

## What Remains

Nadine Olonetzky

*Your shoes talk to me. They whisper, sometimes they shout; I'm the only one who hears it. Most of the time, though, they are just there, silent. They mourn, maybe they're insulted at having been left so alone? They're a bit stretched out. They traveled with you through the world. They felt streets, sidewalks. They walked on stairs, going up and down. They danced: On parquet floors; on asphalt. They swooshed through the air, in little swings and big ones; that must have made them happy. And now? They stand there, obediently, one next to the other. Waiting. And cannot venture out into the world with anyone else. With anyone.*

Someone dies. A husband. A grandmother. A friend. A daughter. At first, there is only shock, pain, then—often for quite a long time—sadness. At first there is a lot to do. Then, at some point, there's nothing left to do. And then the question arises of what to do with the relative's things, the loved one's? What should happen with the shoes, shirts, and pants? The jewelry? The evidence of their little passions; toy cars and dolls, photos and diaries? Where should they go?

*That was your favorite chair. How often have I seen you there, usually reading, a pillow at your back. And the cat who knew that, too, would immediately jump up onto your lap. Comfortable, calm, a simple form covered in fabric with a discrete but refined houndstooth pattern; the chair was simply there, and did not appear to have anything to do other than be there for you at the decisive moment. It is still here now; its cushions still remember you, I'm sure of that. After all, it was a love story, and no little one. I remember it.*

There are some things that we associate with only one single person. Even when the object is a mass product. A leather belt, for instance; a pair of jeans; a pearl necklace. But for us, it is *the* leather belt; *the* jeans; *the* pearl necklace. How very little is required to spark a lot? We put our face in the scarf, and a whole world forms. These things are magical, so full of life. The dead body, we have to let it depart; cremate it, bury it. We have no choice; we have to separate from it.

*What remains? Five tuning forks. They lie in a little cardboard box that has become soft and tattered from use, from intent and purpose. And the tuning forks also had a reason to be there. I still know exactly how you held one in your hand, made it resound with an energetic strike and then immediately brought it to your ear. The tone still resounded there, for us, almost inaudibly. But it was a signpost for you: how to continue, at what height, depth. Which naturally meant, how to begin or to continue singing. But why five tuning forks? Wouldn't one have been enough? Might they have different sounds, and lying in the little box are really five different signposts?*

Our memories hold a lot of stories: In the back or lower drawers, deep in the dark recesses. They can remain there archived for a very long time without being noticed. A scent, a photograph, a scene, or sound: and suddenly the drawer opens and lets them out. The past is suddenly more present than the present. History is back again, as though a little stage had popped up for it. And with its power, it overlays the now; colors it, clouds it, focuses it. Some memories are clear, stand before our eyes as

distinct images. Others are diffuse. Most are longer stories, sometimes they turn into novels.

*Your nightgown. Beautiful linen or solid cotton, perhaps a good quality blend. It still smells like you. It carries you in the spaces between the threads; you're still there in the little empty places. Or are you lying? Floating? After all, now you are without a body, only a scent, impression, disappearing. You have left behind wrinkles. Different wrinkles than the ones you had on your body. No belly wrinkles, wrinkles in the corners of your mouth, smile wrinkles, not the tiny lines in skin, the little grooves that life draws over the course of time. The creases in the nightgown still know that you tossed and turned, and also rolled over slowly, carefully. That you sweated in summer and trembled from the cold when you were already sick. That you then sometimes held the edges in your hands, the edges that were actually ends.*

But what happens when nothing remains? Not even a jacket? War, flight, major fire—and nothing is left? The offspring, the survivors hold fast, but to nothing tangible. To fragments of stories, memories of memories. In the end to documents that surface at some point in archives. There it is in black and white that your very own grandfather's trail was lost on day X in the forest near Y.

You hold fast to every word. But these fragments expressed by these words change. Time pounds on them and with every repetition, they are formed anew. At some time they are no longer fragments of stories, but legends.

*As though you always went out to sea! The buttons of your sailor's jacket, I've put them aside now. Beautiful brass buttons with anchors on them. When the sea was calm, you left the jacket open. But when the waters were rough, it protected you and supported you; then the buttons were critical. Things that are impossible to do without. The dark blue of the jacket fabric and the red-yellow of the brass yielded a contrast that you loved. Just as elegant as it is practical you always said. The buttons bore that in them. The jacket was for weatherproof, intrepid, confident people. For those who are stable, on the lookout, want to see the horizon even when there is no ocean far and wide. For people with experience who know that everything passes, the lull and the drowsy unsteadiness and also the storm. And also the jacket's time.*

If it were only so simple: shared sorrow is half sorrow. Chasms often arise between people who grieve for the same person. They mourn so differently, too little, too much, they mourn so strangely. Maybe a fight erupts because one wants to have things out in sight, while the other wants to stuff them into boxes and put them in the attic. The permanence of the things against the impermanence of life—that is hard to take. The pain always lasts longer than the patience of the listener, at some point it crawls inside, into the bones and accompanies you. It's there, everywhere. You work, eat, sleep again. But it has become a part of everything, maybe only as big as a hazelnut, but a part, and not the worst one.

*Are you with me when I hold your keys in my hand? Listen to the Rolling Stones' Silver Train? Dance to it in the room? The emptiness without you has imprisoned me. I sit in the cell, abandoned. The quiet in here is so horrendous. Can I leave this cell when I carefully hold a glass with your ashes over the railing of a ship, and fulfill your wish: surrender you to the ocean. Are you gone then, or the opposite, absorbed by all elements; so here, everywhere. And am I then free again, through you, being everywhere?*

We want to leave behind traces, live on in them. Beautiful traces. Our own children perhaps. A flourishing business. Something written, painted. A collection of miniature cars, an enchanting garden, snapshots that show us happy. Signs of intent and action, in any case, of structure. Signs of rituals, fine habits, of humor. We do not want to be forgotten, or at least not right away. But signs of roaring mishap, of being lost, of fear? We carry them and have them, but they should not outlast us. They should perish with us.

*The leather band knows your neck. It knows you better than I do. The sweat, the flakes of skin. It has witnessed from up close everything that happened around your face, your neck, and your shoulder, your décolleté. It was there. Like the ball of silver wire. It rolled and jumped on your chest, sometimes leapt in front of your nose. The words that you said and also those that others addressed to you buzzed past it. You balanced spoonful of soup or forkfuls of meat or beans past it. Sometimes drops of wine or a bit of water landed on it. But it wasn't bothered by that, being so close to you was good for it. I carry with me, the leather band with the silver ball, it is good to have you close.*

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Nadine Olonetzky, born in Zurich in 1962, writes for the *NZZ am Sonntag* about photography, art, and cultural history. She has authored and also edited several books. Member of Kontrast ([www.kontrast.ch](http://www.kontrast.ch)) and project head/editor at Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess.