanted encounters can occur spontaneously but can also be deliberately fostered through a sense of play, sensory receptivity, and openness to the positive and generative nature of enchantment as a mood.

In my encounter with the souvenir eggcup or the Tupperware lettuce crisper the enchantment is in their repurposing, and in their webs of connection within my own life and beyond. Their appearance in the narrative of my day charges them with what Italo Calvino describes as magic:

We might say that as soon as an object appears in a narrative, it becomes charged with special force, becomes like the pole in a magnetic field or a node in an invisible network of relations. The object's symbolic value can be explicit or not, but it is always present. We might even say that any object in a narrative is a magic object. (2016, p. 39)

While Calvino places a focus on the symbolic, and thus human-centred interpretation, the notion of the object as a node within a network is one that can be adapted to a posthuman approach. In developing his point Calvino uses the magic ring from the Legend of Charlemagne as an example but standing at the sink beside the compost container, I imagine a different source of folklore. The grubby Tupperware lettuce crisper could become a *tsukumogami*, one of the spirits in Japanese legend that take the form of household objects that have been used for a century and thus gained sentience. I imagine the container powered by the organic processes of rot that occur inside it. *Me and the compost, differently alive*, I think, as I press down the plastic lid to seal it shut, then go to dress and start the day's work.

At my desk I start by attending to email, then begin to write this account of the morning, working on a laptop which is propped up on a pile of old telephone directories, an attempt at DIY ergonomics. These telephone directories may as well be bricks for the amount of times I've looked inside them, but today I take the 2010 L-Z Yellow Pages off the pile and leaf through it, recalling the physicality of such books. There is a familiar smell of ink which emanates from the thin pages, and the impression of having the entire city contained within the book's physical and textual density. When I was a child, and telephone and street directories were in frequent use, this compression of city into book was their magic. Now I flip through the pages, noting the unusual combinations of categories that sometimes appear on the page-headers: 'Materials-Maternity', 'Pipes-Pizza', or 'Writers-X-Ray', and analogue services that have now disappeared: 'typewriter dealers and repairers' and 'video and DVD libraries'. At some point the items I am writing about today will also be relics, the laptop on which these words are appearing, or the phone I left back out on the kitchen table so it would not tempt me with distractions. Thinking of the exiled phone, and of obsolescence, I have a flash of a memory, how when I first owned a mobile phone, I transcribed my text messages into my journal, wanting to convert them into something physical, a form with a sense of permanence.

I turn my attention back to the screen, combing through the things of the morning, recording my encounters with the clock, the eggcup, the compost container and the telephone books. As I write my awareness divides between the screen and the postcards I've blu-tacked to the wall above my desk as aids to thought. There's one in particular my attention often goes to, a souvenir postcard of the Capilano Suspension Bridge in North Vancouver. I look at it yet again, attracted to the image of people walking across a long, curved bridge at the level of the treetops. It is a useful metaphor for writing, moving step by step through the process, bridging the gulf from ideas to text. As with the Grosser Inselsberg eggcup it's not a record of my own travels. I bought it second-hand, making it a record of a chance, rather than a commemorative, experience. Judging from the clothing of the people on the bridge the postcard dates from the 1980s. When I first came across it I was surprised so many of them were wearing t-shirts of the exact same shades of either yellow, red or blue. Closer inspection reveals the tell-tale edges that show the photograph had been modified before it was printed as a postcard, the shirts coloured in so they stand out better against the background of trees. This too I relate to writing, considering the boldness of whatever effects I might use, and how they might enhance or distort.

A lunchtime pause. Rye crackers, a boiled egg that I eat with thoughts of Kichka and Spoerri, as I listen to the radio news on my phone, which I perch on top of a can of chickpeas so as to hear the speaker better. The language of Covid-19 makes up the pattern of the broadcast: cases, borders, restrictions, contact-tracing, infection rate. Today worldwide case numbers are up to 40 million, and I greet this news with the same sense of quiet shock as the reports of previous milestones, and no doubt those to come. The news bulletin ends and I clear up, rinsing the plates in the sink as I look out the window. It frames a view of the garden, dominated by a bulky steel Hills Hoist rotary washing line which is positioned in the middle of it. To birds and insects the Hills Hoist is a surrogate tree: magpies perch on it to watch the lawn for insects, spiders spin their webs between its wires. Its central placement makes it impossible to ignore, a reminder of suburban aspirations of the 1960s. Advertisements from that time had portrayed the Hoist as the housewife's friend and saviour. 'The sun really shines out of a Hill's Hoist', ran one ad, with an illustration of a Hoist on a stretch of green lawn which extends like a runway

to the horizon, from where the sun is rising, as if this manufactured object somehow merges with or tunes into the environment in which it is placed. The Hoist cannot control the weather but it does have the power to shape my attention and my movements around the garden, as I am careful to avoid collision with its long steel struts and their blunt ends.

The sky is still cloudy but the expected rain has not yet arrived, so I decide to go walking, gathering keys, putting on shoes, and setting out along the laneway adjacent to the house. The lane runs between two streets of apartment buildings and alongside a park that has a row of tall fig trees at its edge. A gusty wind blows down small, hard figs from the trees, and agitates stray plastic bags and wisps of trash into eddies that swirl and chase each other. On the road ahead the sun glints off the metallic top of a can which the wind has picked up and animated so it rolls towards me. It comes up fast, then veers, turns a circle, and falls still as I watch it. Any such encounter with trash animated by the wind calls to my mind the scene from the film *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999), in which teenage neighbours watch video footage of a plastic bag ‘dancing’ amid leaves. The film scene produces in me a combination of embarrassment and recognition. I squirm at how the encounter with the bag leads to the film’s central epiphany of the beauty in the ordinary. But I understand the affective pull of the moment, the ‘paradox and ambiguity’ of this kind of encounter, a horror at the environmental implications it suggests, but also a response to its sensual and affective qualities (Hawkins, 2006, p. 23). It is also reminiscent of Bennett’s debris encounter, in which the glove-pollen-rat-cap-stick, ‘shimmied back and forth between debris and thing’ (2010, p. 4).

The laneway is host to an ever-shifting gallery of discards: broken chairs, sagging mattresses, cracked mirrors, and warped panels of cheap wood. At the end of the laneway, just before the road makes a sharp turn to the right, is a brick wall a metre high and five long, with a wide, flat concrete top. An architectural remnant of obscure purpose, it is a perfect plinth for the display of discarded goods. Today it features a pile of flattened cardboard boxes, a broken electric fan, and two 1970s evening dresses. One dress is pale blue chiffon, the other a scratchy-looking green and silver acrylic, patterned like fish scales.

The dresses attract me, arranged as they are companionably side by side. But as I approach them a woman appears from around the corner, moving with a defiant gait. She’s holding a black leather handbag which she slaps down hard, on the end of the wall beside the dresses, as if punishing the bag for some wrongdoing. She pauses, huffs out a loud breath, and retreats. I wait for her to move away, across the lane and into an apartment building, before approaching the bag. Having witnessed the moment of it being left there I feel a duty to inspect it. My desire to engage with it duets with my revulsion at the animality of the leather and the worn fabric of its interior, evidence of its once intimate role in the previous owner’s life. The more I look at it the more I see it as a skin.

A car comes up the laneway and I move out of the way, continuing onwards, falling back into the rhythm of my stride. That walking and writing are complementary activities is often noted, that between pace of motion and pace of thought exists ‘an odd consonance between internal and external passage’ (Solnit, 2001, p. 6). What Solnit identifies as oddness is the experience of sensing a collusion between exterior and interior landscapes, the interior ‘landscape’ being one of thought. But what I am most attracted to in walking is the object or movement that draws my attention elsewhere, towards the rolling can lid or the abandoned bag, in the moments that our trajectories cross. These I think of as the gifts of the walk.

I walk on until I am stopped at an intersection, where I wait at the traffic lights, moving my gaze across the curling edges of an anarchist flyer pasted up on the wall of the building beside me. It carries an image of giant wolves chasing down police, with a background of a prison and police cars on fire, and text on a scroll: 'Destroy what Destroys You'. Such posters are posted up across the suburb, on power poles and walls and electricity boxes, so when I'm out walking, wherever my eyes stray they inevitably come across one. This is surely their intended effect, a counterbalance to the billboard for the luxury car on the side of the apartment building opposite, or another advertising a slice of rooftop advertising space with the slogan UNSEE THIS in giant white letters against a black background. The scuffed flyer is a persistent whisper against the billboard's shout. Looking closer at it I see a conversation is taking place on its surface. Written in silver pen in the blank space at the end of the scroll is the message 'let's riot!'. But at the top of the image, the anarchy symbol has been scratched away.

The signal turns and I walk on, up the hill, towards the op shop. In addition to walking I use op shopping as a contemplation activity alongside writing. Accounts of op shopping stress the role of serendipity, chance, and unpredictability as being central to the experience, as well as the electric moment of finding a desired object (Quibbell, 2016; Annear, 2019). In browsing in an op shop I give myself over to a random collection of consumer goods in all their variety and aesthetic discord. The process of moving attention from object to object, considering each for what it is, enacts a postphenomenology. By reconceiving phenomenological methods to acknowledge the posthuman, alterity, and the 'co-constituted nature of our being in the world', post-phenomenological methods shift attention towards objects (Ash & Simpson 2019, p.140). 'Allure and resonance' are two key postphenomenological styles, where allure is the object's appearance and its excesses unavailable to the perceiver, and resonance is the moment of encounter between human and object, in which both undergo change (p. 146).

Assessing allure, seeking resonance, I go to the shelves of miscellanea. Amid the plasticware, stationery and odd items of giftware, I reach for a plastic case. Inside it are two face washers, brown and white, rolled up together so they resemble a cake, a chocolate-flavoured Swiss roll to be precise. To further the likeness, the towels are presented atop a doily and with a plastic cherry for a garnish. A paper label beside the cherry advertises Easy Way, a bubble tea franchise that once had many branches across the city. In the bubble tea shop I would have likely barely noticed this item, but here, beside a strawberry-scented candle and a row of water-filter jugs, it stops me. Like the dancing bag, I feel the horror of its wastefulness but also the aesthetic pull of its novelty. I can't trust myself not to immediately disassemble it, if I was to buy it, but to keep it in its packet seems equally dissatisfying.

In this way I move through the store, my eyes trailing over the shelves and racks of things. Op shops are busy, tactile places, which hold the enticement that almost any domestic object might be found within them. All of the items have gone through a similar process to end up here, having been designed, manufactured, distributed, bought, stored away or put to use, discarded, sorted, and rescued. The first stage of rescue is their emergence from the sorting room. The second is occurring in the encounters happening all around me. A woman inspects a tall brown ceramic vase, holding it up to her phone as she Facetimes her friend. Ugly? She awaits the verdict. A man wearing a baseball cap and a facemask examines a packet of drink coasters, souvenirs of Canberra. Other people flick through the racks of clothes, pulling out a jacket or a shirt for closer inspection, or turn over shoes to read the size printed on the soles.

Completing my circuit of the shop I leave and turn for home, walking back along my usual loop, past the house where my sister lives. Its force-field of familiarity puts me inside and outside at the same time. I know how it feels to walk down the hallway, to sit in the living room and have the dog curl up beside me. But today I keep walking, past the gardens with azalea bushes blooming bright or pale pink, and the park where the pigeons peck at the crumb-scattered grass. As I walk by the Greek Orthodox church the bell in the tower starts to ring with a low-pitched, repetitive clang. I stop and try to catch sight of the bell, wanting a physical connection to the sound, but it's hidden by the structure, and when the ringing stops and a man emerges from the door at the base of the tower, I am surprised, as if expecting the bell to have been ringing of its own volition.

On the footpath that crosses over the railway line I look for the pink paint splash on the concrete. The shape of the splash, which must have originally been accidentally spilled from a can, resembles a Pac-Man ghost and to further make it so someone spray-painted eyes and a mouth onto it. I feel companionable towards the paint splash, which I think of as The Blob. I have walked past it hundreds of times but in noticing it today I see that its spray-painted features have mostly faded. The pink paint has worn down too, revealing the scuffs and stipples of the concrete beneath, and I recognise this texture as traces of the gestures that were made to smooth it.

When attention is turned towards familiar things – domestic, local, routine or habitual – it can satisfy an ‘everyday hunger’: ‘a desire for greater knowledge and more thorough documentation of our own daily lives’ (Epstein, 2016, p. 42). This desire, Epstein notes, has been heightened in response to the pervasiveness of digital technology, although it has long been present in western philosophical discourse (p. 4). Digital technology’s demands upon, and fracturing of, attention, have resulted in a renewed interest in attention as a faculty, and how it can be used as a form of resistance. From attention that is attuned to ‘the local and present’ can arise a sense of ethical responsibility to place and community (Odell, 2019, p. 10).

In *Forms of Poetic Attention*, Lucy Alford writes of attention as ‘bidirectional’: ‘the way we attend to the world changes the world we perceive, and the world we perceive changes the way we attend’ (2020, p. 4). Attention is a faculty that can vary in style and exist in multiple simultaneous modes. In walking past The Blob I engage attention to my surroundings, noticing storm clouds moving west and the flowering of the *lantana* thicket on the steep incline that leads down towards the railway line. I attend to atmosphere, weather, cycles of growth, the organic forces of climate. I attend to my body in space, my trajectory, step after step. These modes are encompassed within a writerly attention that aspires to perceive things in such a way that that they, and my encounters with them, can be embedded in my memory and conveyed in language.

The Blob, as incidental as it is, makes up a strand in the web of connection between me and this place. Recognition of minor landmarks shapes my sense of belonging, forms part of the ‘topographical intimacy’ (Lippard, 1997, p. 33) that is my experience of the local. I hadn’t expected to be considering an encounter with The Blob. But, apart from my encounter with the clock upon waking, the day’s things are surprising me with their unpredictability, the way they suggest themselves rather than being deliberately chosen.

In the laneway the black bag and two evening dresses remain on the concrete shelf. The hem of the blue chiffon dress ripples, lifted by the wind. The wind pushes at my back as I walk down the hill, exerting the same push upon me as it does upon the dresses and the trees and the eddies of trash. Then, back at home, I set up in the living room on the couch, a prim, 1970s-era two-seater, patterned with large bright purple flowers. I had bought it from a secondhand shop, now closed down, that had the habit of arranging its new stock on the pavement in front of the store. Among the typically drab collection of used furniture the couch stood out. It was from an era when bright and expressive, rather than neutral and minimalist, was the norm, and it somehow had remained as crisp as when it had been new.

Now it is a little fading and frayed, its patches of wear corresponding to the way I put my feet up on the arm-rest as I sit up against the opposite corner, legs stretched out. Amid the chaos of the untidy room, I think of it like a raft, a sturdy structure with a heavy wooden frame, covered in thick upholstery, bolstered with foam. Sometimes when I straighten its cushions I catch sight of the label, a gold ribbon that gives the manufacturer, WR & P Woodward, an Australian company that operated in the 1960s and 70s. As much as the couch is familiar to me, when I notice the label, I think of the room it would have been intended for. It was not this one, which is of a kind that would never appear in a furniture catalogue. The room is cluttered and mostly given over to books, which are stacked into over-full bookcases that line the walls, with more piled up on the floor.

I pick up my copy of Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day*, a slim blue New Directions 'paperbook', a category which suggests it is distinct from the ordinary paperback which it otherwise seems to be. The pencil drawing on the cover shows a bare winter tree and a house in the background, and I think about how the book contains a time and a place in a similar way to a sketch, and how to hold the book is to hold a day of Mayer's life. I turn to a long passage in which Mayer provides an inventory of her house through its things, moving from room to room, itemising and summarising. I follow her through the bedroom, kitchen, bathroom and then the living room with its 'shelves of books and books in boxes...' (2000, p. 34). I look up to the books surrounding me, feeling an accord between our different lives. Mayer was the mother of two young children at the time of writing *Midwinter Day* and her poetry presents what Andrew Epstein describes as 'the poetics of the maternal everyday' (2016, p. 159). In *Midwinter Day* writing and mothering are not presented as separate or adversarial, as she 'consciously attempts to welcome *everything*' into the poem (p. 174). The inventory presents this every-thing: 'a mimeograph machine and its cover, diaper rash ointment, from the walls a butterfly kite, a leaf on a ribbon from nursery school, mushrooms by Joe, an iris and a gladiola by Rosemary, the gladiola painted here, the stuck clock, the window faces south...' (2000, p. 32).

The inventory proceeds without break or full stop until its end. It is a capture of the thing-life of the house within the span of the day, a time capsule within a time capsule. As I read them the things appear in my mind's eye, each with a momentary glint like the sunlight off the can lid I'd watched earlier that afternoon. When I look up from the page I borrow this roaming, inventorising eye, see the door half ajar and the lamp in the shape of a lighthouse, the stack of cardboard archive boxes that reaches the ceiling, the record player, the globe of the world, the books on shelves or in stacks and piles anywhere it is possible to shelve or stack or pile them, the long window that frames the street outside. Looking out I see the daylight is fading, and I go over to close the blind, so I won't be visible to people walking by. It is the time of day for

joggers and dog walkers, and if I leave the blind open my lighted window presents the room to them as a cluttered still life, with me on the couch at the edge of it, a thing among things.

As I continue reading, I listen for the sound of the front door opening, signalling S's return from work. In a while it comes, the heavy, familiar sound of the latch unclicking, before he appears in the doorway, puts down his bag and his bike helmet, begins to settle back home. Soon we are at the kitchen table, exchanging our stories of the day as we eat bowls of pasta. This pandemic year our nightly stories of our days' work have changed. Now his are edged with the increased tensions of working in public, and mine with the disconnection of working remotely, of being everyday home.

I start my story. My day, I say, was made up of things. The alarm clock, my quilted jacket, the souvenir eggcup, the Tupperware lettuce crisper, telephone books, my laptop, a postcard from Vancouver, the phone, the Hills Hoist, a can lid, abandoned evening dresses, a discarded handbag, an anarchist flyer, face washers arranged like a Swiss Roll, a church bell, The Blob, the couch, a paperback copy of *Midwinter Day*. This is a day's inventory. An index of a sequence of encounters, between myself and the things that have written this account with me.

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