



FINDERS KEEPERS

Jenn Shapland

Objects of My Affection

For a collector—and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be— ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects.

—WALTER BENJAMIN,
“Unpacking My Library”

Here is a list of things you might find in 7B:

1. Suitcases
2. Typewriters
3. Hatboxes
4. Funeral shoes (unworn)
5. Eyeglasses
6. Swizzle sticks

7. Board games
8. Socks (worn)
9. Handkerchiefs (used)
10. Pen refills

A library is not a list. A library is dirty, has smells. I know this because I interned in a special collections library. It’s a special collections library that happens to house, along with its First Folios and signed copies of *The Waste Land*, a larger assortment of socks than you might guess.

Personal effects generally arrive at the Harry Ransom Center’s loading dock on the University of Texas campus via

happenstance. They get stuck into boxes of manuscripts and books for reasons unknown. They're stowaways. That is why I'm so fond of them. Personal effects include items owned or worn that do not necessarily pertain to the recorded work of a cultural figure. They are objects that don't fit comfortably into folders. Working on the seventh floor, where a sign by the elevator warns IF YOU FIND A BAT, DO NOT TOUCH IT, and especially working in 7B, the room that houses the personal effects collections, is not unlike haunting an uninhabited Collyer Mansion or Grey Gardens. It's a place where things are housed, where they come to roost. 7B is a microcosm of the archive writ large.

It was in 7B, before my long afternoons itemizing and categorizing the socks of the dead and famous, that I began to collect certain stories. Stories about wanting and having, giving and taking, even stealing. I learned of a caper by a Texas football scion, which led me to a tale of a multimillion-dollar book heist. Yet as I poked and prodded into what began to seem like the dusty broom closet or unexamined under-the-bed of culture, it was my own relationship to objects that began to feel illicit.

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Not long after I finished my several weeks of training, I made a discovery while

passing through the personal effects stacks. I don't recall what brought me up there. Perhaps I'd been toying with Anne Sexton's eyeglasses, or taking a peek in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's cabinet of "apparitions and dreams." (He labeled one of the drawers "apparitions of dogs." Imagine: so many canines from beyond appeared to Doyle that he had to allocate an entire drawer for them.) As my cart squeaked down the aisle, rousing the sleeping artifacts, a large box labeled "Einstein, Albert" came into view. I hadn't heard of any Einstein materials in the personal effects collection. A closer look at the box's label

informed me that it contained the physicist's molecular model kit.

I shifted my weight, eyeballed the box, quickly looked both ways. The Center has a set of Einstein's notes on relativity—chicken scratch—that are kept in the vault. The vault, you'll be glad to learn, is in fact a vault. Picture the cartoon lair of one Scrooge McDuck. Okay, smaller than that—more like a locker. Chalkboard gray, iron, with two handles and a pancake-size combination lock. And inside? Some would call it treasure. Others might just see a pile of junk. Old, musty, moldy (sometimes toxically so): other people's junk.

I carried and handled and sifted through this invaluable cultural material, this *stuff*, all day long. When ink rubbed off

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a manuscript leaf, or when a page's edges crumbled into literal dust that coated my fingers, I found myself thinking hard about the impulse to collect. To keep.

I pulled down the box labeled "Einstein" and began slowly unwinding the threads that wrapped its button enclosures. I was about to ever so gingerly lift the box from its archival housing (boxes within boxes are sort of a conservationist's specialty, it turns out. There is an entire lab devoted to the making of boxes designed to hold other boxes), brazen background soundtrack playing in my head, when I thought I heard someone approaching.

My heart stopped for just a second. It's extremely easy to scare somebody in a library, but why did I so often feel as though I'd been caught in the act when I was alone with a find from the collections? I was allowed full access to these materials, free range, and yet that feeling—it's the same feeling anyone would get when discovered rifling through someone's stuff. Actually, it's the precise feeling I used to get when I snooped around the houses of people I babysat for while the kids slept, or when I snooped around my own house while home alone. Touching, looking became unique opportunities for access. And violation.

I come from snoopers. When I lived at home, my mom would go through my room regularly. She read all my letters and notebooks without permission, then quizzed me on their contents. As traumatic as her invasions of my privacy were, years later, I can't help but understand

the impulse behind them, to some extent. Going through other people's stuff, or having it—borrowing clothes, books—makes me feel closer to them.

And then, too, there are the things objects tell us that their owners never would. Secrets. Now I wonder if I snoop in part because growing up queer in a Catholic house in the Midwest was confusing and lonely. I knew I was different but had no idea how or why. "I had no idea what was missing but felt the missing-ness of the missing," to borrow Jeanette Winterson's wording. My snooping has always felt justified, internally. Like research: *How to Be a Person*, Exhibit A. Our stuff tells on us. In objects lie the hidden habits of how each of us makes a life. I was rooting around in other people's closets for signs of connection, community. Curiosity is itself a kind of stealing: internalizing an experience that isn't yours.

The personal effects collections I processed—sorted, labeled, photographed, housed—contain the belongings of two of the twentieth century's greatest writers, greatest female writers, greatest queer writers, two of my all-time favorite writers: Carson McCullers and Gertrude Stein. I started to fixate on, even to cathect, their belongings as I worked. They're all I talked about in the office, at the bar: Have I told you about Carson McCullers's llama statue? *Yes*.

So I guess this is a story about my obsessions. Obsessiveness. But it's also about a young queer writer coming into her own. Getting close enough to her

heroes to relate to their goddamn handkerchiefs. It's about impossible intimacy, and about recognizing yourself.

The curator who interrupted my reverie helped me get the box out of its box and set it up on the table with the requisite velvet cushions to hold the cover open at an un strenuous angle. All run-of-the-mill procedures for handling materials.

The process seems to be crucial for maintaining the specialness of special collections. Not just for the practical reasons, like protecting the objects from wear and tear, but for another purpose: the cushions and weights and meticulous housings insert an unspoken of but palpable barrier between person and thing. The first question most newcomers to the archive asked was if they needed to put on gloves. Most were disappointed and a bit unnerved when I told them they could use their bare hands. We want tools, gear, layers of dark velvet or pristine white cotton to protect the materials from us. There is a fear, here, of carelessness. But on the flip side, there is *care*. There is a desire to nestle the object into something soft and perfectly sized to hold it. It's not for nothing that those velvet cushions that support a book by its spine are called "cradles."

Before she left me to it, I heard the curator explaining something that sounded important, but I'd gotten distracted by a small blue ink doodle, possibly from Einstein's own distracted hand, etched into the lower corner of the duct tape on the box. A spaceship? A smiley face? Totally illegible. Alone again with the item, I

quickly set aside the stack of papers detailing what I presumed to be boring stats on provenance, acquisition, other library inanity, and dug into the model set. But my eyes caught a letter on personal stationery that had sifted loose from the pile.

I picked up the letter and encountered a Dallas woman named Cecilia Hawk, who wrote to the Ransom Center in the late 1980s. In her letter, she writes that after reading about "a missing page from Einstein's papers in the *Dallas Morning News*"—a sheet of handwritten notes had disappeared from under a locked display case—she decided to offer to the Center "something that might be of interest."

Hawk bought the molecular model kit at an auction in Atlanta, Georgia, for reasons unstated. Nothing in her letter makes it clear why it was significant to her, but her personal investment is unmistakable. So moved was she by the case of theft from the archive, just from reading about it in the paper—in my imagination she wears slippers and sits alone on a porch with fan in hand—that she donated her purchase, asking nothing in exchange but a receipt. John Chalmers, a former HRC librarian whom I had until this point never once heard of, wrote back to let Hawk know that the leaf of Einstein's notes had been recovered, and charges had been brought against the "young man who appears to have removed it."

Chalmers's response takes on a sudden and unexpected emotional tenor—this is a librarian writing to a patron, remember—as he confides in Hawk that "during that

rather difficult week, the reception of your letter about the molecular model in small measure gave me comfort.” He warmly accepted her donation.

Transference. That’s the psychological function at work here. It’s a combination of projection, ascribing some aspect of yourself—fantasies, desires, imagination—to the object, and introjection, taking some part of it unto/into yourself. For William James, this is the way objects (which, importantly, can also be *whole people*) become extensions of the self. Cecilia Hawk so incorporated Einstein’s molecular model kit into her person that her act of giving it to an institution was perceived by both parties as deeply generous. And for Chalmers, the kit was a form of condolence for a grievous loss that not just the institution, but by extension *he*, had experienced.

But the kit wasn’t Hawk’s to give or Chalmers’s to receive, not really. Its entire significance is bound up in its being *Einstein’s*. Something was being taken in this scenario; something was being stolen. I wanted to know what, but first I wanted to play with the thing myself. I wanted to open the box and hold its molecules in my hands.

The revelation of the theft left me with a bit of a buzz as I turned back to the kit, which consisted of small wooden blocks—atoms—in different shapes, organized by

color. The item had a story and now I was invested. Attached.

One of the provenance letters suggests that Einstein requested extra types of atoms directly from the manufacturer; the basic set apparently did not meet his molecular modeling needs. The pieces had been neatly organized by color, which I instinctively took to be Chalmers’s doing; in current archival practice, such rearrangement constitutes a pretty serious breach, but in earlier eras it was common to adjust, fix, arrange, and reconfigure items upon arrival. The pieces in the box are blue, orange, yellow, black, green, dark

blue, beige, and brown spherical shapes with rounded and flat sides. Each has several holes in it, into which brass pegs fit. I pulled out several atoms, distinctly aware that the fingerprints of the man who came up with relativity were all over them. I pictured him standing before a classroom, demonstrating the universe’s most fundamental truths with wooden blocks.

I was mulling over Cecilia Hawk and the missing notes, and wondering in an abstract way what would possess someone—that phrase—to steal from an archive. In my hand I could feel the weight of the tiny molecule I’d built—I think it was H₂O—its particular heft, its smooth surfaces. My fingers closed around it. It occurred to me how easy it would be to pocket the thing.

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I already felt a creeping guilt just doing my job. It was enough of an intrusion to handle these objects. Sliding my arms into McCullers's nightgown sleeves to prop them up with tissue in their new housings? Adjusting the button fly on Doyle's suit pants? Toying with Alice Toklas's jewelry box? I was an intruder. How else could such proximity to traces of the radically ordinary—the dingy bottoms of McCullers's socks, the faint smell of poodle that pervades the Stein collection—feel but radically intimate?

All vicarious experience is a kind of stealing, but living vicariously is a huge part of how we form our identities. We commit undocumented thefts continuously as we form a self. When you think about it that way, biography and narrative, the usual forms of interaction with famous cultural figures, are types of possession. Like unrequited love, unrequited interest and unrequited access are ways to own something or someone that isn't yours. A line keeps coming to mind that I can't track down: that you can understand something only without desiring it. It echoes in my brain, a refrain, but I don't know if I have it right, or if perhaps it's the other way around.

An anonymous tip-off led to the discovery of the single page of Einstein's notes, now slightly water-damaged, creased, and tucked in a photo album, in the duplex of Samuel K. Royal, nineteen-year-old grandson of

the late University of Texas football coach Darrell K. Royal. As in Darrell K. Royal Memorial Stadium, the 100,000-seat football megachurch down the street from the Ransom Center. No motive was given.

The district attorney at the time had this to say: "This is an invaluable treasure that belongs to the entire species of humanity and we are delighted to report to you that it has been recovered."

Chalmers, head librarian at the time, had this to say: "This has wonderful elements of mystery about it." He refers to the circumstances of the notes' Houdini-like escape from a locked display case that showed no

sign of damage or break-in. Royal was sentenced to five years probation and two hundred hours of community service.

Can anything "belong" to "the entire species of humanity?" The words *belong* and *belongings* share roots with both desire (*longing, to long*) and proximity (*along, alongside*). The funny thing about the Royal case is that the thief put the notes in an album. He made his own effort at preservation and conservation. And he opened them to the public. Ransom Center staff rumor has it that the anonymous tip came from a guest at one of Royal's duplex parties, where he entertained partygoers with his prized Einstein possession.

After learning of Royal's heist, I became fixated on theft, the possibility of items

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slipping away unnoticed. For a few months I played investigator—maybe I'd been watching too much *Veronica Mars*—and hunted down reports of theft from all the top archives. I came across the Smiley map heist at the Beinecke, the Poe hoarders at the Alderman Library. I found out as much as I could about the HRC's security systems, which are a huge presence throughout the building.

Here is a set of facts and conjectures:

1. The Ransom Center's security system underwent a complete overhaul in 2003, to the tune of half a million dollars.
2. At any given time you will find at least three armed guards on duty downstairs to protect the ca thirty seven million manuscripts inside.
3. The doors to this building are *heavy*.
4. Unlike the special collections at the British Library or at most other universities, the Ransom Center is a public archive. All one needs to enter is a photo ID and a brief orientation. This is one of my favorite things about it.
5. While one of the improvements to the building's security features was to funnel all building users through a single entrance and exit point, there remain at least two other ways in:

- a. A loading dock entrance to the basement by which materials come into the building.

- b. An entrance to a tunnel—*think about this*—that runs under Austin to the State Capitol Building. Built in the 1930s, the system of tunnels totals six miles in length; public entry to the tunnel system is forbidden due to heightened security since 9/11.

6. In the basement, you'll find several multimillion-dollar walk-in freezers that are used to quarantine collections when they arrive in their damp, crumbling, contaminated cardboard boxes from the garage or basement or attic in which they previously resided.

7. Floors four through seven are restricted.

8. If you ever read *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, a chapter book about two kids who secretly live at the Met that is, not surprisingly, a long-standing favorite of mine, then you should know right now that it would be impossible to enact such a fantasy here. Which is not to say I haven't thought about it.

9. The elevators to the stacks, which require a key-card swipe, stop

running at 4:47 PM precisely. I found this out the hard way.

10. It may also be a violation to list these facts. To conjecture.



I got good enough at playing librarian that I managed to coax a story about theft—something no one seemed eager to tell the nosy intern about—out of the steely ring-leader of the Reading Room while sitting at the reference desk. The Reading Room is a glass fishbowl on the second floor surrounded by the writing desks of John Fowles and Edgar Allan Poe, plus a veritable army of busts. The busts are exclusively white male writers and artists whose collections the Center houses, with the exception of Dame Edith Sitwell and her glorious nose. I find her presence (and her nose, which arcs like mine but at an even bolder angle) immensely comforting. The librarian in charge has worked this desk for as long as anyone can remember and wears sweaters that coordinate with even minor holidays. She keeps a collection of windup toys at the front of her desk, which seems at first out of sync with both her personality and the room's aesthetic. They are lined up neatly, but they are dusty.

Throughout the building there are nods to and parodies of the collecting and exhibiting of materials; on the fourth floor, outside the men's restroom, you'll find a locked case full of paper clips across the ages, each type sorted, named, and

labeled. Sometimes I'm not sure what the precise difference is between the paper clips, or the windup toys, and the exhibitions downstairs in the galleries. Once we decide objects are worth collecting for reasons apart from monetary value, where do we draw the line?

I could ask myself this question. Sitting on my desk right now are several black binder clips that came home in my pockets after I processed the last installment of David Foster Wallace's manuscripts. I was tasked with removing and discarding all clips, but I couldn't part with them. Instead, I gave some to friends and academic advisors as quirky gifts, and kept the rest. The problem is that I can no longer tell, looking at the pile of clips on my desk, which belonged to him and which are just ordinary—that is, clips that already belonged to me.

The reference librarian told me her theft story in fits and starts as she swiveled around, printing requests, arranging materials to be reshelved, directing the library staff, always with an eye on the patrons. She mentioned several times how embarrassed she had been that she didn't realize why a patron kept asking about the price of each book he requested. These requests included a copy of *The Origin of Species* that he put down his pants and walked out with one afternoon in 1988. As she told me how it was recovered at a nearby rare bookshop, her flinty look momentarily left her. The only thing her blue eyes conveyed was sadness. A sense of betrayal. Someone flouted the rules and to this day it flouts

something personal, precious, and cherished in her.

In the Reading Room a kind of magic is at work. A conjuring. It happens every time patrons put in requests, summon materials from above or below to their tables. In my mind it's Matilda-esque, objects flying from their shelves straight into a patron's outstretched hands. It's similar to what some visitors—very easy to spot when they arrive—are up to when they come in to do readings with Aleister Crowley's tarot cards. There's also something sort of erotic about it, all the touching. But there's another kind of intimacy, too. The intimacy of texture. Of odor. Of atoms mingling with each other. In 1988, patrons were still allowed to have whole carts of books beside their tables. Now up to five books are delivered to them by staff. The reference librarian keeps a map behind her desk of where everyone is sitting at a given moment. Intimacy still exists between patrons and the books and papers they summon, but no one's putting anything down their pants these days.

I started to write letters to the personal effects I itemized in 7B. I wrote them on the HRC's yellow paper, on which I was supposed to be recording details about the collection for the finding aid. That's one reason I'm not a librarian. And one reason the librarians started to give me some side-eye. You're not supposed to have all these *feelings* when you're working behind

the scenes. Or if you do, I guess you're not supposed to write about them. You're not supposed to commune with the objects. That gradually became clear. It now occurs to me, at the distance of several years, what I brought to this job as a twenty-five-year-old graduate intern, and what gets me in trouble at most of my jobs: unlicensed perspective.

When I arranged an interview with a head librarian to investigate the Center's history of theft more thoroughly, I—amateur gumshoe, lifelong snoop, bored intern—found myself in

deeper than I intended to go. He met me in a windowless office off the Reading Room that contained nothing but a table, two chairs, and a silenced phone. I took excessive notes. I tried to ask "hard-hitting" questions.

He told me the story of a massive heist. Between three and four hundred books were smuggled from the stacks—the exact number can never be known. Some are still missing.

The magnitude of the theft is shocking, but I was probably even more shocked that no one had so much as mentioned it before. I now understand that its impact resonates in just about every aspect of the Center's day-to-day policies. It is a matter of something more, something deeper than reputation or legacy. It is about possession and immortality, like the archive itself. Libraries, archives, and museums

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all find themselves at the intersection of materiality and the mystical. Perhaps this is why we're so quiet when we enter them. As I listened to the librarian's story, it dawned on me that theft, these actual physical slippages, are just interruptions to the collective body, the assembled self that the archive represents. A collective body that includes not only objects but also the archivists and conservators who care for them.

It was an inside job. Mimi Meyer, a volunteer working in book conservation, began taking books home with her sometime after she started in 1989. She was a trusted member of the Ransom Center's volunteer force, but the librarian was quick to tell me that her skills as a conservator were seriously lacking. And despite everything, this seemed to be her worst offense in his eyes. In 1992, she was fired for having a book in her office that she had not checked out.

The books she took were no pocket-size paperbacks. They were big books. Old books with signed bindings, gilt covers, calligraphed interiors. She sold most of them to dealers overseas, and the ones she didn't sell wound up stacked all over the apartment she moved into in Chicago after leaving the Ransom Center, an apartment she shared with her boyfriend, none other than John Chalmers, who had remained the head librarian until 1990. They shared \$400,000 in a joint checking account when Meyer was convicted.

Chalmers was never officially charged with the book theft, but it was, according to the librarian, "inconceivable" that he didn't know what was going on. The books were *in* his apartment. In all likelihood, he directed Meyer to steal certain books and helped to sell them. Yet he remains a member of the Caxton Club, a prestigious bibliophile association in Chicago.

Did the Einstein theft and its "wonderful elements of mystery" inspire Chalmers to make a mystery of his own? I'd like to know what was missing for him, what void he was trying to fill with books and cash. Chalmers had refused indignantly to let the guards check his briefcase on exiting the building each day, a policy that is still in place, a policy I abided by daily. He was fired by the director in 1990 for "incompetence." The police found the books when they raided Chalmers and Meyer's shared apartment in 2003. Meyer was already in prison on drug charges. The current head librarian spent much of his first ten years working with the FBI to hunt down the books and recover them from dealers, none of whom gave the books back readily. He keeps a list of the books that he knows are still missing, but it isn't possible to know with certainty what has been lost. The librarian used the word "skullduggery" to describe the world of rare book dealing; he said this without a hint of irony, but with real anger, masking sadness.

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I keep wondering: Was Chalmers's goal simply to make as much money as possible on the black market with rare books? How did Meyer get involved? Or was it her idea? Was the heist a precursor to their romance? Did it fuel it? I think the apartment where they squirreled the books away is significant. The psychology of hoarding is almost indistinguishable from the process of collecting. Hoards are often intentional, organized, and used by their owners. Sometimes they're shared, displayed. The main difference, according to psychologists of hoarding Gail Steketee and Randy Frost, is that hoarders' lives are in some way encroached upon by their collections. "Hoarding is not defined by the number of possessions, but by how the acquisition and management of those possessions affects their owner." The collections start to take over the collector. I think of Cecilia Hawk—that is, the Cecilia Hawk I've invented in my mind—and wonder if, perhaps, Meyer and Chalmers were just lonely. Loneliness is my go-to assumption for people who spend a lot of their time in libraries. Objects provide a kind of company, a constancy, that other people simply cannot. If I've learned nothing else from working with librarians, archivists, and *things*, it's this fact. It's what brought me here in the first place.

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Throughout its history, the Ransom Center, whose name seems more and more significant to me, has been viewed as sort of a

renegade in acquisitions. The notoriously snooty British libraries in particular are resentful that the papers of so many of *their* national authors have been sent to Texas (the "of all places" is implied). Profiles on the center's archive and its directors cite the practices of pirates or bandits as apt points of comparison. The Ransom Center perpetuates the stereotype in its promotional materials and its continuous snatching up of valuable collections.

And surely the imperialist motives of museums are well documented; amassing cultural goods is a colonial enterprise. Mary Ruefle, who fell in love with a shrunken head at a museum, an infatuation to which I can seriously relate, explains how this truth unfolds: "I can assure you my school did not teach what I now know to be true—that the museum I wandered in was built on rape and plunder and pillage and oppression and murder, that everything in it was stolen, that the very wealth necessary for such acquisition was stolen, wealth acquired by force of so filthy and unspeakable an evil our heads cannot fathom it and have no single word for it." In Texas, some of the words for it are *oil* and *football*. I wonder if at the Center one of the words might be *loneliness*. From owner to archive to thief to dealer, the playground policy of "finders, keepers" rules the day. Acquisition is driven by power and money, yes. But it is also driven by desire for a certain kind of intimacy, a relation. Ownership is a relationship with objects and with the person those objects *embody* in the word's most literal sense.

When trying to convince a writer or her family to sell a set of papers to the Ransom Center, the librarians emphasize, above all, the care those belongings will receive. They promise tireless attention. We will value these things as if they were our own. Watching librarians and scholars handle materials, hearing their stories of loss, witnessing their constant vigilance against the threat of carelessness, affirms my long-held suspicion that research, attention, and careful arrangement—the touch that allows everything to find its right place—are sure signs of unconditional love. There is satisfaction in housing, in placing. The books on their shelves, the manuscripts in their boxes, the personal effects nestled in tissue, and, on a larger scale, the security guards and heavy doors and card swipe elevators—all of these constructs hum with the energy of human devotion.



The clothes are the things that stick most with me. Mentally, that is, spiritually, perhaps, but of course not materially. Sometimes I miss them, miss having them within reach. I can look at the collections online, can see the digital photos I took, and I can even call them up in the Reading Room if I want, but I don't. I prefer to remember them as I encountered them, one-on-one. Gertrude Stein's beaded sleeping cap, Carson McCullers's pale green winter coat. In McCullers's collection I found a gold lamé, magenta-lined jacket with the Saks tags still attached. It isn't her typical style—she

tended toward neutrals and primary colors, classic menswear silhouettes—and I wondered if the jacket was a gift, or if perhaps she bought it in a moment of trying to be someone else.

Closets are spaces to store our alternate identities. The objects and outfits in 7B expand and confound our oddly complete sense of the *person* behind a given proper name. They contradict what we think we know, surprise us, and in the process help us better relate to these unreachable people. There's something queer in our relationship to objects, or some queer potential in the space of that relationship. A love and an attachment outside the bounds of the normal. And, to me, the quirks, the idiosyncrasies that a person's possessions reveal tend to make them anything but normal. If you look long enough at your own knickknacks or keepsakes, you, too, might start to question the possibility of normalcy.

Ian Woodward, glossing Jean Baudrillard, says we project "our own feelings onto a particular object that we use in order to be who we are," but that our need to do so comes from a psychological lack he describes as "cavernous." In Baudrillard's view it's all very pessimistic, because the objects can never satisfy that need. But what if they can? What if our relationships with objects in fact act on us, make us who are?

On that afternoon I spent alone with Einstein's model kit, I looked up at the personal effects shelves lined with meticulously labeled boxes and felt overwhelmed by the fact that it was all just stuff. And not

even the Ransom Center's stuff, but other people's belongings crammed together in a room in the middle of Texas. Everything began to smell. The cold air began to reek of all these strangers'—dead strangers'—skin cells, pipe smoke, decay. The word *ephemera* took on a more desperate meaning. The highly systematized, rigid order the library tries to enforce revealed itself in that moment for the flimsy facade it really is, the shoddy but desperately maintained boundary between culture or knowledge or history and the basic physicality—the bodies—in which these abstract ideas are contained.

Why do we want to have these things? Why do we deserve access to them? Why does the institution want them; why do individuals want them? Why do we preserve them, touch them, catalog them, put them under glass, build gray, elaborate, eerily coffin-like containers for them?

Of course, there's the issue of mortality. We want these figures—the owners of these objects—to live on in some way; we want to preserve materials against the effects of time because it is one of the few ways we think we might control time. Temperature control it, in this case. But

I'm more interested in *housing* than in memorializing. An archive is a living thing, a community of imagined people who reside together and interact and change and confound through each new encounter with their belongings. It's a big, strange family, and the people who work there perceive themselves to be a part of it. My strange intimacies with these collections, my daydream of donning McCullers's suit or Stein's embroidered vest—this is why I borrow loved ones' clothes and never return them, the reason I snoop with impunity.

Maybe this desire for communion, for identity—the *longing* in belongings—is what Walter Benjamin means when he says that collection is a renewal, acquisition a form of rebirth. And isn't it funny, the big lie at the heart of the enterprise? All of this stuff is ultimately just that. No apparatus, no matter how meticulous or expensive or careful, can protect a collection from the inevitable slippages, losses, thefts, whether the perpetrators be people, bugs, mold, disintegration, or time. Acquire it, collect it, steal it, hoard it, conserve it, preserve it, store it, house it, box it, hold it, wear it, but there's just no keeping it. 🏠