

Ann Keniston

(Over)compensating: Some Collected Parts

1.

My best friend C. kept her postcard collection in a cardboard box, organized alphabetically by location, each section marked with a heavy dark-gray cardboard divider. I imitated her in this as other things, but my collection was haphazard, the postcards jammed into a shoebox too long to keep them upright, the dividers crookedly cut from shirt boxes. Some were hard to categorize and I didn't know where to put them. Every Saturday we took the bus to the mall and chose another little plastic animal from the display case at Malley's, then went home to place it beside the others on its designated shelf. We spent a third of our identical weekly allowances on our collections, C.'s idea too, which I went along with because she was more confident and also more anxious and probably more injured. Both our mothers were drunks, though we didn't know it then.

We liked those animals because they were so small, but also because we could set the lion beside the bighorn sheep; the tortoise was nearly the same size as the elephant. We never played with them or gave them names or pretended they were alive. They were hard and perfect, easy to knock down if our hand trembled arranging them, a domino effect.

A collection is something owed that has come due—a repayment of a debt—but also something freely acquired. One theorist calls it *a weigh[ing] against, a way to seek and find a kind of companionship or overlap*. It converts what's *useless* into *an asset* and *a scale*, probably the old-fashioned kind with two pans, the weights always relative. Our collections let C. and me devise a system of accrual and exchange using homemade accounting methods, which must have been how we tried to fill the gaps we knew and didn't know about.

I often thought I had ended up with less and therefore believed I was owed more than seemed fair. I believed in overcompensation not (only) in the dictionary sense—taking *excessive measures to correct or make amends*—but

also in the sense of backpay or payback, though I also knew this logic was self-indulgent, histrionic, and therefore doomed to fail. Yet I never became a hoarder or anorexic or OCD or a sufferer from PTSD, all conditions associated with collecting. Instead, I created what's been called *a realm of mock exchange* informed by *control and confinement*. I filled my days sorting and arranging, which helped me hide my feelings, the way old-fashioned travelers disguised their impulse to plunder visited or conquered lands with a more decorous set of names: *preservationist, expert, connoisseur*.

2.

Sometimes I pretended I was worthless because that's how I felt. I became an essayist, though I called my first attempts *diaries*, then *journals* and *poems*, then *transcendental journals* composed in segments over years and left in their first form in identical numbered hand-written notebooks I bought specially and stored in a locked box, my extra-long adjective-filled sentences a secret boast. Sometimes I copied other people's words without attribution, trusting I'd remember or could look up the source, using underlining or italics to indicate what wasn't mine.

My plan was to use my old stuff—my memories, some already worn with handling, but not just those—to buttress my latest theme or scheme, to *arrange, re-arrange, and classify parts* of the *big-world-out-there* in a private space, hoping the randomness of *metonymy* would click into *metaphor*. I dripped so much *sentimental value* onto my worthless scraps they got soggy. I didn't know the sentimental tries to bring about *the death of death* nor that *the stopped time of objects* reveals *it is my death that is in question, even the grim reaper* transformed according to the logic of kitsch into *a homely figure*.

I wanted certain memories to become autonomous and charged when put into proximity with objects that evoked them, though this was a hubristic act. I loved nearly all the objects I picked up. For Marx, capitalism, and more specifically the marketplace, bring inanimate objects to (almost-)life, transforming them into fetishes, the so-called primitive objects imbued with a living force, which bourgeois Western collectors liked to carry home from their travels and display. Collecting, Theodor Adorno implies, denies the corollary that capitalism turns people into things. Sometimes I could feel each purchase draining away a little more of my aliveness.

Secretly I must have believed I was neither alive nor free. That's why I let my breath catch on the tiny things I cherished like hoarfrost on pine needles when the sun comes up or glittery snow in a globe that offers an illusion of escape precluded by the fact of its containment.

A similar backward or exploded math has been used to determine how collections acquire a *value, aesthetic or otherwise, independent of the simple sum of their parts*, the parts combining, if the collector is lucky into a *synthetic whole, a programme of the world in microcosm*. A magic trick, a sleight of hand, jackpot, bonus, or unexpected dividend, the way some mathematicians can calculate and predict irrational exuberance, seemingly chaotic events, and the outcome of art auctions propelled to giddy heights by the fact of bidding in a crowded room.

3.

I've put the cart before the horse by frontloading my rationale and pitching my defense as an apology and the reverse. I've violated the sorting method I devised to allow each iteration of myself her due. My aim was to extract from that chronology a set of themes, *taxonomy*, it's said, the first skill a collector must master. But I've untethered my citations from their authors' names and jammed in too many words to demonstrate I've done my homework. An iceberg method, the underwater buildup necessary to create the illusion of a perfect floating peak.

I was ten when like a precious object I began to be passed back and forth between my parents according to a predetermined plan. After my father moved back into our old house, the built-in shelves in my old room were empty since I'd taken my collections to my mother's new house (*mine*) in another city. That's probably why my father started saving airplane drink bottles and hotel Do Not Disturb signs from the trips he took. He must have suggested I collect those little objects, which remind me now of Lacan's *petit objet a*, a little object desired but eternally unobtainable. A collection is a side effect of loneliness and extra time, *a discourse addressed to oneself*, writes Jean Baudrillard, which must be why collectors *can never entirely shake off an air of impoverishment and depleted humanity*. That junk let me put my brokenness on display, though a giddiness also sometimes emerged. I still slept in my Peanuts nightgown, my hair frizzed out.

When my father packed up our old house just a year or so after he'd moved back in, I went specially to help him. It was an end to childhood, I must have thought. It was August, hot and sticky, and I had cramps, which might be why I rolled all my stuff in newspaper, the worthless with the cute and valuable. When I finally unpacked those boxes forty years later, I was embarrassed—for both us of us, I guess—and threw most of it away. But I also found things I remembered, souvenirs from trips, mostly, which I repacked and sent to my real house and scattered on shelves and counters.

I used my father's gifts as rope or glue or double-sided tape. He'd carried the bottles home and rinsed them out for me, made them metaphors for his tenderness, their objective worth or worthlessness irrelevant.

4.

Summers with one parent or the other, I liked to wander the beach at low tide, collecting feathers, stones, and shells, especially the little yellowish ridged ones that reminded me of toenails, objects I found *curious*, that is, *interesting* or *unusual*. I arranged those scavenged things on my dresser in peanut butter jars I'd soaked the labels off, the rocks immersed in water to make them colorful or smeared with Vaseline. From shells with holes made by sea creatures or birds and driftwood and black thread, I made mobiles, difficult to keep horizontal though I managed and hung them in the window of my room in the rented house where I lived with each parent for two weeks.

I also checked out novels from a list of classics every girl my age should read from the musty local public library, working my way through them according to my whim though I made sure I read them all. I collected books describing the outermost beach I walked on daily, *curious* in the sense of *cautious*, *careful*, *taking care*. In constant unrequited love with boys glimpsed at a distance, I was too shy ever to attend the weekly outdoor dances for kids my age. I was trying to create—*curate*, *seek a cure for*—a version of experience in which I was an eye, my hand sometimes transcribing what I saw. My goal was to be a writer but also a custodian, librarian, a carer for extant things.

The ephemera I gathered and wrapped in toilet paper at the end of the summer were mostly damaged in transit, too fragile to save or else I didn't

work hard enough to preserve them. The sand dollars shattered, as did the intact starfish I occasionally found; my mobiles got so tangled I had to throw them out. It's a lifetime habit of mine, to neglect the things I say I love. Nor did I understand, much less appreciate, that those shell bits were emblems of my *noblesse oblige*, a string of empty days that allowed me to find ways to turn my lifelong loneliness into an object of study, then a state of being I thought I couldn't live without. It was *the transience of objects* that moved me most, and also their *finitude*.

Most days I shambled or sometimes skipped down the beach in a sundress, brown as a berry with sunburned feet, imagining myself graceful and fragile, like the objects arranged in old-fashioned cabinets of curiosities by European collectors, *skeletons beside torn wings, braveries, and vanityes, old rotten pictures beside broken-nosed Marble*, though the effort it took to be a happy person sometimes made me feel as rigid as the plaster casts in the first museums composed from donated private collections, placeholders for originals to be acquired later on.

5.

The last photo of me with my father was taken on a camera phone a year before he died in the dining room of his assisted living. When I printed two copies at the pharmacy, one for me and one for him, I tried to zoom in on our faces, cropping out the dishes and half-eaten food, but the image was too dark, so our faces blurred and became a series of geometric shapes, pixilated. Photos by then were the only gifts I could think to give him other than pillows and fuzzy blankets.

Collections are often understood as *monuments to mortality*, maybe partly because the first collections were objects buried with the dead. According to this logic, every collection is a *mausoleum*, every collector a *pharaoh*, which means collecting both staves off and acknowledges death, especially since *whatever we collect we have to kill*, not only *butterflies or beetles* but everything else (*metaphorically*). Collected objects are therefore *relics, both dead and alive with the aura, the spirit of something greater*, or that's the wish, to infuse *spirit* into inanimate stuff. The first souvenirs were the bones of saints as well as bits of cathedral walls and statuary hacked off by pilgrims, offering evidence not only of the journey but the faith that inspired it, the way saints' painted haloes signal their transcendence of bodily suffering.

A collection is a reliquary. It creates a spell, even though collecting is also *melancholy, even morbid, and perhaps ultimately tragic*, inevitably expressing *the failure that is always on the cards once mortal desire reaches its built-in limits*.

On one of his last conscious days, my father, cranked up in bed, was handed a self-published biography of him a grandchild had composed years earlier. On its cover was his name and a photo of him as a young man. He mutely held the book and studied its cover for an hour while others chattered to and around him, captivated by it, though no one could tell whether he recognized himself and if so perceived the gap between his represented youthful self and what he had become. Maybe he found this discrepancy poignant. Or he didn't recognize the photo and held it to be polite. By that point no one was bothering with his glasses.

In the afternoons that week, while he was asleep, I walked around a nearby pond and photographed the scuffed-up ice that partly covered it. I didn't know how to feel, though collecting those images seemed to help. I was interested especially in where the ice and water joined and resisted each other and also the edge between water and shore, images metaphorical in a way I couldn't spell out, something about economy and waste, reflecting and deflecting. Already I was thinking about recycling those images, converting them into words.

A few weeks after he died, I assembled (curated) a slide show of scenes from his life. I began by scanning prints I removed from his childhood photo album, which I stuck back in at random afterward since who would ever look at them again? Some of the negatives must have been damaged in processing, since the prints were scratched; others, taken in low light, were blurred, and the colors of some more recent ones were off because of the film or printing process or they had faded over time. Those flaws, and also their proximity to one another, caused a kind of prick, what Roland Barthes calls in reference to photography a *wound*, . . . [a] *mark made by a pointed instrument*. One of his ideas is that because photos depict a single, often accidental moment, they evoke death and also bereavement. Like collections, they are always poignant, always sad.

For weeks, several times a day, I watched the finished version of the slideshow, in which his death was still *in the future*. All souvenirs eventually

get transformed to memento mori simply because time passes. Like any collection of objects belonging to the dead, the slideshow affirmed that loss lacks boundaries and also that every collection is misplaced and inadequate, an almost apostrophe calling impossibly back from beyond death, though it's more common for the living to apostrophize the dead.

A print my father bought in college, his little silver pitcher, the saltshakers he collected during the Depression—I sometimes think that other than my memories of him and those of other family members, they're the most enduring part of him now, no matter that he contributed to many people's lives. I've mixed his former possessions with mine, an almost seamless appropriation, more stuff to be sorted through after I die.

6.

Some nightmares aren't so bad. Even when they wake me, I want to fall back in and keep wandering the unreal streets I've come to recognize though there exists no map there where I entertain dead and living family members and strangers in long-since abandoned or invented rooms. Inside there is no hurt or fear; my broken-heartedness is sealed off, waiting till I wake to flood back in. When I'm lucky, the non-arrangement of my failures resembles a set of building blocks with which I can accrue credit in a pretend bank, a decompensation in the psychoanalytic sense, a *breakdown of defenses leading to severe regression*, a separation from reality, *me* projected onto unreal sites derived from actual ones. To decompensate is to playact or become unhinged, which is why I let all my defenses get overrun, the unobtainable object just an act of reaching out. Dizziness is what I am, numb arm or hand that reaches out of habit for some trinket, which tumbles from the shelf and dissolves into a black seethe I want to smear all over me, my excess also rimmed with finitude. The leftover glints are symptoms, not car headlights or a lamp left on but part of me, a flash or floater, torn vitreous or brain deficit. I was always lazy-eyed, legally blind. I refused to play to spite my face. *Despite my face* was how I misheard that phrase. Sometimes I induced a fever so high I had to stay in bed through dinner and the whole next day, furious at myself for doing it again but having hand-built the container I kept my fury in with baffles and trap doors and double locks so it stayed safe.

7.

Sometimes arranging photos of starlets and homely objects in boxes makes art, as when Joseph Cornell put mostly worthless junk he'd found or bought into glass-fronted cases, the arrangements so provisional, so impromptu and improvised, one viewer said he wanted to reach in and reorganize their parts. Cornell liked glitter especially and sometimes scattered it on magazine photos of starlets he'd cut out, the images glamorous and constrained in their boxes, some of which had compartments and others none, creating what Cornell called *theaters, shadow boxes wherein are metamorphosed the elements of a childhood pastime*.

I curated my feed so it included collages made from cut-out pages from old books and sheet music alongside images of birds and brightly colored scraps of ads, painted or photographed landscapes, and bits of paper with paint layered on, then scraped away. All those elements were glued onto another page. And still, my wish for burnished light persisted, just a little gold dust or gold leaf near the edge.

Into an empty cabinet with twelve little empty compartments I put small treasures formerly concealed on an upper shelf, some shells and little pots, souvenirs and gifts, my colonizing impulse modest, almost everything scavenged or mass produced except a single hand-cast bronze tile and two tiny Navajo pots.

Essays have been called *collections* and also *museums* and *cabinets*. They are an origami model that can be folded flat when not in use, a handmade book that opens to create a paper replica of the Eiffel Tower, a marvel of ingenuity thanks to discrepancies of medium and scale. A dark-painted wall hung with backlit Nubian masks, a culmination meant to display leftovers and also wow.

For me, Mary Ellen Bateson's phrase *composing a life* evokes a starting place, not a pencil sketch or study but the first paint dab applied to canvas without a plan. If that method doesn't work, it's okay to start somewhere else or adopt an angrier or more impetuous or pedantic tone or rearrange the parts, the composition only possible in retrospect, which is also true of life.

The display is often simple, but the labor can be intuited, if not the exact

proportion of patience to impatience, the first idea followed by who-knows-how-many years reworking it. Whether the maker had faith that combining stuff would make some kind of whole is irrelevant for the viewer. So many photos, bangles, and beads evoking or belonging to the dead get brought to the Black Rock Desert, then arranged spontaneously or according to a plan inside the temple constructed to be burned with all its contents. So many impromptu shrines line state highways, each a compensation, excessive and inadequate at once. The items left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall by relatives and well-wishers—bouquets and single flowers, letters, photos, and pins—are collected every night and saved. Maybe later, some of them, muted or gaudy according to the curator's whim, will be selected for a traveling exhibit, or a yet-to-be-imagined, infinitely expandable museum will be built to display them all.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Thanks to Emily Wittman, Mary Millen, Yolanda Manora, and (especially) Lisa Sewell for feedback on an earlier draft of this essay.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland, and Richard Howard. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Hill and Wang, 1981.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*. Verso, 1996.
- Blom, Philipp. *To Have and to Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting*. Overlook, 2003.
- Cavell, Stanley. "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting."
Contemporary Collecting: Objects, Practices, and the Fate of Things. Kevin M. Moist and David Banash, eds. Scarecrow, 2013. 99-132.
- Conley, Katharine. "Collecting Ghostly Things: André Breton and Joseph Cornell." *Modernism/Modernity* (2017): 24.2. 263-282.
- Craig-Martin, Michel. *On Being an Artist*. Art / Books, 2015.
- Elsner, John and Roger Cardinal. *The Cultures of Collecting*. Reaktion, 1997.
- McKinley, Mark. "The Psychology of Collecting." *The National Psychologist*.
31 May 2011.
- Swann, Marjorie. "Collecting." *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*. Bruce R. Smith, et al., eds. Cambridge UP, 2016. 476-482.
- Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. John Hopkins University Press, 1984.

Copyright of Five Points is the property of Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia by & on behalf of Georgia State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.