

**Stepping Up to Loss:
Crafting Feelings through Encounters with Crafted Memorials**

Rena Tom

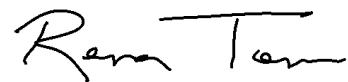
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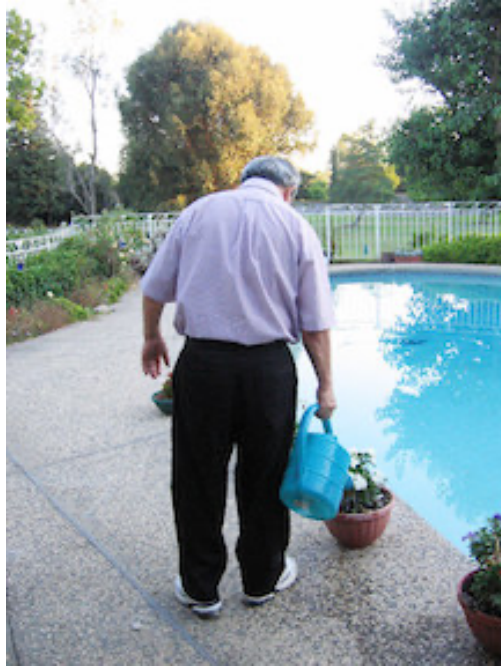
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rena Tom". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Rena" and last name "Tom" clearly distinguishable.

Author Signature

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DEDICATION



For my father. Don't worry, I'm keeping an eye on the plants.

PREFACE



Figure 1. Dad's memorial jade, February 2022 (*left*) and February 2023 (*right*). Photos by the author.

At the end of 2021, while I was busy with my usual routine of school work, holidays, and kids' birthday parties, loss showed up and demanded my attention. My father's health had been poor for a long time and I started to receive updates from my family about bruises that were slow to heal and emergency trips to the hospital with increasing frequency. Contemplating his absence happened sharply in bursts after reading the group texts, and softly in the middle of the night, disturbing my sleep.

I drifted away from my father as I grew up, busy with my own life. I visited a few times a year, but he became like a stranger as time went on. My most vivid memories of him are from age five to twenty-five. They include waiting at strangers' houses while he installed drapes, golf lessons on hot summer days, peeling potatoes so he could make french fries, and watching him douse flowers from a big plastic watering can on the back patio.

After his death a few months later, I returned home for the funeral. Entering my parents' house, I found the kitchen table covered with tiny jade plants in even tinier flowerpots, no more than four inches high. Instantly I was twenty again, rolling my eyes at Dad offering me yet another plant to take back to college... and then I was back in the present, and he wasn't there to greet me. I learned later that my mother and sister took cuttings from Dad's abundant jade bushes to offer mourners something as a sweet gesture of remembrance. At the moment, however, walking into a room with a sea of little plants was overwhelming, and reminded me of his absence. Knowing he was gone led to a rush of confusion and sadness. Through this encounter, I felt loss.

I attended his funeral the following day at Mount Vernon Memorial Park, a massive property with a statue of George Washington guarding an imposing white-columned replica of Washington's home. The manicured grounds, dotted with headstones, reinforced the solemnity of the day. My family chose a memorial service that blended American norms with Chinese traditions. The director handed me a memorial card as I entered the chapel. At the back, I could see the coffin, surrounded by several funeral wreaths and a large photo of Dad. I watched a slideshow of images of vacations and holidays projected onto the back wall. During the viewing, endless aunts, uncles, and cousins lined up to stand before the coffin, bow three times per tradition, and then give my mom a hug on their way back to their seats. The elder family members, the ones who knew my father the best, cried. Watching other people cry was intense and I could feel pressure behind my eyes, but I had no tears. My face felt frozen and I could only sit mutely and observe.

When the viewing was over, people got up to tell stories about Dad. At the end of the service, we were handed two small envelopes: the red one had a crisp dollar bill inside and the

white one held a quarter and a butterscotch candy, which we ate on the short walk to the cemetery plot.¹ Everyone placed a rose on the coffin before it was lowered into the ground, and then we walked back to a catered luncheon at the main building. The serious business was over and the atmosphere was more relaxed and cheerful as the relatives got to catch up with each other.

Every table had a cluster of jade plants at the center. Seeing them again snapped me out of my sad and slightly numb state and let me interact with people at the luncheon. Sometime during the night, my sister added plastic plant tags labeled with Dad's name to each pot. Crafting these keepsakes, which reminded me of wedding favors, was a lot of work, but honored our father in a way that would have been meaningful to him.

Nothing that day moved me quite like the jade plants. Each was slightly different, personal, and handcrafted; each one represented care, continuity, and renewal. It would have felt weird if the more customary objects like the wreaths, the card, and the envelopes weren't there, but they seemed like set dressing, things to check off a list. Because they were expected, they barely registered with me.

After I went home, the memorial card went into my closet to be filed away, but I placed the jade by the other plants on my porch. Here was an actual association with my father I could fuss over. Every day, I look at it and say hi, forget to water it and feel bad, see tiny new leaves, and become excited about placing it in a bigger pot someday (fig. 1). When my son helps me move it to a sunnier spot, he calls it *gung gung*, or grandpa in Cantonese.

¹ Gail Rubin, "Fundamentals of Chinese American Funeral Customs - Part Three," A Good Goodbye, November 7, 2016, <https://agoodgoodbye.com/funeral-traditions/fundamentals-of-chinese-american-funeral-customs-part-three/>. The red envelope is for good luck. The quarter in the white envelope is to pass on luck to someone else, and the candy is to sweeten the bitterness of the day.

Even before my father's death, I was researching craft, absence, and the senses. Since loss has been so pervasive during my time in the MA program, I decided to lean into it.² A curiosity about how I feel (and feel about) loss drives my investigation into the roles crafted objects can play when they are encountered by people who are grieving. Facing personal loss through the comforts of craft seems like the right way, for me, to mourn. Dad's jade, carefully crafted into a memorial object, is an example of craft's ability to unexpectedly stir up feelings and memories. The plant represents the loss of my father, but its leafy presence, flourishing, lively and green, softens the fact of his absence.

² Thank you to my advisors for getting me back on track.

1 INTRODUCTION

Personal loss, in simple terms, is what a person feels because of the absence of someone important to them. For example, they may feel heartache, anxiety, sadness, physical pain, or relief. Particular to the individual, the feelings are subjective, localized, and transient. Personal loss can lie dormant and be evoked through encounters that set in motion an affective response and a subsequent slew of emotions, reactions, and memories.

For example, if a person encounters an object associated with an absent loved one, it can instill a fresh episode of grief. As the bereaved notices that the other person is missing (you see their bathrobe but they are not wearing it), they acutely feel disturbances to other life routines (you miss eating their pancakes at Sunday brunch), and grief blooms within. Here, the encounter leads to what philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe calls “a full recognition of loss” that consists of acknowledging the loved one’s absence, followed by “appreciating that the world lacks certain possibilities, those that depended in one or another way on [their] potential presence.”³ The bathrobe transforms into an object that memorializes personal loss.

People have long used objects to memorialize loss because of the human propensity to develop attachments to things through ritual, commerce, function, or sentiment, transforming everyday objects into memorial objects. According to writer and curator Sandra Dudley, “The material qualities of objects—their shape, color, density, weight, texture, surface, size and so on—define our sensory responses to them,” and those responses contribute to our affective

³ Matthew Ratcliffe, “Grief and the Unity of Emotion,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 41, no. 1 (2017): 162.

response.⁴ Affect happens across and through objects and therefore memorial objects are participants in affective encounters as much as individuals.

Memorial objects are where the tangible and intangible come together for people who are experiencing loss. They can be a substitute for presence, a reminder of absence, or a conduit for memories, feelings, or imagination. Whether the objects are natural, manufactured, or crafted, they take on one or more of these roles based on the immediate needs of the grieving person. My interest is in how crafted memorial objects, deliberately embedded with attributes like skill, process, function, form, or material knowledge, are recognized through our bodies.

When we hold and behold these objects with intimacy and familiarity, we deepen our affinity in ways that bring up emotions, evoke memories, and contribute to meaning-making. Crafted memorial objects have the potential to amplify our awareness of personal loss and affect how we react to it. They become poignant when our bodies, already feeling loss, attune to what craft has to contribute.

My embodied encounters with a makeshift roadside memorial, memory seed bombs, and an oversized funeral wreath are at the core of my research. Sociologist Michael Brennan states that “bodies themselves are a kind of matter... sensuous beings moved by the loss of people and of ‘things.’”⁵ Taking cues from my sensing and feeling body, a material object in its own right, I examine how connections between craft and loss form and reveal themselves through acts of transformation, mourning in public spaces, and embodied responses to informal memorials.

⁴ Sandra Dudley, “Materiality Matters: Experiencing the Displayed Object,” *University of Michigan Working Papers in Museum Studies*, 2012, 1.

⁵ Michael Brennan, “Why Materiality in Mourning Matters,” in *The Materiality of Mourning: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Zahra Newby and Ruth E. Toulson (New York: Routledge, 2019), 234.

This topic felt valuable to explore because my grief does not follow culturally determined conventions or timelines.⁶ Through this project, I am learning how to contend with personal loss by being attuned to the world through my body. My encounters with the objects initiated feelings that were sometimes soothing and sometimes shattering. I was solemn at the roadside memorial; when I held the seed bombs, I felt hopeful; and in the presence of the wreath, I was nostalgic. Craft, in its different guises, caught my attention in these objects and helped me find unconventional places and times to mourn.

Not everyone wants to be reminded of their grief while going about their day, and not everyone is ready to step up to loss, especially if it is very recent. However, some people might welcome a space where they can incrementally try on feelings of loss from different angles. Landscape architecture scholars Ebru Erbaş Gürler and Başak Özer believe “memory sites” that are human-scaled and integrated into daily life are better able to form a relationship with the observer.⁷ My project suggests there are benefits to encountering memorial objects outside of designated places of mourning, and that relating to craft—familiar, intimate, and approachable—within these objects can assist the grieving person with preserving memories of the past and moving forward with life.

The Crafted Memorial Object

Writer and curator Jorunn Veiteberg, in her book *Craft in Transition*, claims contemporary craft exists in an intervening space that makes room for its transient, undecided

⁶ See Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005). The five stages of loss model (and its related concept, the five stages of grief) was widely adopted in the West by therapists and later by popular culture, though recently the usefulness of this linear progression has been refuted.

⁷ Ebru Erbaş Gürler and Başak Özer, “The Effects of Public Memorials on Social Memory and Urban Identity,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 82 (July 2013): 859.

nature and is “between function and non-function, tradition and breaking with tradition, craftsmanship-based art and idea-based art... in which values such as ‘instability’ and ‘undecidability’ prevail.”⁸ I am excited by the possibilities that crafted memorial objects have within this space, where the instabilities that swirl around loss, like absence and presence or remembering and forgetting, can be reframed with potential positive outcomes.

To test this idea, I chose three memorial objects—a roadside memorial, seed bombs, and a large wreath—that are all crafted in some fashion. Crafted memorial objects, in this study, refer to tangible objects with some detectable presence of the handmade, specifically designed to memorialize loss. Each selection fulfills this definition a little differently, which I discuss in more detail in each case study. The memorial objects are unofficial, intentional, and local, and bring different perspectives than large, institutional memorials, or objects that were not originally meant for mourning. I engaged the work of Margaret Gibson, Sherry Turkle, and James Young to decide what kinds of objects I wanted to interrogate.

My interest is in intentionally crafted memorial objects. This differentiates them from “objects of the dead,” which author Margaret Gibson calls items like clothing, furniture, or accessories, previously used by or associated with the absent person.⁹ These are often manufactured goods that are repurposed into mourning objects. The transformation of objects into objects of the dead may or may not be voluntary, contributing to a complex matrix of mourning, meaning, and intention that surrounds the object. While I am interested in how mourning happens through objects, my research differs because my main focus is not on an

⁸ Jorunn Veiteberg, *Craft in Transition*, trans. Douglas Ferguson (Bergen, Norway: Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen, 2005), 87.

⁹ Margaret Gibson, *Objects of the Dead: Mourning and Memory in Everyday Life* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008), 2.

object's previous relationship with the dead. Instead, I attend to my embodied response to new-to-me objects specifically made for mourning.

According to sociologist Sherry Turkle, an object of the dead can be an evocative object, though not all evocative objects are objects of the dead. She explains that evocative objects, like a necklace or a stuffed animal, intensify emotions as “a companion to [the] life experience” of its new owner or caretaker.¹⁰ Relationships between objects and the people they link together have inspired a trove of moving, personal storytelling in literature, film, and the arts.¹¹ However, I believe these preexisting associations would contribute to a different affective experience than I am studying. This project looks at the relationship between object and absent person, if it exists, but centers my personal relationship with the object through its representation of craft.

Because I am interested in individual instances of personal loss, I am not including more formal and permanent memorials in my study, even though they are the most conspicuous examples of commemoration in the landscape. James Young, who writes extensively about memorials and national memory, theorizes that large, official memorials are gaining popularity because “monuments propagate the illusion of common memory” missing from modern society, which is fractured into a variety of beliefs and values.¹² These monuments imply that people might find common ground and unity through collective mourning. While I acknowledge that individual mourning can happen at national memorials, my project explores smaller, informal memorials to understand how they can be, in my experience, as moving as official responses to grief.

¹⁰ Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 5.

¹¹ There are too many examples to list but for storytelling art projects, see Kija Lucas, “The Museum of Sentimental Taxonomy,” accessed January 25, 2023, <https://www.themst.org/>; Dani Blum and Jaspal Riyait, “What Loss Looks Like: Times Readers Share Artifacts of Remembrance,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2021, sec. Well, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/well/covid-death-grief-loss.html>.

¹² James E. Young, “The Memorial’s Arc: Between Berlin’s *Denkmal* and New York City’s 9/11 Memorial,” *Memory Studies* 9, no. 3 (July 2016): 329.

My chosen objects possess instabilities associated with loss and craft; they exist within an intervening space where they waver as I interact with them. While the space Veiteberg refers to is not spatial, my encounters happen at very different physical locations. My case studies are organized according to their objects' material instability due to their locations, from most to least precarious. The street, the studio, and the museum become affective partners to my encounters and provide other dimensions to explore as I conduct my research. I elaborate on the relationship between me, the object, and the environment in the next section.

2 METHOD

Emplacement and Attunement

In this project, I speculate on how aspects of craft in memorial objects contribute to affect and change my feelings of personal loss. I found that studies specifically about craft and affect often analyze the viewpoint of craft makers as they engage with materials, produce work, and create meaning.¹³ My desire, however, is to investigate my engagement with objects outside of craft practice, a more specialized activity not everyone participates in. I want to see what makes crafted objects affective to grieving people as they learn to live with absence, and if the encounter can show them new paths for mourning and feeling personal loss.

As I embarked on my project, I brought in the work of anthropologist Sarah Pink and social theorist Brian Massumi to assist in defining the parameters of my fieldwork. I wanted to construct my subjective experience through multisensory observation constructed in person instead of mediated by text, photograph, or screen. While I am primarily interested in my affective response to craft within the object, it is impossible to isolate my feelings from what I bring with me, which includes knowledge about the object's materials, function, or conditions of making, my current mood, and my physical condition, for example. It would also be inaccurate to ignore the role of the environment in my evaluation.

My methodological approach is theoretical and speculative and depends on close noticing of crafted objects and the places they are situated in, where place is an indeterminate zone "made through people's embodied and multi-sensorial participation in their environment," according to

¹³ For examples, see Catherine Harper, "Craft Histories, Textile Futures: Emotional Affectivity and Design Hybridity in Quilt Design," in *Futureground-DRS International Conference 2004*, ed. J. Redmond, D. Durling, and A. de Bono (Melbourne, November 17-21, 2004); Belinda MacGill, "Craft, Relational Aesthetics and Ethics of Care," *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 1 (February 2019): 406–19.

Pink in her book *Doing Sensory Ethnography*.¹⁴ I wanted to accommodate this mindset both during and after my encounters which led me to look to sensory ethnography and affect theory as I moved between observation, self-reflection, and analysis.

Ethnography involves a wide range of practices but, explains Pink, “tends to include participant observation, ethnographic interviewing and a range of other collaborative research techniques.”¹⁵ She believes a shortcoming of this more traditional approach is that it excludes or diminishes the role of the researcher. To remedy this, she recommends employing sensory ethnography where “the self-conscious and reflexive use of the senses... is an important and strategic act.”¹⁶ Specifically, she endorses emplaced ethnography, based on David Howes’ proposal of emplacement, which responds to “the relationships between bodies, minds, and the materiality and sensuality of the environment.”¹⁷ Emplacement helps me extend my research because “through our own emplaced experiences we can gain insight into those of others.”¹⁸ For example, I can better understand how a roadside memorial can exist simultaneously as a public landmark, an eyesore, or a reminder of absence, depending on the role of a pedestrian, driver, or the bereaved. Emplaced ethnography compels me to remember that materiality and sensuality exist beyond myself and the specific object of study and is another variable to consider during data collection and analysis.

Pink answers the *what* about my encounters but I turn to the field of affect theory to understand *how*. By applying affect theory, I gain insight into how objects and I “speak” affectively to each other. Because I am interested in a crafted object’s ability to affect feelings of

¹⁴ Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 2015), 112.

¹⁵ Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 4.

¹⁶ Pink, 59.

¹⁷ Pink, 28.

¹⁸ Pink, 116.

personal loss, identifying conditions of the encounter—the time of day and temperature, the ease of access, how the work is illuminated, any signs of wear, if I am preoccupied, if I have a headache—is vital to my project. During an encounter, my material body interacts and resonates with the object, its culturally informed presence, and the atmosphere we create together.

For media studies scholar Brian Ott, affect theory mostly falls into two main camps: affect as elemental state or affect as intensive force (with an emerging third perspective that is a hybrid of the two).¹⁹ In this circumstance, affect as an intensive force has more to offer because, he proclaims, affect “foreground[s] the importance of matter as lively, vibrant, and animate,” which underscores my relationship to crafted objects as I affect and am affected by them.²⁰

Massumi is a proponent of affect as intensive force; he believes that affect, sensation, perception, and memory contribute to creating intensity of experience in the affective field, which encompasses the entirety of an event or encounter.²¹ This position helps me chart how intensity builds, manifests, and changes throughout my encounters. He maintains that affect and emotion are connected but not the same by arguing, “Emotion is... the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized.”²² To have emotion is to make an interpretation based on affect, which flows all around the participants of an event.

For example, affect is found within (and also generates) atmospheres which are the “spatial experience of being attuned in and by a material world,” according to anthropologists

¹⁹ Brian L. Ott, “Affect in Critical Studies,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

²⁰ Ott, “Affect in Critical Studies,” 12–13.

²¹ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 1.

²² Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28.

Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard, and Tim Flohr Sørensen.²³ Atmosphere is formed through engagement, a constant affective attunement with and within an affective field. Massumi remarks:

You have to keep attuned to how the field is affecting you, even as you are affecting it. So it's a kind of double becoming, where you as an individual are being modulated by the collective field as much as the field is being modulated by your deeds. You're never standing outside just directing or judging or critiquing or commenting upon or describing. You're adventuring.²⁴

While Massumi's interest in attunement serves his work on relational aspects of political ecology, it also helps define my position during an encounter, where I am the object of study as much as the crafted object itself. Using emplacement as an ethnographic point of view to gather information through affective attunement, I fully adventure into my case studies. These methods encourage close noticing of the encounter between self, crafted object, and environment within an affective field. It also accounts for the influence of my existing craft and embodied knowledge and emotional state that I bring to the encounters, reflection, and analysis.

Visiting, Revisiting, and Revising

Now that I am situated, I determine what I want to accomplish and how to proceed on a more granular level. Gibson's work on melancholy objects examines the "emotional, symbolic and memorial value" of objects that represent both grief and the memory of grieving itself and provides a useful framework to organize my information.²⁵ I modified her approach to accommodate what I wanted to know about craft and loss and analyzed my overall affective

²³ Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard, and Tim Sørensen, "Staging Atmospheres: Materiality, Culture, and the Texture of the In-Between," *Emotion, Space and Society* 15 (May 2015): 35.

²⁴ Jonas Fritsch and Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen, "Affective Attunement in a Field of Catastrophe: Interview Med Brian Massumi Og Erin Manning," Peripeti, June 6, 2012, <https://www.peripeti.dk/2012/06/06/affective-attunement-in-a-field-of-catastrophe/>.

²⁵ Margaret Gibson, "Melancholy Objects," *Mortality* 9, no. 4 (November 2004): 287.

experience during the encounter, my interpretation of the object's craft details, and the relationship that developed between me and the object. Putting these together, I can test my broader hypothesis about how craft contributes to alternative ways to grieve and mourn.

When I visited each site, I paid attention to my “experienced, knowing, and emplaced body” and recorded my impressions and fragmented thoughts through writing and photographs.²⁶ Another reason it would be impossible to isolate my observations and produce a set of sensory-only details is that, as Pink asserts, analysis is always happening, situated both within and “spatially or temporally away” from the encounter.²⁷ My affective experience would necessarily combine new and previous knowledge, memories, sensations, feelings, and emotions.

Later, I revisited what I wrote to clarify my words. This process brought up even more memories and feelings from my past and more information about my encounters, which I added to the document. I performed text and visual analysis while paying particular attention to how instances of craft influenced my feelings of loss, including looking at the interplay between absence and presence, the memories that surfaced, and what I gleaned from the environment itself. I also looked for clues about physical and emotional transformations, ways I felt and expressed mourning, and what embodied responses I had to formal and informal memorial environments.

During this project, I wanted to meaningfully show how craft affects me personally. Massumi states that language cannot convey affective intensities, which poses a problem in translating the specifics of my encounter to the page. However, he says it can “carry affective intensities,” so while I cannot fully describe what I felt, I can try to instill that feeling in my

²⁶ Pink, 28.

²⁷ Pink, 143.

readers.²⁸ Marcel Proust's description of the madeleine and subsequent emotional and mental journey in *Remembrance of Things Past* demonstrated a way forward for me to create an evocative portrait. I slightly revised my writing for legibility but retained sentence fragments and informal language to offer a sense of how I moved through my encounters.

Each case study has two sections: the encounter, which is descriptive, colloquial, and roughly chronological, and the analysis. I begin with an anonymously created and constantly evolving roadside memorial in Berkeley. Afterward, I look at examples from artist Kasey Smith's memory seed bomb project in her Oakland studio. I end with encountering the haunting *Mourning Wreath* by Angela Hennessy at the Oakland Museum. Detecting craft, under my fingertips or standing before its presence, lent reassurance and familiarity to each object and gave me the confidence to navigate my uncertain feelings about grief and loss.

²⁸ Brian Massumi et al., "Affect and Immediation: An Interview with Brian Massumi," *DisClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 28 (2019): 115.

3 ROADSIDE MEMORIAL

Encounter: In the Street

Tuesday, January 31, 2023, 3:00 p.m. It was a brisk sunny 56°F, everything still damp from the unprecedented month of rain. I took advantage of the dry weather to walk to a nearby roadside memorial constructed in the median where Berkeley and Oakland meet. I wanted to experience the memorial up close instead of speeding by in my car.



Figure 2. Approaching JT Street's memorial on Adeline Street in Berkeley, facing south, January 2023. Photo by the author.

I walk down the sidewalk, distracted by everything: the traffic, loud as ever; endless shiny machines zigzagging through the intersection; the rumble of the train overhead. But then, an unexpected sight: the encampment near the memorial is actively being erased. My long-standing neighbors' homes being removed, almost gone. Now trash trucks, a backhoe, resigned protesters, and police. Fiberglass ribs from broken tents. I am told not to go further and am

instantly indignant. I look across the street at the weekly farmers' market proceeding undisturbed, pylons, signs, pop-up tents, volunteers in safety vests, strollers. Who is and isn't allowed is blindingly apparent.

On to my mission, I run across three lanes of traffic to the median into extra squishy green grass, tall after three weeks of rain. I see cars casually running red lights every day here and imagine the sounds of metal crumpling, ghost bikes on sidewalks, broken glass in the street. The lanes run one-way, but I look both ways, an Oakland habit. Vehicular accidents make me not just sorrowful but angry. My tiny interaction with the police and the destruction of the encampment feeds a slow rage.

I walk closer to the memorial, squinting in the sun (fig. 2). In the distance, I see shaggy lumps of stuff. The fragility of things left in the rain, a soggy tribute. It brought up fresh memories of two friends who died in car accidents while we were all in college. I had not thought about them for a long time, nor who I was back then, upset at their deaths, taking long drives up and down the coast, needing to escape myself but failing.



Figure 3. The memorial stretches from the street sign to the tree, January 2023. Photo by the author.

I can feel eyeballs on me from passing cars. I'm not where I'm supposed to be. I try to ignore the feeling. Up close, the piles have transformed into a memorial, a collage of things that equal "tragic, sudden death" when put together. There are two sections, each with a low plastic picket fence. One fence defines a space at the base of a leafless tree adorned with a faded bouquet of tenacious dried flowers, somehow survivors of the rain (fig. 3). It feels like a grave I have seen, fenced just like this, on the edge of a state park. Beyond the fence, more flowers, fake and real, and a cardboard box melting away, exposing tall memorial candles and glass bottles, sliding off a low table made of peeling plywood and a milk crate. This part is untended and sad, defaced by the elements.



Figure 4. The base of the street sign is fenced and supports flowers, a wall plaque, and a bottle of champagne, January 2023. Photo by the author.

I turn around. Suddenly, the absent person has a name, a presence. The other picket fence surrounds the most memorable part, an actual metal city street sign, milk chocolate brown and reflective, that reads “JT Streets,” surrounded by tributes: a solar garden light, piles of fake flowers, and a flat Mylar balloon, lashed to the signpost, painters’ tape and ribbons woven around like a maypole (fig. 4). A peeling plaque leans crooked and is shaped like a headstone; text almost faded away that says, “Believe anything is possible.” Looking closer, I see a bottle of champagne in a shiny blue mesh bag, a tiny “I love you” heart balloon, stiff and puffy, the kind that never deflates.

I imagine going to the grocery store, walking fluorescent-lit aisles, buying these things, kneeling to light a candle, tying a dancing balloon to the sign so it can’t fly away. A ziggurat of offerings set in a sea of overgrown grass, undisturbed, almost everything but the street sign a

little worn down. Cheap fabric flowers bleached to white like a pile of bones next to others holding their color. Maybe they arrived later? It gave me a feeling I was out of phase, like 3D art if you don't have your glasses on, unsure of where to rest my eyes.

I felt conspicuous writing notes and taking pictures, unsteady and unsure, the stop-start of cars at the signal light watching me survey the impromptu gravesite, the two ends defining a space about the size of a burial plot. Sudden realization that cemeteries and golf courses have the same smooth expanses of grass. I was nervous instead of solemn, embarrassed. Moving cautiously, I took notes, almost tiptoeing around it, mindful of my shoes sinking into the mud, staying further away than I should to take photographs. Something held me back from approaching closer, but I wanted to know more about JT. Who was he? Why do I assume JT was a man? I felt sympathy for the people who loved him, felt sadness at the dilapidated memorial, and had mixed feelings that it would be allowed to remain, while they forced the people who lived across the street to leave. I carried this uncertain feeling with me as I walked away.

Site Unseen

My first case study is a roadside memorial erected in June 2022 for a local resident named James “JT” Street, who died in a motorcycle crash a few blocks from my home. Street was a longtime employee of Berkeley’s public works department and beloved enough that the mayor mentioned his passing at a city council meeting.²⁹ Street’s memorial at the site of his death appeared shortly thereafter and perpetuates his legacy at a prominent spot near the

²⁹ Emilie Raguso, “Berkeley Honors JT Street, 19-Year City Worker, Who Died in Motorcycle Crash,” *Berkeleyside*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.berkeleyside.org/2022/06/15/berkeley-jt-james-street-city-worker-fatal-motorcycle-crash>.

Berkeley/Oakland border. His memorial is notable because it is, to me, a conspicuously public display of craft that repurposes and combines other objects to serve its purpose.

A roadside memorial is the public expression of a private tragedy, a display of intense feeling laid bare for everyone within its affective range. The tenuous physical existence of roadside memorials, due to local politics, petty theft, or weather conditions, creates an awareness of the transience of life and memory. Street's memorial is a vernacular crafted object that shows evidence of the relationship between decay, maintenance, and feelings of care in a public setting. My feeling was one of uncertainty at first but changed into fondness. Months after my encounter, he has settled comfortably in my memory and I think about Street when I pass by his memorial.

Official, permanent memorials in public space generally address collective loss and are expensive, slow, and complex to coordinate. For example, the 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York cost \$700 million, took five-and-a-half years to build, and opened ten years after the attacks.³⁰ Gibson notes official memorials are “usually bound to large-scale events of national and international significance such as wars and natural disasters.”³¹ Unfortunately, this also means they can perpetuate narratives that involve heroism or predominantly highlight white males, violence, and privilege.³² Roadside memorials, conversely, commemorate the large

³⁰ Andrew Rafferty, “\$700 Million and Counting: 9/11 Museum Opens With Money Worries,” NBC News, May 18, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/700-million-counting-9-11-museum-opens-money-worries-n106536>.

³¹ Margaret Gibson, “Death and Grief in the Landscape: Private Memorials in Public Space,” *Cultural Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (March 2011): 155.

³² According to a 2021 audit of almost 50,000 monuments in the U.S., 33% represented war, and the commemorative landscape is “dominated by monuments to figures who would be considered white, male, and wealthy in our common understandings today.” “National Monument Audit,” Monument Lab, accessed March 11, 2023, <https://monumentlab.com/audit>.

number of individual losses that happen every day.³³ As they spontaneously appear within the landscape, they declare that every death deserves remembrance.

The memorial I encountered is anchored by a reflective street sign that says “JT Streets” and the years of his birth and death.³⁴ It caught my eye the very first time I drove by and afterward, I could not unsee it. Social geographer Avril Maddrell thinks material objects are “an expression of the continued social existence of the deceased.”³⁵ Street’s street sign, while not handmade, was created expressly for him, made possible by his employment with the city’s public works department. The sign represents his continuing bond with his former coworkers.³⁶ It is very prominently situated in public space and indicates his importance to the local community.

According to cultural geographer Suzanne B. Dickens, a roadside memorial is a vernacular sacred space that “stands in a wild state of private emotion, often facing the road and challenging the public space it occupies, ignoring any rules or ordinances regarding its visage.”³⁷ Roadside memorials all over the world are connected by public expressions of grief and not by materials or methods of construction. While some roadside memorials have handmade elements, many use easily available manufactured goods. Vernacular craft is “craft made by the people for

³³ “Newly Released Estimates Show Traffic Fatalities Reached a 16-Year High in 2021,” NHTSA, May 17, 2022, <https://www.nhtsa.gov/press-releases/early-estimate-2021-traffic-fatalities>. Over 42,000 people died in car accidents in the United States in 2021, compared to 3,000 deaths in the 9/11 attacks.

³⁴ I can only guess why the sign says “Streets” when his name is “Street.” I wrote to the city of Berkeley to talk to the department responsible but they did not respond.

³⁵ Avril Maddrell, “Living with the Deceased: Absence, Presence and Absence-Presence,” *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 4 (October 2013): 509.

³⁶ The model of continuing bonds maintains that “the resolution of grief involves a continuing bond that the survivor maintains with the deceased” and that such a relationship can be healthy and normal instead of pathological. Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven Nickman, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 3.

³⁷ Suzanne B. Dickens, “Vernacular Sacred Spaces: Rethinking the Roadside Memorial in the United States,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 38, no. 2 (2020): 143.

the people,” states craft scholar Gloria Hickey.³⁸ Like sloppy craft, she says, its makers use “whatever medium or technique is at hand that will help them express or realize their conceptual goals.”³⁹ Street’s memorial is vernacular craft: a demonstration of assemblage that pulls together an assortment of items into a unified whole. The fact that the memorial’s components came from a grocery store did not dilute its impact on me. My sensory knowledge of the items added to my affective experience; as I recalled the slick feel of the cylindrical candles and the taut surface of the tiny balloon, it helped me imagine I was the one crafting the memorial.

Street’s memorial consists of everyday objects like flowers, balloons, and champagne, commonly seen at anniversaries, weddings, and graduations. However, these celebratory items become clothed in new meaning when gathered, consumed, then left to age in a public space. As I mentioned earlier, I felt out of phase looking at the artificial flowers, which visually overlapped past and present; some flowers looked new, while others were older and faded “like a pile of bones.” The association with bones and death left me feeling uneasy and even though the streetscape itself had not changed, my attunement to the encounter shifted. Massumi notes that attunement is “the direct capture of attention and energies by the event.”⁴⁰ My discomfort with the faded flowers affected my actions and led me to approach more tentatively, like I would at an actual gravesite.

Over time, however, my feelings gradually shifted from unease to appreciation. Decay is a natural part of a roadside memorial’s ongoing relationship to transience. Art historian Ernst van de Wetering believes signs of age alter what we think about objects:

³⁸ Gloria Hickey, “Why is Sloppy and Post-disciplinary Craft Significant and What are its Historical Precedents?,” in *Crafts: Today’s Anthology for Tomorrow’s Crafts*, ed. Fabien Petiot and Chloé Braunstein-Kriegel (Paris: Editions Norma, 2018), 60.

³⁹ Hickey, “Sloppy and Post-disciplinary Craft,” 58.

⁴⁰ Fritsch and Thomsen, “Affective Attunement.”

Although we may not be aware of it, it is specifically the signs of natural aging and of wear that often provide us with significant information about the material of which an object is made. These signs also provide instant information about the meaning of an object and about the ways and means in which it is used; they even let us know the extent to which it is valued—or neglected.⁴¹

In this light, noticing decay can be positive. Crafted objects gain emotional resonance over time, detected through fading, worn spots where it was handled or used, or the texture of patched areas. Signs of repair indicate the bereaved's attempt to maintain a presence for the absent person.

While my familiarity with its individual elements drew me in for a closer look, when I perceived the memorial as a unified whole, I was truly affected. Over time, witnessing changes to the assemblage—its constant breakdown and renewal—has become reassuring instead of disconcerting. Preserving Street's memorial means working with decay instead of trying to prevent it. Its constant renewal reifies the memory of Street and his contribution to his community. The memorial's caretakers periodically add new objects and replace older ones, but the basic structure remains. The items that show signs of wear and age indicate to the public how much he is loved and appreciated. I am now attuned to look for changes, much like I do with my father's jade plant. To my surprise, I have developed my own relationship with the memorial.

Revisiting my notes, I thought more about how aspects of craft affected my experience. The accumulated layers of memory surrounding the assemblage format indicate Street's memorial is a crafted object, but its constant repair does, too. Part of its potency as a crafted object relies on the fact that it materially changes all the time through maintenance. Social scientist Fernando Domínguez Rubio states “the discrepancy between object and things is

⁴¹ Ernst van der Wetering, “The Surface of Objects and Museum Style,” in *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, ed. Sandra H. Dudley, Leicester Readers in Museum Studies (New York: Routledge, 2012), 105.

constantly negotiated through a series of seemingly minor acts of maintenance and repair.”⁴² The memorial’s maintenance is an example of craft in action that lovingly prevents it from devolving into a pile of debris.



Figure 5. The memorial has been refreshed recently with new balloons and flowers (*left*) and signage supported by a repurposed outdoor cat house (*right*), March 2023. Photos by the author.

I am not sure if JT Street’s memorial will be around forever, but for now, it is still being tended to and grows ever more elaborate. When I drove by after Valentine’s Day, a month after my site visit, I noticed new flowers and a few half-deflated Mylar heart balloons tied to the sign. Passing by a few weeks later, someone replaced the disintegrating makeshift table with a mysterious blue and green wooden structure, replete with a cutout doorway and a tiny set of

⁴² Fernando Domínguez Rubio, “On the Discrepancy between Objects and Things: An Ecological Approach,” *Journal of Material Culture* 21, no. 1 (2016): 76.

stairs to its roof, seen in figure 5.⁴³ This made a sturdy backdrop for another religious-themed plaque, two garden flags staked into the ground, and giant corrugated plastic letters that spell “JT” facing northbound traffic. There were also new balloons tied to the street sign and more memorial candles on the structure and in the tall grass. I saw shiny plastic beads looped around the structure’s fenceposts and imagined a nighttime visit to the memorial to celebrate Mardi Gras with Street. Every time I see his memorial, I am happy. For as long as it remains a fixture in the neighborhood, JT is alive in the memories and thoughts of his loved ones, and now, my own.

⁴³ After some sleuthing, I discovered it is an outdoor cat house, sans roof. It makes a more durable and attractive tabletop for the candles.

4 MEMORY SEED BOMBS

Encounter: In the Studio

Tuesday, September 27, 2022, 12:30 p.m. It was a perfect out, a mild 65°F in Jingtown, a funky arts district in the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland. After a couple months of back-and-forth texting, it was time to see Kasey Smith's memory seed bombs in person before she moved out of the country. Though she would be present, I recorded my impressions and feelings as quickly as possible before we started talking.



Figure 6. Kasey Smith, *Memory Seed Bombs*, 2020-ongoing. Watercolor on papier-mâché, forget-me-not seeds, dimensions variable. Photo by the author.

I pull up to the building, sit in my car and just look. A jumble of art lofts on a quiet residential street with a much busier one down the block. I go outside and peer into a window. Model airplanes in primary colors, as big as me, hanging from a ceiling. I pace, no obvious entrance, excited and nervous. I text Kasey and she sweeps me in, down long hallways, a little like a dorm.

Some people seem like old souls. Kasey has round, intense blue eyes, a laconic drawl. In her studio, I watch my step as we wind around chaos, boxes and tubs and books. A cat wiggles by. In the back, a small room, a table, and a wall of tiny frames I have seen at dollar stores. The table is scattered with brushes, paper scraps, small objects, a packet of forget-me-not seeds. A curious archaeological dig, a trash midden of the twenty-first century.



Figure 7. The reverse side of the whiskey sour memory seed bomb features embedded forget-me-not seeds, 2022. Photo by the author.

I look closer at the assortment of mundane things next to their painted ghost replicas. The seed bombs are bumpy and ragged-edged, true to size, and speckled (fig. 6). I imagine ashes and pulp. One after the other, I pick them up, flip them over—suddenly they are ghostly, unpainted, unrecognizable. Pitted with dark seeds like papadum (fig. 7). I rub them, flex them gently between my fingers. Comforting smell of paper, the confidence of holding a book. I flip them

back and consider each one. Why these things? A pack of Kleenex, tubes of lipstick, a book of crossword puzzles, a movie-theater box of gumdrops, and a box of whiskey sour drink packets, which made me frown as I imagined the taste. I suddenly flash to previous encounters: I have felt a tube of lipstick warming in my hand, I have shaken similar candies out of a box.

I feel the presence of people I don't know. I imagine an old man in a recliner, watching football, condensation from a glass of whiskey sour making a ring on the table. I picture a woman pulling out the Kleenex to offer to a child, something my mother would do. I see the little pile of eraser crumbs on a page with a half-done crossword, and an empty chair. The room becomes crowded and anxious. Knowing that Kasey made the seed bombs for people who had lost their memory made these visions bittersweet.

I don't know how long I've been there, sinking into the seed bombs, Kasey's intense gaze, and our conversation. She says it's helpful for her to use memories like objects. The air shimmers with feelings, and we are both on the verge of crying at times.

What would represent my father? It should be golf balls. The day before the funeral, I talked to my mom as she gathered items to place in the coffin. Dad was obsessed with golf and she decided on a shirt and hat from a famous golf course, a golf club, and a new three-pack sleeve of golf balls. I tell Kasey this story.

Wondering if "forget me not" is a question or a demand, I jump into the future. What would planting the seeds feel like? What would planting a crafted object feel like, a familiar object once removed? Some people need to hold tight to memories and some people need the closure. Maybe it depends on if the memories are positive or negative. I remember things from exes I keep, questioning why I do it. Evidence of something.

Was Dad losing his memory? I think about being annoyed at my dad for not remembering things I just said and having to repeat myself. It could have been short-term memory loss, but then again, I sometimes caught a sly look that said he was trolling me. When I leave the studio on wobbly legs, more mundane memories. The fading recollection of his dumb jokes and his crooked smile that used to accompany it. Forget me not, indeed.

Tending to Loss

Kasey Smith and I worked on art together about eight years ago, but we haven't seen each other much since. She and I have similar predilections for the found, the ghostly, and the trace. In 2008, she began making urban seed bombs, meticulously painting replicas of trash found in vacant lots onto poppy seed-embedded handmade paper, then redistributing them back into the landscape.⁴⁴ Her memory seed bombs project began two years ago when her parents started losing their memory, one from Alzheimer's and the other from Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome. She now makes seed bombs for people who are similarly impacted by loved ones with memory disorders. This time, the paintings replicate a meaningful object provided by the grieving person, painted on handmade paper she makes from forget-me-not seeds. I thought the seed bombs would make a good case study because I wanted to encounter an object through touch and hopefully discover more levels of detail.

Smith transforms more conventionally manufactured and previously owned objects of the dead into one-of-a-kind, crafted memorial objects. By creating a lo-fi trompe l'oeil representation of a possession, she transforms a meaningful object that might bring up painful memories into a softer, more accessible format: a unique, functional work of craft with the

⁴⁴ Kasey Smith, "Urban Camo Seed Bombs," accessed February 24, 2023, <http://www.kaseysmith.net/urban-camo-seedbombs>.

potential to generate new life. My encounter with the seed bombs had sad moments as I imagined all the people they represented, but touching the objects gave me a new understanding of aging, growth, and self-determination.

Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, in their book *Death, Memory and Material Culture*, remark that “materiality feeds memory, to construct a sense of the absent person which is relevant to the survivor’s present situation.”⁴⁵ Memory seed bombs offer a grieving person something tangible to mourn with, to address feelings that arise when the loved one is essentially absent and present at the same time. Smith mentions, “I want to mourn, but wearing funeral blacks while she’s still living feels tacky and premature.” When grief disrupts the usual routines of life, the bereaved might try to prevent any further changes out of sorrow or disrespect. The effects of living with absence-presence can include feeling guilt and uncertainty about mourning or moving forward while the loved one is still present. Matthew Ratcliffe argues that grief is “not so much a cohesive pattern as a rupture in life’s pattern.”⁴⁶ Therefore, Smith’s seed bombs could help people mend ruptures and navigate loss to imagine a life that includes the formation of new patterns and memories.

Early in my encounter, I recognized what each seed bomb represented almost instantly through its distinctive coloring, size, and shape. I became attuned to them; visual evidence of the handmade—uneven surfaces, wobbly paint strokes, and raggedy edges—tantalized me, and I itched to touch them. Sandra Dudley remarks that when you touch an object, it touches you back, enabling “an intimacy with the material thing [you] hold.”⁴⁷ My body desired to handle the seed bombs and establish a relationship with them. While my familiarity with the objects portrayed

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 85.

⁴⁶ Ratcliffe, “Unity of Emotion,” 160.

⁴⁷ Dudley, “Materiality Matters,” 2.

offered clues of what the originals might feel like, I wanted to touch the actual paper they were painted on, too.

When I finally touched the seed bombs, there was no hesitation about what to do next because my body already knew what paper was capable of. I felt the slightly creased texture, uneven like the skin over my knuckles. I flexed it like a playing card and discovered it was sturdy enough to bounce back into shape. When I rubbed it between two fingers, fast enough to feel the warmth from friction, the initial roughness went away and it felt smoother. I could tell the seed bomb was handmade because its cut edges were not perfectly straight and it turned up slightly at the corners. This detail made me think of leaving a notebook in the rain and later seeing ripples that never quite dissipate. It reminded me that paper has a memory, too.

Encountering so many objects specific to others firmly solidified their presence in my mind. As I noted in the previous section, my feelings about the people who inspired the seed bombs were ultimately bittersweet—happy and sad at the same time. I was pleased they were being remembered this way, but I was sad they could no longer remember for themselves. Upon reflection, bittersweet is not a bad feeling to land upon. It represents a way to live with personal loss without being consumed by it by remembering the good and the bad.

Maintaining memories correlates with maintaining a garden—putting in the everyday work of remembering the loved one by tending to the transformed memorial object. Like the roadside memorial, craft in the form of maintenance continues even after the object disintegrates. In her work on the links between gardens and grief, researcher Avril Tynan says the garden is “a valuable metaphor for thinking about the ways in which grief can persist while being simultaneously maintained, contained, and tamed.”⁴⁸ Gardens symbolize growth, renewal, and

⁴⁸ Avril Tynan, “Growing Grief: Cultivating Life After Death in the Garden,” *Thanatos* 11 (2022): 27.

the continuation of life. Seed bombs are transitional objects that can facilitate continuing bonds, even after they take a different physical form, because plants can remind the grieving person that some part of the loved one remains forever in the world. Planting is a conscious decision to invite change and transform the absence-presence characteristic of loss into something new.

Smith's seed bombs have the potential to inspire new feelings, emotions, and memories. For example, while the painted pack of Kleenex brings up memories of the original and inspires my imaginary glimpses into its former owner, touching the handmade paper generates its own associations. Paper varies widely in composition and durability, but paper embedded with seeds suggests a change in form is part of its material makeup and reason for being. It does not remain frozen in time with a single possible configuration of shape and meaning. Sensing the potential built into the seed bomb by touching it may help the grieving person concentrate on its next transformation into a living thing, freeing them to tend to new life, and in turn, their own.

More than the other case studies, my encounter placed me in an unstable space where my thoughts were of life and death, remembrance and forgetting, or keeping things the same or moving on. However, thinking about planting the seed bomb soothed me; even though one presence had to end, another one would begin. Manufactured objects generally come into our lives in their final form and therefore are not easy to physically transform. If they come to represent an object of the dead, this can limit its potential as a memorial object when feelings are in flux. The crafted seed bombs differ by highlighting the possibility of change because planting them provides another way of living with loss. They give people agency to transform an object instead of just throwing it away or keeping it forever, which are the main options that manufactured items afford. By flexibly participating in different ways of grieving, Smith's

memorial objects bridge life and death and assist people whose loved ones are still alive and whose needs do not fit mourning practices intended for the deceased.

Hallam and Hockey assert, “The ephemeral or fleeting nature of memories is acknowledged with the recognition that memories ‘fade’ or threaten to wither or die and consequently need to be ‘kept alive.’”⁴⁹ This is when I knew I wanted a seed bomb for my father. Through handling it, I would feel the many hours of care it took to create, and I would relish the memories that living with it would bring forward. A manufactured, anonymous sleeve of golf balls, produced in the millions, would not have the same effect on me.

⁴⁹ Hallam and Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture*, 27.

6 FUNERAL WREATH

Encounter: In the Museum

Friday, September 23, 2022, 1:15 p.m. It was a typical autumn day in Oakland—hot, cloud-free, and 82°F—and none of the hundred-year-old houses have air conditioning. The Oakland Museum is a brutalist concrete structure and always cool inside. It was the right time to go to the museum for a couple of hours and see Mourning Wreath by Angela Hennessy.



Figure 8. Angela Hennessy, *Mourning Wreath*, 2017/2022. Synthetic hair, artist's hair, 24k gold leaf on copper, enamel paint, chain, 96 x 72 inches. Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA. Photo by the author.

Buried in the rough concrete, all the way in the back, always in the back. Clicking past the flicker of video, a corset under glass, I frown, my stomach feels tight. Winding around plinths and cases, I lean in at the turns, the world's slowest motorcycle ride. Soft zones of brightness pool on each object, not quite reaching the dais, stumble-tall. The glitterflake of a chopped custom bike.

I wander in and out of shadows. It grows dimmer and colder and higher, squares of text floating off the wall, hard to pass by, hard not to read. The next room opens up, double-high, livelier, busier. Here is the exhibition, a timeline of feminism, protest posters, shoes with scrub brush soles. A long white wall, endless faces in black outlines to promenade by. A Ruth Asawa blob, familiar, so many holes to poke your fingers through but out of reach. I do not reach. More display cases, cubes and rectangles, sometimes a plant or a shelf. Don't touch. I roll my eyes and trace the bumpy border with my feet. Sometimes the cases grab my attention: blurry Asian women before a switchboard, wall of cables, snakes. Not-white faces slow time for me and I lean close.

I continue. More cases and even more cases with thick opaque plexi edges. A long old-fashioned dress, headless, tiny waist. A table of gentle shapes arranged in a rainbow, oh they're sex toys, I bury a laugh. Now I hear talking, more people in singles and clusters but alert to proximity, moving in patterns, Pac-Man avoiding ghosts.

What is it I am looking for? Suddenly I feel shy. A cool breeze swirls around me and I put my hoodie on. I see a change in lighting, go around a partition wall, turn right, full stop. A massive mass, a black shiny texture on a matte black wall. It is imposing, dense. All hair? All the same shade of black. It looms, higher than I can reach. I do not reach for it. I feel my shallow breathing, everything becomes quiet. The lights a little bit dimmer, the space somehow friendlier, sadder, warmer, the air is still.

The floor, polished concrete. I glide over it smoothly, slowly, moving until all of it comes into view, until I could not feel its presence pushing at the air. Is the air actually thicker? Shallow breaths again. An enormous shaggy donut because all circles are donuts to me. Black on black, centered, it owns the wall. Whoa. I am uncertain what to do. It's a lot. But realizing that, I am

pulled back in. The void in the center, the gravitational pull. I retreat to the side, it feels safe, like I could leave anytime.

It looks so heavy. Would it be soft? I think of spools of trim from my parents' drapery store in the 1980s, pom-poms and tassels I used come out with my fingers, then the yarn I twist and braid to tie things back around the house.

Seen in figure 8, the wreath touches the wall but floats over a black rectangle on the ground. No words around it or on it. I feel uncomfortable coming close to the rectangle but not the wreath. I look around for a guard. No guards. Confidence. I imagine myself tiny, walking into the black shadow wedge where the wreath meets the wall. If I snuggle all the way in, I would be touching the wreath. Little me wouldn't have a choice. No smell. A giant wreath on a giant tomb. I can't imagine working with this much hair. So, so heavy. So much intimacy with strangers.



Figure 9. Angela Hennessy, *Mourning Wreath* (lower half), 2017/2022. Synthetic hair, artist's hair, 24k gold leaf on copper, enamel paint, chain, 96 x 72 inches. Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA. Photo by the author.

Back to the front and center in an arc. I hear music, a loop of words behind me. I approach and retreat, approach and retreat. Texture, so much texture, shadows and shiny coils, loose strands (fig. 9). Stillness, silence. Flashes of gold at the top of the circle then dripping hair, trying to be vertical. I approach again. Braids, loops of black pearls woven through rosettes, spirals, loops, forming ornaments. Braiding, working in silence, hands, care. The heaviness but pliant, squeezable. Undone, braids, waves, kinks. I fall into the detail. I flash to a small cardboard box in my closet: ornamental pins and combs that used to belong to my aunt when she danced, maybe eighty years ago at this point. Not made of hair but similar techniques, thread-wrapped coils, flowers and petals and pearls.

My shoulders are just high enough to peek over the bottom curve, the wreath suddenly a mirror, dark faces looking back at me. I feel small, unimportant, think of silence, death. There are three layers of shadows, fading into grey. I begin to be reminded of things, the earth and its roundness. My father who passed earlier this year, braiding hair with my high school friends, beauty, examples on TikTok, my inexperience with black hair, that it was not to be touched, annoyance when people make comments about my appearance or come too close to me. My brain drifts to other instances of black hair, the beauty shops in my neighborhood, extensions, loose in the gutter, how we jokingly call them ‘tumbleweaves,’ I’m not sure where I first read that, and it feels vaguely wrong to think of but also funny.

I remember my hair was this black once, harshly shining like a bird feather, made into two long braids every day by my mom while I ate oatmeal before school. Foreign wiggles and waves when it was undone at bedtime. My hair fell to my waist until I was ten because, I was told, Dad liked long hair. Not a sad memory, just one that popped its head above the water briefly, then went away.

The black wall is almost purple in the light. What is color? What is light? I look again at the wreath, I can almost touch it, but it doesn't want to be touched. The wreath is too large but still declares itself, it represents everyone, and it represents just me, my mortality, I feel it. The golden disks wink from the darkness. They are looking forward. I also move forward, and tip my head back to look at them, my neck aches and cracks. Individual braids dangle from the upper part of the wreath into the center. I move back to a low bench to be comfortable, the black circle is now the size of my hand. Its presence fades into the room, I can hear again, people talking, slow footsteps, music that is surprisingly loud from the alcove behind me and a recorded voice saying, "Take time. Rest. Reflect."

Now it is radiating solemnness, but not grief. At some point, it absorbed my grief, left it shining and stuck in the web of braids, curls, hands, hair. The wreath is an oval, a lonely open mouth, a way in. I watch others, pause, walk by, read the plaque, go on. I look around, the other parts of the exhibition speaking color, chaos, it wants attention but the chatter pushes me away. The wreath hushes, it quiets, it waits.

The Texture of Grief

Angela Hennessy is an artist and educator at California College of the Arts. She works with real and synthetic hair using craft techniques like braiding, twisting, weaving, and coiling to form objects that invoke absence and presence, transience and permanence. When I heard that her handcrafted, conceptual work addressed ephemerality, invisibility, and grief, I became intrigued because even now, those concepts are rarely mentioned together. I discovered her work was at the Oakland Museum and decided to visit and record the encounter.

I saw Hennessy's eight-foot-tall *Mourning Wreath* seven months after my father's funeral. It was included in *Hella Feminism*, a major interpretive exhibition, typical for the museum, with themed rooms, a linear narrative, lots of wall text, and many physical barriers and printed signs to indicate that touching was not allowed.⁵⁰ I made extensive notes about my affective experience within the exhibition, which contributed to my understanding of wreath-as-museum-object. The plinth positioned under the wreath kept me three feet away and technically I could lean in and touch it, though I did not. However, this got me close enough to encounter the wreath-as-craftwork. More than the other case study objects, observing the wreath showed me how integral the environment is to the encounter. During my short visit, I experienced both the limitations and the benefits of an exhibition setting for a crafted object.

What can exhibitions do to make space for individual responses? Cultural historian Marzia Varutti, looking at affective encounters in museums, believes curators can employ “display techniques and layout that enable a personal encounter with the museum environment or objects, allowing for the possibility (the space and the time) to become aware of one's responses (memories, emotions, feelings) before the attention gets caught by something else happening in the exhibition, such as contextualization and meaning.”⁵¹ This acknowledges that there is value in using creative methods to present interpretive text with objects, displayed so people can spend time with “the thing in front of them, before they ask what it is, what it was for, who made it and where it came from,” according to Dudley.⁵²

⁵⁰ Touchable objects in *Hella Feminism* included a take-home zine of images from an installation by Kate Schatz and Miriam Klein Stahl, and comment cards for visitors to fill out that might be selected and pinned on the wall.

⁵¹ Marzia Varutti, “Affective Encounters in Museums,” in *Heritage Ecologies*, ed. Torgeir Rinke Bangstad and Þóra Pétursdóttir, Archaeological Orientations (New York: Routledge, 2021), 140.

⁵² Dudley, “Materiality Matters,” 7.

My experience truly began when I walked around a wall into another room and was confronted by the wreath. It was picked out by spotlights and was an imposing black object on a black wall, isolated from other objects, with no text or explanation in sight. These curatorial choices suited the wreath; if the desired effect was hushed solemnity and awe, it was working, and I gave all my attention to the encounter. I had ample time and space to respond to the wreath on a quiet afternoon, but I think the effect might not have been as strong on a busy weekend. I would not have stayed as long or gotten as close because my awareness of people around me, in an indoor space during COVID, would have been distracting.

My encounter with the wreath was both expected (because I knew it was at the museum) and a surprise (because I did not know exactly where it was located). *Mourning Wreath* is much bigger than an actual funeral wreath. I reacted to its scale first as it took up my entire field of vision. Turning a corner and suddenly confronting the wreath, enormous and light-absorbing, created turmoil in my body. Varutti notes that within museum environments, “Surprise creates a ‘hook’ to which meaning can be fruitfully attached” because it “precedes, or stands independent from, explanations or interpretations.”⁵³ Initially, my encounter made me aware of a kind of sludgy feeling shaping my response to the dark mass before me. As I mentioned in the previous section, I was taking shallow breaths and was “uncertain what to do.” I felt a “gravitational pull” which led me to step to the side of the wreath to get away from it as if it could see me. Feeling surprised as I came upon the wreath changed how I moved around to observe it; I noted the loud, hollow echo my boots made in an almost empty room and I felt hesitant to move quickly or make loud noises.

⁵³ Varutti, “Affective Encounters in Museums,” 134.



Figure 10. Angela Hennessy, *Mourning Wreath* (detail), 2017/2022. Synthetic hair, artist's hair, 24k gold leaf on copper, enamel paint, chain, 96 x 72 inches. Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA. Figure 11. Vintage hair accessory, date unknown. Photos by the author.

During the encounter, my movements felt like a slow dance, a waltz with death that spun me close to the wreath and then away again. At the apogee, the details softened, and the work turned into a funeral wreath, giving rise to more general thoughts about absence and loss on a collective level. As I got closer, the material details became more noticeable and my feelings became far more personal. For instance, observing the incredible patterns and details in the wreath (fig. 10) brought up associations with the wirework in my aunt's decorative hairpins (fig. 11).

While my mind was racing from memory to memory, I felt personal loss within my body; the sludgy feeling shifted to an awareness of pain—a stiffness in my shoulders, dry eyes from the low humidity, the chill caused by air conditioning, aching feet from standing on the concrete

floor. We have bodily resonance with emotions, according to psychology researchers Thomas Fuchs and Sabine C. Koch, that manifest through autonomic or muscle movement activity that is “the very medium of affective intentionality.”⁵⁴ When I retreated to the bench to sit and try to alleviate my pain, I became aware of the general museum environment again. I perceived fewer details of the wreath at this distance and it became emotionally less significant to me.

Artist Lygia Clark believes objects can be relational through their tangible nature. “The relational object has physical specificities. Normally it has no analogy with the body (it is not illustrative), but it creates relationships with it by means of the texture, weight, size, temperature, sound and movement (the motion of the diverse material used).”⁵⁵ While the wreath does not look like a body, Hennessy crafted it almost entirely from human hair.⁵⁶ As I recognized that fact, it made me think about my body and the bodies of absent others. My encounter generated a mishmash of feelings and sensations around familiarity, experience, and memories that played off of each other: the recent loss of my father, how my scalp hurt when my mom braided my long black hair before school, and the doubly transgressive desire to touch black women’s hair in an exhibition.

When I think about what transpired within the affective field, the wreath begins to play a different role as a crafted memorial object. A funeral wreath already has a certain amount of symbolic power, but for *Mourning Wreath*, that power was amplified by the craft materials and skills on display that created additional emotional charge and resonance. My relationships and memories came up over and over again, in line with cultural studies scholar Esther Berry’s idea

⁵⁴ Thomas Fuchs and Sabine C. Koch, “Embodied Affectivity: On Moving and Being Moved,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (June 2014): 3.

⁵⁵ Lygia Clark, “The Relational Object, 1980,” in *The Object*, ed. Antony Hudek, Documents of Contemporary Art (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 212.

⁵⁶ Actually, it is made from both natural and artificial hair but telling the difference at the time would not have changed my reaction significantly.

that hair wreaths maintain their emotional charge due to “[their] direct link to the biological body, coupled with the labour of the memorial.”⁵⁷ *Mourning Wreath* taps into the signs of labor and associations with the body that Berry refers to and lends intensity to my experience.

While I was revisiting my notes, I wondered about the wreath’s inclusion in a museum exhibition about feminism. Weaving, braiding, and decoratively working with hair are considered feminine activities. They are intimate acts of craft that strengthen bonds between people; they become magnified, culturally, within a feminism-themed exhibition, and physically, as part of a greatly oversized memorial wreath. Hair’s very presence within a crafted object, regardless of how it is used, highlights craft’s ability to expand beyond the decorative and into the social and political. I did not immediately grasp the cultural ramifications of an object made entirely of Black hair because my own loss was at the forefront of my mind but the longer I spent around it, the more layered and expansive my thinking became. Lygia Clark says, “The same object may express different meanings for different subjects at different moments.”⁵⁸ My emotionally driven, personal reading of the wreath, based on the feelings of loss I arrived with, was at the heart of my encounter.

The wreath’s method of display within the museum’s affective atmosphere contributed the intensity of experience as well. A museum is a space that “gives away much about what we (humans) value, and why” by “[holding] up mirrors to ourselves, our virtues and limitations, our anguish and dreams,” according to Varutti.⁵⁹ Placing an object at a certain point in an exhibition’s overall story and layout already accords it a set of values and perspectives, regardless of its didactic text. Focusing on this interpretation can overshadow what we can know

⁵⁷ Esther Berry, “Hurricane Katrina Hair: Rereading Nineteenth-Century Commemorative Hair Forms and Fragments Through the ‘Mourning Portraits’ of Loren Schwerd,” *Fashion Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 8.

⁵⁸ Clark, “The Relational Object,” 212.

⁵⁹ Varutti, 143.

by confronting the object itself. According to Dudley, this runs the risk that objects “feature as mere illustrations punctuating the story being told, rather than as powerful items in their own right.”⁶⁰ Fortunately, Hennessy’s wreath avoided this fate because of the museum’s decision to grant it so much space and forego the amount of text found elsewhere in the exhibit.



Figure 12. Installation view of Angela Hennessy’s exhibition *When and where I enter*, 2017. Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA. Photo by Raheleh (Minoosh) Zomorodinia.

In contrast, Southern Exposure, the San Francisco-based organization that originally commissioned *Mourning Wreath* for Hennessy’s solo exhibition *When and where I enter* in 2017, positioned it on a metal stand in the middle of the gallery space, seen in figure 12. Upon seeing the photograph, my first impression was that it looked like a hoop or portal more than a funeral wreath. Proximity would allow for a closer look at the intricate craft details from either

⁶⁰ Dudley, 6.

side but the overall impression seems less solemn and would probably lead to a different affective experience lacking the deer-in-headlights feeling I initially felt in my encounter.

Hennessy's wreath, in an institutional setting, is read as art: a conceptual representation of grief and mourning that demonstrates its maker's intent, process, different possible interpretations, and emotional impact. However, a lot of my experience depended on sensing its looming presence and feeling the emotional resonance created by craft's propensity to bring back memories and hair's ability to preserve continuing bonds with the dead. While the encounter began with feeling silenced and disconnected, its tenor changed because of hair through its association with the body and how it was manipulated through painstaking effort. The encounter offered not what it feels like to braid, but a sense of the relations created between people involved in braiding. These brought up old memories that renewed my ties with family, both present and absent. Even though my father was not involved in braiding directly, the loss I was still feeling prompted hair-related memories that involved the both of us to unexpectedly surface.

6 CONCLUSION

My project began with a question about how feelings of personal loss change through encounters with crafted memorial objects. I looked for answers using my unresolved feelings in the wake of my father's death. While I can only speak about my own experience, I hope my findings might be of interest to others who also find that loss lurks insistently in the background of their daily routines.⁶¹ The lessons I learned by attuning to craft properties like scale, materials, maintenance, and mutability through objects helped me acclimate to loss as a bittersweet companion to life.

Preliminary research indicated that a lot of scholarship about craft, grief, and memorials takes an art historical or material studies approach; alternately, objects created for collective mourning are often analyzed in the context of social practice.⁶² Craft discourse commonly centers what people gain from the memorial object-making process, rather than what is learned by encountering the finished objects themselves.⁶³ While studies about human/craft object interactions exist, they are more prevalent in museum studies, psychology, or design and tend to investigate how research participants relate to each other as they learn about the objects.⁶⁴ These

⁶¹ I feel it is not uncommon for people in 2023 to have a persistent hyperawareness of loss instilled by years of living through the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁶² Textiles seem to be the most recurring material for small-scale crafted memorial objects because of how we associate cloth with the body, mending metaphors, and the history of sewing and quilting circles as communities of practice. For an example that combines quiltnaking with the preservation of memory, see Jodey Nurse-Gupta, "A Fair-Ribbon Quilt: Crafting Identity and Creating Memory," *Agricultural History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 227–43. For an overview of perhaps the most scrutinized recent American handcrafted memorial project, see Peter S. Hawkins, "Naming Names: The Art of Memory and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (1993): 752–79.

⁶³ For more, see Ilana Harlow, "Shaping Sorrow: Creative Aspects of Public and Private Mourning," in *Death, Bereavement, and Mourning*, ed. Samuel C. Heilman (New York: Routledge, 2005), 33–52; Rachel E. Weiskittle and Sandra E. Gramling, "The Therapeutic Effectiveness of Using Visual Art Modalities with the Bereaved: A Systematic Review," *Psychology Research and Behavior Management* 11 (February 1, 2018): 9–24.

⁶⁴ For examples, see Christian Heath et al., "Crafting Participation: Designing Ecologies, Configuring Experience," *Visual Communication* 1 (February 2002): 9–33; Bruce Davenport and Neill Thompson, "Object Handling with Contemporary Craft Objects: An Observational Study of an Embodied, Social and Cognitive Process," *The Qualitative Report* 23, no. 9 (2018): 2253–78. It was interesting to note that Davenport and Thompson

lines of inquiry are informative but do not fully address my questions, which I feel have not been examined with the same frequency: What can an unexpected encounter with craft mean to a grieving individual? How does loss move through the body? In pursuit of answers, my project illuminated how craft details of memorial objects, such as processes, textures, or techniques, contributed to my awareness of how loss moved within my body, across objects, and through the environment. My case studies afforded different results, partially shaped by how I sensed each object. Even if I did not touch the object during the encounter, the familiar contours of craft gave me something safe to cling to as my feelings and reactions shifted, seemingly of their own accord, due to affective attunement.

For example, noticing the presence of craft drew out thoughts and memories that sometimes had nothing to do with the objects' intended memorial purpose. Marzia Varutti believes, "Recognizing the capacity of objects to affect us, shifts our interpretations away from symbolism and iconography, it allows us to encounter objects in their objecthood, peeling away the multiple layers of meanings and references that so often narrowly reflect human values and concerns."⁶⁵ Thinking about objecthood helped me remain open to what I could learn from the object itself, without ignoring what objects represent or how they are culturally positioned.

Sarah Pink reminds us that we must consider "all the sensory categories that are in play in the culturally specific context in which one is researching" when conducting ethnography.⁶⁶ The connections between me and the crafted objects became more noticeable as I paid closer attention to my body. When I held the seed bomb in my hands, I knew it was handmade and meant to be planted because I could feel the paper's irregularities and the faint indents of tiny

chose contemporary craft objects to avoid personal associations due to familiarity, which would let them focus on object interactions and peer-to-peer relations.

⁶⁵ Varutti, 143.

⁶⁶ Pink, 116.

seeds; the object was telling me something about itself beyond what was painted on the front. Like Sandra Dudley predicted, touching and being touched by an object led to greater intimacy and spurred thoughts about decay, growth, and transformation, as if it was telling me it wanted to be planted. This, in turn, related to representing the transience of memory, which was the impetus for the seed bomb's creation. I do not think I would have found as much nuance if Smith just made a painting and hung it on a wall.

Even when I could not touch the crafted object, the intensity of my feelings varied according to how closely I stepped up to it. Turning a corner and coming upon the funeral wreath, looming and dark, amplified a feeling of heaviness and a sense of the void, but when I was near enough to detect it was made from hair curled, woven, and braided through many hours of labor, I felt the warmth of connection and an outpouring of thoughts. In his writing, Brian Massumi reiterates that affect travels across all elements within an affective field and is “a ‘thinking-feeling’ ... in no way the opposite or the absence of thought.”⁶⁷ Affect flowed across my encounters and the results contributed to thinking-feeling about how craft contributes materially and immaterially to my experiences with memorial objects.

A common theme among my encounters was the instability of feelings and the inevitability of change. I did not expect how much I would respond to physical deterioration; my feelings about personal loss, absence, and presence were connected to signs of aging, maintenance, and preservation. A tangible object can also be transformed through repair or growth and, in doing so, reenact the relationship between the bereaved and loved one. Instability can be desirable when it creates space and time for the bereaved to build continuing bonds on their own timeline. Smith's memory seed bombs are a good example of this concept. During my

⁶⁷ Massumi et al., “Affect and Immediation,” 113.

encounter, I contemplated the implications of Smith handcrafting paper so she could include forget-me-not seeds; it meant that the crafted object was as important as what was depicted on its surface. The transitive property of the seed bomb—its ability to dissolve but reemerge as something else—can remind a grieving person, stuck in a holding pattern by the absence-presence of the loved one, that moving ahead with life does not mean leaving anyone behind.

Change does not have to mean full transubstantiation like the seed bombs, and the creative use of mass-manufactured materials to create a roadside memorial is a living demonstration of that. Fernando Domínguez Rubio calls Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* not a painting but “a *slow event* [emphasis in original] that continues to unfold through different chemical and mechanical processes.”⁶⁸ JT Street's roadside memorial is also a slow event; in this case, change is not about helping the bereaved move on but is part of their remembrance process, enacted in daily life. I was able to understand the memorial as a crafted object when I also slowed down and got close enough to take in crafted nature. Driving by in my car, it looked like a blurry, curious, somewhat haphazard cluster of objects. When I walked up to it, though, it coalesced into an amateur but very sincerely crafted memorial, which moved me. I rotated quickly through confusion, trepidation, and finally fondness as I noticed the small details of the assemblage, like the picket fence at the base that gave it a homey touch. This warm feeling has stayed with me to this day. I enjoy watching the memorial's footprint shrink and grow and seeing the bare metal of the street signpost disappear under colorful ribbons; these signs of visible mending equal ongoing care and attentiveness to remembrance, which I resonate with every time I drive by.

⁶⁸ Rubio, “Objects and Things,” 66.

Public memorials denote official locations for mourning to occur, which implies there are other locations, like roadways or parks, it should not occur. However, notes Avril Maddrell, “Increased freedom to acknowledge and express the absence-presence of the deceased, in conjunction with wider socio-economic and cultural changes, has resulted in increased expression of continuing bonds in public spaces.”⁶⁹ Small, abundant, and unofficial memorials can provide a place to display these bonds and publicly mourn in a manner that suits the style and circumstances of the bereaved. The more of these heartfelt, vernacular tributes we encounter, the more we normalize living with loss in everyday life.

Funeral services and public memorials set aside a special place and time for grieving, but they do not address the transient feelings of loss that become threaded into daily life. An elaborately carved granite gravestone is a crafted object that indicates certainty, finality, and “eternal rest”; it denies transience by putting a wall between the living and the dead. The memorial objects in my life are ordinary and everyday: a ceramic Day of the Dead skull with a tillandsia sprouting out the top, the labyrinth near the dog park, the altar in the back corner of the neighborhood Thai restaurant. The comfort I feel around these informal crafted memorials suggests they are well-suited to commemorate the ordinary, everyday lives of loved ones and negotiate a meandering path through personal loss.

⁶⁹ Maddrell, “Living with the Deceased,” 517.

Encounter: On the Phone

Friday, March 3, 2023, 9:42 a.m.. It was a cold 50°F winter morning in Berkeley, nothing to sneeze at when you only have a space heater. Under all the blankets, I checked social media in bed and had a surprise encounter on my phone.



Figure 13. Kasey Smith, sleeve of golf balls seed bomb, 2023. Watercolor on papier-mâché, forget-me-not seeds, dimensions variable. Photo by Kasey Smith.

Sleepy still, waking up, my mind groggy from working on this paper. I open Instagram, see a DM from Kasey, sent from a weird hour in the Netherlands, click it. And then I snap awake—I actually say, “Wow!” out loud. Before me, golf balls in a red sleeve in a dainty watercolor, off-centered on off-white paper (fig. 13). Vivid, detailed, imperfectly perfect.

The reality of the object comes forward, made tangible by the photo’s background, a hardwood floor strewn with notebooks and art supplies. I feel like I’m stepping into her studio as

I reach out, touch the slick screen, and spread my fingers. It grows larger, the egg carton texture revealing its handmade origin, flecks of purple and yellow. Then the details catch my eye: Tiny text on a faded blue price tag, discounted. Faint traces of pencil marks, rendering of soft shadows. I can hear the crinkle of the plastic window, feel the thump as the box tilts in my hand and the golf balls slide to the bottom. I let go and the image springs back, trapped in the phone again.

I smile and think of Dad, caddying for him when I was ten, gleefully driving the golf cart, the smell of sod, buying Snickers from the snack bar. Half understanding his comments about what the ball did or should have done. The color of the back of his neck from the unending Sacramento sun. Then I skip to the last few years when he couldn't golf anymore, a sudden heaviness pulls at my cheeks. I write a quick thank you to Kasey, turn off the phone, and put it on the nightstand.

Tending to Loss, Continued

I look forward to receiving this seed bomb in the mail, to opening an envelope covered in strange stamps, knowing what is inside but not quite knowing how I will react. The small, handmade crafted object both memorializes my father and also lets me mourn him, a little at a time. As I know from my seed bomb case study, the irresistible desire to play with it means it will only gain more meaning, more signs of wear, and more memories.

I know feelings will wash over me as I explore the seed bomb's mottled surface, scratch it to leave a shallow furrow like a divot on a fairway, or tilt it in the sunlight to watch the colors change. The ability to touch and be touched by the object will make an already important object even more meaningful.

If I place it on the mantel in my room, I will look at it occasionally. If I pin it to my refrigerator, next to the last photo Christmas card from Mom and Dad, or I could use it as a bookmark, which will soften the edges and wear away the paint. The action I take will be a response to how I feel at the time, and how it makes me feel when I am around it.

The golf ball seed bomb is both a memorial object and a living artifact with transformative potential. I have the power to decide if I will extend my encounter with it, or plant it and let it go. I cannot say what will happen, but I like to think that someday I will plant the seed bomb next to Dad's jade, incorporating it into my garden as I continue to tend to his loss.

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