

*WITHOUT THESE THINGS, I WOULD BE INVISIBLE*

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## Abstract

This paper “*Trace and Retrace*” accompanies my Masters of Fine Arts thesis exhibition titled “*Without These Things, I Would Be Invisible*”. The exhibition took place in Special Projects Gallery at York University in Toronto from April 25th to April 29th, 2022. The body of work consists of sculptures, photographs and found objects. The work stems from my own experience of loss from childhood to the present. I am reflecting on how unresolved familial loss and trauma can be passed down through the things shared in a household. My work acknowledges the crucial role of objects in the formation of identity.

Over the course of my MFA, as I made these works and experienced further casualties, I became even more familiar with the nature of grief as a fragmented process that is unstable, and unreliable: grief is a powerful agent of chaos and change. I will be approaching this paper with an experimental structure that aligns honestly with the waves and ruptures brought on by loss.

“*Without These Things, I Would Be Invisible*” explores the intersection of grief with sentimental objects as they intertwine with memory, unresolved loss and identity. I work with personal materials that recall memories for me—conjuring a symbolic status that overrides their intended function. This body of work is my attempt to remember, find new articulations, and honour the complexities of my own experiences of grief and my obsession with certain objects.

I aim to craft a body of work that acts as a composition of resilient personhood. Juggling the visible and the invisible aspects of identity, I maintain an awareness that nostalgia and memories conjure up both personal relief and crisis in their unveiling.

*Keywords: visual art, photography, sculpture, grief, autotheory, loss, objects, identity, visibility, invisibility, nostalgia, death, home, sentimentality, installation*

## **Community Acknowledgement**

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## **Land Acknowledgment**

This work takes place on stolen land.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015) "[The Legacy: What we have learned: Principles of truth and reconciliation](https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Principles_English_Web.pdf)" pp. 103-111  
([https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Principles\\_English\\_Web.pdf](https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Principles_English_Web.pdf))

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*As we mourn our losses, we mourn ourselves  
for better or worse;  
as we are, as we were, as we are no longer.  
- Joan Didion*

## **Introduction**

*“Trace and Retrace”* is the accompanying paper to my Masters of Fine Arts thesis exhibition titled *“Without These Things, I Would Be Invisible,”* installed in the Special Projects Gallery at York University in Toronto. The show consists of ceramics, concrete sculptures, photographs, and audio. My practice aims to make the often tumultuous relationships between loss, family, domestic objects, destructive behaviours, and acts of love into tangible things; this work is an attempt to remember, find new articulations, and honour the complexities of these feelings. To begin to understand how unresolved familial loss and trauma can be passed through a family, I focus on the relationship between mother and daughter embodied within shared domestic objects. In Sherry Turkle’s book *Evocative Objects*, she illustrates how objects transform into a companion, how objects are linked to emotional connection, and the representation of an indescribable relationship.<sup>2</sup> Her text shapes my perception of belongings as emotional anchors that keep my mother and I stuck in the past.

*“Trace and Retrace”* explores how the pathways of grief crossover with sentimental belongings and memory. I begin this work by employing autotheory as a methodology used to plunge into my research and art-making. I consider how objects can appear evocative, magical and cruel throughout the cycle of grief and how the mode of presentation can affect our

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<sup>2</sup> Turkle, Sherry. *Evocative Objects : Things We Think With* 1st (The MIT Press) Pbk. ed., 2011. pp. 5.

perception of an object. I unpack why I believe photographs are objects and conclude by offering a reflection on my experience of creating “*Without These Things, I Would Be Invisible.*”

Throughout this essay I reference necklaces, rocks, handkerchiefs and Ziploc bags; these items appear as physical objects within the exhibition. The addition of poetic interludes have been collected through poetry, journals and notes over the course of many years, convey a more subjective experience. Viewers can hear me reciting these poems recorded on a cassette tape that plays within the gallery space during the exhibition. The focal point of the exhibition are the photographs encased in concrete slabs displayed on each of the walls. These pieces form fossilized windows to the past. On a low plinth, reminiscent of a coffee table, one encounters an oversized replica of a silver heart necklace intended to illustrate the physical weight endured when some objects are so emotionally charged they become burdensome. The exhibition includes a grouping of remade sentimental objects in stoneware: A sympathy card that has “*Deepest Sympathy*” carved into it is a ghostly rendition of what was constantly displayed then tucked away in my home. A candy bowl that is frozen in the midst of change, filled with a mix of stoneware and real wintergreen mints. The third object is a vase from my great-grandmother that has painfully grown thorns. On the floor of the exhibition, one encounters a concrete piece formed within a used Ziploc bag with small, long-dead flowers sprouting from it. Resting on this piece is an angel coin, a source of good luck. Photographs and sculptures in the exhibition are recreations of the things that are integral to and intertwine with my identity and sense of self, but they also reference subjects and objects iconically linked to sentiment and grief. The objects in the exhibition feel inseparable from me, they make me feel visible in the world that moves too quickly past loss.

## Part One: As I Am

*How is your heart during the worst of times? Do you know anything about what can happen in the space between three days, the space between a year? I hide Ziploc bags around my bedroom, keeping twenty and fifty dollar bills tucked inside drawers, boxes under the bed, in between the pages of books. This is not significant except to note that I hold onto things. An attempt to find joy or satisfaction in the preservation. This kind of concealment evokes more dread. When confronted with heartbreak, one is left without a sense of where to go. Someone could possibly escape or just slip away. Left alone to guess, to fuss, or obsess over what is temporary or disposable and devote one's self to find meaning in it. I try to understand the relationship between death, love, and things without the hope of resolution. I find meaning simply in the notion of looking.*

The starting point for my work is the tangled web of grief. I am using autotheory as my method of research to engage and theorize my narrative, to begin the process of untangling. Lauren Fournier's work on autotheory emphasizes the importance of writing theory from the first person and using memory as a means of expanding beyond one's self.<sup>3</sup> Fournier states "autotheory [is] a practice of performing, embodying, enacting, processing, metabolizing, and reiterating philosophy, theory, and art criticism."<sup>4</sup> Autotheory is an important methodology when creating work surrounding a topic as complex and unreliable as grief and nostalgia; affinities can be drawn in my approach to art-making, and academia. Consequently, Fournier's position is that the majority of artists that have been marginalized in academic settings employ autotheory as a feminist practice.

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<sup>3</sup>Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. (The MIT Press), 2021 pp. 6.

<sup>4</sup>Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. (The MIT Press), 2021 pp 6.

As a first-generation graduate student, I feel like an imposter in academia. I shift my eyes back and forth waiting for the moment York University realizes they let in the wrong girl. I can hear my mother yelling “What are you, fucking stupid?!” and it echoes through me until I give up. I purposely underachieve, rather than be told it's not enough. This deep-rooted shame demotivates me from work but encourages me to collect, especially at times of grief. Autotheory offers a methodology where “theorizing from the first person” is a necessity and encourages one to look beyond the self to identify the different strands of connection in relationships.<sup>5</sup>

Auto-theory has reminded me that there is much to be learned from lived experience and it is valuable to share our own experiences with others, teasing out connections and encouraging growth. For a long time, I felt alone and intimidated by the pursuit of academia, my blue-collar background haunting me. Through this exhibition, I gained insight into how many of my peers truly understand those feelings - this encouraged me to continue with the difficult yet meaningful work. I embed a great deal of myself within the works I create, they are tiny recordings of the life I am actively living. And yet, I am hiding in these pieces too. I attempt to share the record of my life but I purposefully leave out specific details because I feel ashamed. Each piece in the exhibition was created without an anticipated result, it was both a collaboration with materials and a gamble. It's a trace of my life, my mother's life, my uncle's life and my Nana's life. It's all about the traces a human can leave in the world after they are gone. It is not about clarity, it's about meaning-making. There are repetitions in the work and repetitions in this essay. I have a habit of saying the same things over and over again in different ways in my attempts to understand and draw connections.

Grief has a way of making one's world very small. It is a wound that continuously needs to be nursed. Over time and without healing, loss becomes the main focus, difficult to see a

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<sup>5</sup> Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. (The MIT Press), 2021 pp. 8.

world beyond great pain. Grief manifests in a myriad of ways. It is a different experience for everyone. It can also be a topic people avoid or squirm about. I learned that hiding grief was one mode of getting by, eventually leading to complete avoidance. I often feel as though I am grieving wrong, despite recognizing that there is no right way to grieve. I was seventeen and it was February, I held the hand of my friend as they drifted away from cancer and then in June, two friends took their lives by jumping off of a cliff together. In what felt like the shortest and the longest four months, I lost three people that were very close to me. After each of the funerals, their passing was taboo to bring up. I sensed, that expressing my sadness, felt burdensome to others. Life kept going, if I was the strong girl everyone thought I was, I would keep going as well. I tried to take my heartache and lock it away for another time. It would take me many more years to realize that did not work. Grief often feels like fear. I want to turn away while being unable to turn away. Competing emotions swirl unpredictably. There are moments of big waves that threaten to wash me away and yet moments of feeling nothing at all. It is a building that is collapsing while I am trying to repair it. Loss interrupts life as I know it—or as I *think* I know it. I am fragile. With the underpinning of sadness and grief, I come undone. I am forced to recognize my dependence on my belongings and my vulnerability. This recognition is in relation to loss: the loss of control.

I grew up in a low-income house, and neither of my parents attended college or university. My father was a steelworker and my mother still works at her minimum-wage coffee shop job. It is important to disclose my parent's education level and employment here, as I believe that blue-collar lifestyles influence the way that my family grieves. Blue-collar workers tend to be watchers, sitting on the sidelines, caregivers, people-pleasers, passive participants in their own life and the world around them. They are angry at the universe for dealing them this

hand, stuck, seeking control in small things like objects.<sup>6</sup> This testament is accurate for my parents. My mother hides her true emotions, opting to bottle-up feelings instead of communicating them openly. After the death of her brother, my mother cried at the funeral and never again. This created a lot of tension in our household. The only emotion expressed was anger. Although things were not expressed verbally, I noticed how my mother hung onto the flowers from his funeral service, the collection of miniature demolition derby<sup>7</sup> cars, and an outdated cell phone that had a voicemail from him. She kept any object that gave her the slightest connection to him. That was how her collecting began and how it holds my mother and me still.

*A production of collapsing lungs and coiled tubes*

*Lunch with a lawyer*

*Half an hour intervals of long pauses and*

*Moments with strangers*

*On decorative napkins,*

*declaring what is mine,*

*What's yours.*

*The sun goes up and down while we stay here*

*The more I talk about you, the less I know you*

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<sup>6</sup> Bochantin, Jaime E., and Renee L. Cowan. "Acting and Reacting: Work/Life Accommodation and Blue-Collar Workers." *International Journal of Business Communication* Thousand Oaks, Calif., vol. 53, no. 3, (SAGE Publications), 2016 pp. 306–25.

<sup>7</sup> Demolition derby is a type of motorsport that is usually held at country fairs and festivals. The competition involves drivers hammering their vehicles against each other. The last vehicle which is still operational is the winner. (Wood, Robert. "Demolition Derby the Sport." Topend Sports Website, 2014. <https://www.topendsports.com/sport/list/demolition-derby.htm>)



Fig. 1 *Mother* from “Falling Asleep While Chewing Gum,” 2013.

This body of work began in 2013 with a series of photographs titled “Falling Asleep While Chewing Gum,” that attempted to capture my childhood home. I had not lived there for three years and going back was a burden. The house felt haunted by unresolved emotions that had been swept under the carpet. The house held on to the feeling of anger beginning to bubble before boiling over. The house stands in for unacknowledged feelings. It appeared trapped in the 80s; all carpet, wood trim, fake wood panelling and a bright pink bathtub. The house was filled to the brim with objects collected by my parents for over three decades, stuck emotionally and physically by possessions. The title for my photographic series is meant to reference being ‘stuck’, something that happens without anyone noticing it. “Falling Asleep While Chewing Gum,” documents my family home and was an attempt to understand my mother's inability to let go of things. The series sparked intrigue with objects and collections, this was when I began to notice my habit of collecting. To understand my attachment to objects, I must look at my mother's attachment to objects. I was largely shaped by her habits, patterns, and thinking.

In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart notes that childhood is not remembered as it is lived, it is



voluntarily remembered, a childhood manufactured from its material survivals.<sup>8</sup> If we believe that the core person is formed in childhood while the brain develops, the most prominent way to understand the younger self is through belongings. Children only have what they are given, which primarily comes from caregivers. The book *The Dance of Anger*, by Henriette Lerner, is a self-help book for women struggling with their relationships. Lerner states that “we never truly leave home.”<sup>9</sup> This sentiment is meant to convey that leaving behind the home does not leave behind the unresolved feelings, difficult relationships and habits formed in childhood - those emotions are carried with us (until resolved). I argue that those unresolved feelings can be physically carried in life through belongings. I inherited my mother’s mode of thinking and behaviour through her things.

This concept is further explored in the book *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, by Dr. Pauline Boss who claims that, “unless people resolve the ambiguous loss, the incomplete or uncertain loss that is inherent in uprooting, and bring into some congruence their psychological and physical families, the legacy of frozen grief may affect their offspring for generations to come, compounding itself as more ordinary losses inevitably occur.”<sup>10</sup> The suppression of grief can often do the most harm. Grief is sticky yet shifting: a paradox of feelings and reactions. One emotion seeping into another. It is often fragmented. It frays the threads of one’s life.

“The More I Talk About You, The Less I Know You,” is an audio piece that was recorded on a cassette player. It plays in a corner of the gallery space to mimic the experience of hearing music from another room in a home, one can only hear bits and pieces of words or melodies. A

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Stewart. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. (Duke University Press), Print 1992. pp. 145.

<sup>9</sup> Lerner, Harriet Goldhor. *The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships*. New York, (NY: Harper & Row Publishers), Print 1989. pp.15.

<sup>10</sup> Boss, Pauline. *Ambiguous Loss : Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*. (Harvard University Press) pbk. ed. Cambridge, Print 1999. pp. 374.

familiar phenomenon: a single sound that has the power to conjure up an entire scene from the past. The audio piece is created from multiple recordings, songs, and poetry readings. All of the audio clips in this piece have a significant place in my grieving process; poetry, songs, phone calls, and therapy sessions. In the beginning, you can hear the band Pearl Jam playing “Come Back”, which was played at my uncle’s funeral; despite it being a favourite, my mother never played that song again. Much of the audio is ambiguous and difficult to hear word for word. It is an echo of childhood memories that become untouchable.



Fig 2. “The More I Talk About You, The Less I know you,” 2022.

*I don't know if I remembered it or if I just remember what I saw in a photo of myself face down in water wearing goggles cleaning the pool my back floats to the surface I couldn't stop the bugs from biting sweating like a dead piece of meat (dead meat sweats as I do)*

*mosquitoes wear me down by sheer numbers.*

*I hit myself too hard too many times.*

*A creaky blue carpet, holding my  
own hand as you drive through  
the night, falling asleep chewing  
gum waking up with it in my hair:  
stuck. The sun begins to breach  
the house, even when the curtains  
are tightly shut, the middle of the  
blue carpet stained with  
adolescent nosebleeds, tomato  
sauce*

## **Part Two: Evocative, Magical, Cruel**

*When someone's life ends, all that is left of them are their belongings.*

*There is an overwhelming need to leave their things as they were.*

*Untouched.*

*Yet if they are left, they collect dust, creating a new kind of skin and meaning.*

*There is something both heartwarming and heartbreaking about the things  
that are left behind.*

I imagine that my mother's collecting habit was shaped by superstition that unknowingly led to patterns of magical thinking. Magical thinking is defined as believing that one event happens as a result of another without a plausible link of causation.<sup>11</sup> Broken mirrors causing bad luck and making a wish while blowing out birthday candles are common examples of magical thinking. Magical thinking creates a vehicle for love, anxiety and the inevitable to take shape, where feelings of the unconscious meet those in the tangible world. I used to wear a sapphire necklace gifted by a friend who passed away. It once made me feel a little closer to her but as time passes, it now symbolizes the gap in my life where my friend used to be. I thought the proximity of the necklace to me was healing. The more I wore it, the more it reminded me of what was lost. It is no longer a dainty necklace – it is a gigantic chain tethered to me. “I wear the Necklace I Forge,” an oversized necklace sculpture, is an ideal symbol of love, an easy object to keep close to the heart. The heart indicates both the love and the heartache that this exhibition renders. At certain angles, a reflection of one's self can be seen, trapped in the silver glaze. The chain link represents all of the memories that connect and overlap. In this piece, I consider the overlaps between our interior worlds and exterior reality.

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<sup>11</sup>Lickerman, Alan. “Magical Thinking.” *Psychology Today*, (Sussex Publishers), 2009.  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/happiness-in-world/200911/magical-thinking>.



Fig. 3 “I Wear The Chain I Forge” 2022

Magical thinking embeds itself into objects by appearing to work from time to time - my uncle attributed his demolition derby wins to a lucky angel coin in his pocket. The superstitious power this coin holds is a direct result of its presence during a positive outcome. One loves and trusts in magical objects because they survive through time and "prove to be good and helpful after all."<sup>12</sup> Since my sapphire necklace was once “good,” I am emotionally tied to it. Yet magical objects can turn into cursed objects when they begin to bring more pain than comfort. I imagine these cursed objects to grow vines with thorns and when they are touched, prick the skin. In my exhibition, I created a vase that has a crown of thorns around the top to illustrate this notion. The vase is completely functional but it would be difficult to avoid being pricked by a thorn when

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<sup>12</sup>Klein, Melanie. *Love, Guilt, and Reparation & Other Works, 1921-1945*. (Delacorte Press/S. Lawrence), 1975. pp. 360.

placing flowers inside. The irony is, that I am dependent on these objects, to bear the pain of losing them is worse than the pain they cause (or so it seems). We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 4 “Crown of Thorns” 2022

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<sup>13</sup>Turkle, Sherry. *Evocative Objects : Things We Think With*. (The MIT Press) pbk. ed., Print 2011, pp. 6.

### Part Three: The Call of Things

Included in the exhibition are two small frames called “Out of Pocket”. These framed pieces contain scans of items that my Nana had in her pocket when she died, she always kept every scrap of paper. My mother took them from her pockets and preserved them in a Ziploc bag. These items are quick notes, receipts, and business cards that would usually be tossed into the garbage but, because they were on my Nana when she died, they became imbued with meaning. Objects are a tangible record of one’s life, if these sentimental objects were lost, the self would be invisible. The home of a hoarder has “tendencies (which) mirror what is cluttering them on the inside, both psyche and self...psychic clutter and residue can be found in physical form.”<sup>14</sup> The persuasive and seductive force of fantasy is how hoarders idealize objects to avoid real pain. Objects can be seen as representing critical parts of identity and symbolize a frustrated attempt to renew the symbolic function missing in life.<sup>15</sup> As I attempt to find symbolic meaning in life, my physical world becomes a mirror for my internal world. In contrast, new-materialism and political theorist Jane Bennett sees hoarders and artists as people who hear “the call of things.”<sup>16</sup> Bennett claims that hoarders display extreme perception, they seem to notice too much about their things, and they are struck too hard by them.<sup>17</sup> They believe it is their duty to respond to that call. I would like to think my habit of collecting leans towards Bennett’s theory, however, if I am a novice hoarder, I accept the good and bad implications of this. When my things call to me, I

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<sup>14</sup> Winters, Renee M. *The Hoarding Impulse : Suffocation of the Soul*. (Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group), 2015 pp. 10.

<sup>15</sup>Winters, Renee M. *The Hoarding Impulse : Suffocation of the Soul*. (Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group), 2015 pp. 113.

<sup>16</sup> Bennett, Jane. “Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency.” *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, (Punctum Books), 2012. pp. 237–70.

<sup>17</sup> Bennett, Jane. “Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency.” *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, (Punctum Books), 2012. pp. 237–70.

must listen. The act of hoarding and collecting has become a ritual of care for the preservation of the self and the love I once felt.



Fig 5. "Over My Mother's Shoulder," 2022



### Part Four: In and Out of Sight

*the only thing I want for a long winter*

*and a longer day of spring*

*is to see you*

*in warm weather for a few hours*

When objects that carry painful memories are hidden away it is easier to trick oneself into feeling healed, that is until said object resurfaces. Theorist Gaston Bachelard's text, *The Poetics of Space*, considers the home's ability to activate memories, dreams, and times during our past to allow our mind to access these thoughts for comfort.<sup>18</sup> A home does not always carry warm memories; my house unlocks negative memories of death, anger, and abandonment with the smallest glimmers of love that I access through my belongings. I'm always greeted with the memories of my parents' arguments over the number of things in our home. I argue that the belongings and habits I was surrounded by as a child in the home are what I access for comfort; for better or worse.

Bachelard refers to the home as "a nest for dreaming, a shelter for imagining." In *The Hoarding Impulse*, Renee Winters<sup>19</sup> states that hoarders describe their possessions as a "nest." These two sentiments describe an object-filled home as a place to feel protected and to feel a sense of self. The self-image and self-worth of the inhabitants become dependent on this sense of security.

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<sup>18</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*. (Beacon Press), 1994. pp. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Winters, Renee M. *The Hoarding Impulse : Suffocation of the Soul*. (Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group), 2015 pp.120.



Fig 6. "Nest," 2022.

The psychological meaning behind many objects in the home can be overlooked based on their banality – handkerchiefs, cards, chipped mugs, vases that hold fake flowers, photographs on the wall, and the mantle. Most of us don't notice how significant an object has become until we are faced with the choice to keep it or throw it out. I inherited my Nana's wardrobe when she died. Wearing her clothes is strange and comforting. In almost every single pocket of any given item, there are handkerchiefs, hand-written notes, and big pink chalky mints. I could not throw them out. If I close my eyes I can see my Nana give me a toonie, a hanky or one of those pink mints to suck on while she places bets on the horse races at Woodbine. I accompanied her to many horse races. These small objects seem to encapsulate all of my memories of her. I move

toward and away from objects depending on how I am moved by them.<sup>16</sup> I replicate a handkerchief and pink mints in the exhibition stoneware as an attempt to illustrate the weight they have for me.

Bachelard explores aspects of the house and lures attention to objects that store and lock away intimacy: wardrobes, chests, and drawers<sup>20</sup>. He is examining the wardrobe as a private space; it is not accessible to everyone.<sup>21</sup> A wardrobe carries family history, collections, order, and memories. The gallery space acts as a pseudo wardrobe, housing the sentimental objects that were the catalyst for collecting. It is in this space that I begin to form an understanding as to why I am drawn to these items.

### **Part Five: Gap**

When there is a death there is a gap—a tear in the fabric of the home. When not properly repaired with the right materials and tools, the gap gets bigger over time. Unnoticed at first, it begins to spread and crack until it threatens the entire structure of the home. The works in my thesis reverberate with this sentiment. I employ materials typically used for making or repairing a home, such as plaster, concrete, chains, tiles, bricks, and clay. The works in the exhibition bear traces of my labour but can also be seen as metaphors for staying stuck while trying to move on. These items are remade from objects I collect, things I’ve hidden in between pages of my books, photographs that have the aura of an object, heirlooms and gifts. I have taken intangible objects from my memory and given them the heaviness I feel through clay. Clay is one of the most

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<sup>20</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*. (Beacon Press), 1994. pp 74.

<sup>21</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*. (Beacon Press), 1994. pp 78.

powerful mediums of expression, attempting to harness the silent energy of the earth to dwell on conflict and on the emotional and intuitive moments of life. The malleability of clay allows me to work with my bare hands and create impressions that are symbolic of the scars and indentations I have acquired while in the world. Paige Valentine, a painter and a ceramic artist, creates work I am drawn to and influenced by because it has the pervading sense of the eternal, contrasted by underlying humour and sentimentality. Valentine's work focuses on ceramics that are functional but include detailed paintings. She is pulling imagery from her every day, history, and sentiments of nostalgia. I admire Valentine's ability to create intimate treasures embodying an emotional tenderness that contrasts their hard exteriors.



Fig. 7 Paige Valentine "Dog Tower," 2022. 18"x11"x 9.5" Ceramic Sculpture.

I attempt to turn sentimentalism into a kind of fossil through casting in concrete and the use of stoneware. Both concrete and stoneware are materials of durability. The traces of labour and the reshaping of belongings stand to remind me that I am being perpetually shaped by time, by objects, and by life itself.

My fascination with concrete as a material came while I was working on “While Bodies Become Whole Callouses’,” a project about my father’s life as a steelworker. This work examines the ramifications blue-collar labour has on the body, focusing on the steel industry in Hamilton, Ontario. Hamilton formed its identity in the early 1940s as the “Steel City” - industrial, working-class, masculine, heterosexual, white - and it is this public image that has reaped complex results for its inhabitants. By the early 1970s, the steel industry had taken a turn for the worst, there were multiple strikes and lockouts for the next 40 years, leaving little employment and financial security. Steelworkers endure exhausting hours, strenuous conditions, exposure to toxins and constant perils as a daily part of their job. As a child of a steelworker, I try to emulate the industry through my material choices while rendering visible labour associated with the often invisible infrastructural materiality of steel. A key element in this work is the rows of Stelco Steel keychains mounted on a wall, each one imperfectly moulded in concrete from the original steel keychain given to me as a child by my father. I draw parallels between the body of a steelworker and my own body as a child, both byproducts of the industry. Through sharing my personal experiences growing up with a steel-working father, I explore the ramifications it can have on family life. An affinity can be drawn between emerging artists – often working precarious, low-wage jobs with no benefits to support their practice – and blue-collar labour. In this work, I explored the implications of contemporary art-making becoming entangled with

manual labour jobs and how the legacy of my father's work has become my own. I maintain concrete as a constant material in my practice because of this.



Fig 8: "While Bodies Become Whole Callouses," 2019.

*How can I replicate the smell of midnight at the steel plant, the feeling of shift work for over 40 years? The image of my father having cereal alone, the sound of him leaving before the sunrise, coming home, rolled a bit thinner, a bit more blistered each time. A running joke, more often becoming the source of dry throat, spit-fuelled arguments. It became anger always brewing right below the staircase. A steelworker spends 12 hours a day in a crane 70 feet high. From the window of the cabin, he watches the crane slowly shift a cauldron of molten steel from one to another. Across the room a colleague bends over a spectrometer. Another hundred feet away, a worker monitors cameras trained on the insides of red-hot furnaces where steel slabs are formed and plucked out by a mechanical arm. "You either have the temperament for it, or you don't"*

*guiding ladles full of super-hot liquid metal weighing as much as 120 tons above his co-workers*  
*"If I were to bump up against something, I would cause someone to get hurt"* <sup>22</sup>

### **Part Six: Sting, Speck, Cut**

Each time I go to a beach or travel to a new place, I collect a few rocks that feel special at that moment. This habit began when I was a child visiting the beach. Through these small and ordinary rocks, I can conjure the smell of the sea, the cool water brushing up past my ankle, imaginary sensations that can make me shiver. Emotions shift the central focus from the internal to embodied interactions with the material environment. Each narrative construct comes from embodied experiences, evocative objects trigger and sometimes construct emotionally laden autobiographical memories.<sup>23</sup> I recognize that memory and embodiment are essential to selfhood. I need to have specific memories of past experiences to be that past self. Thus, I create a need to hold on to objects embedded with experience and memory to articulate myself to myself. There may be holes in memory, but there are sufficient overlapping chains of memory to establish continuity over time.

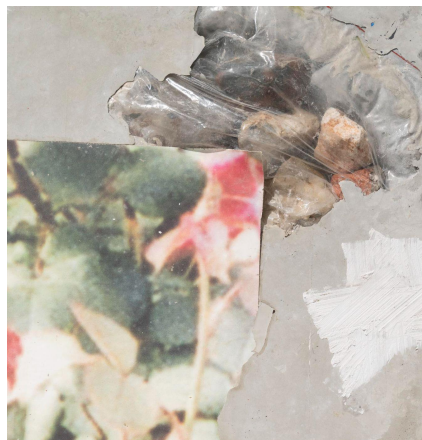


Fig. 9 Ziploc of Collected Rocks Cast into Concrete Slab.

<sup>22</sup> From "While Bodies Become Whole Callouses," Artist Statement 2019 by Jessie Kitchen

<sup>23</sup> Heersmink, Richard. "The Narrative Self, Distributed Memory, and Evocative Objects." *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 175, no. 8, Springer, 2018. pp. 1829–49.





Fig. 10 & 11 “Swan Song” and Detail Photo, 2022.

When I look at photographs, I find myself drawn to particular pieces that make up the whole image. It's as though I want to pick apart the image in order to excavate the moment of pain, feeling, or love that is embedded within it. These are points of entry into memory, I consider these points of entry in relation to Roland Barthes's *punctum*, the “sting, speck, cut, little hole ... which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)”.<sup>19</sup> The images I chose to use for my exhibition came from a Ziploc bag full of photographs that belonged to my Nana. I scanned each of the images on their own, in piles and in their Ziploc bags. These photos were the originals printed from the film, for this reason, they had an aura to them. As a whole, the photographs felt special, but I felt like an outsider looking in. I kept trying to find a door to



memory. Scanned at a high resolution, I could see the coffee dribbles that eventually landed while reminiscing at the breakfast table, the dog ear corners of the photos from being carried around, and the fingerprints from being held onto so tightly. Zooming in on parts of the scanned images reveals a beautiful hazy texture, it is like looking through a screen door. This was my way in. I kept picking apart each image until I found the moment in the photograph that was most evocative. In order to reflect usefully on the photographs without being overwhelmed, the best method was to draw the emotions out slowly through these poetic allusions.



Fig 12 & 13 Original scan and Crop

Once I find those snippets of memory, I cast them into a concrete frame. I am placing precious objects into the concrete, not knowing if they will be lost in the mix or made visible. These pieces are a collaborative process between me and the mix of cement, although painful, I want to actively relinquish control. With hesitation, I toss in a tiger eye earring that belonged to my grandmother, I told myself ‘this is healing! Let it go! This way, it’s forever but alas, it was lost. In an attempt to gain a semblance of control, I try to pick away at parts of the surface like a scab. I use chainlinks throughout the work to symbolize the chain of memory and to solidify the

notion that I am tethered to these objects. The concrete pieces have gel wax on them, this allows them to catch their own “belongings” such as dust, bugs and hair, simply by existing in a space. These pieces stand as a reminder that the objects one keeps can still change and decay despite attempts at preservation, the objects can harden and promote new kinds of growth.



Fig. 14 Detail shot of Gelly Wax

*I pick scabs chewing on the thick ones*

*I can constantly see myself dying*

*Slipping away*

*I'm going to avoid second-hand jewelry,*

*warm beer, indoor cigarettes and thinking about flowers growing in between the  
cracks of concrete*

*a testament to the fact that I often find meaning in*

*what is temporary or disposable*

### **Part Seven: Reflection**

*Do spiders feel pleasure or even satisfaction knowing they are leaving something (their web)  
In the world after they are gone?*

Grief is an extended process. It rips through me, starting with the heart before spreading, moving outwards - becoming a tangible thing that inevitably weighs me down. I know that after loss, a state of mourning should eventually subside. Despite knowing this I remain inconsolable. Loss irrevocably changes a human being and what follows is supposed to be healing. Not everyone gets so lucky. Some of us, like myself, never have the time or space to heal. That tangible loss becomes a collection. It grows with me, it sits on my shelves posing as decoration, and it becomes indistinguishable from myself. Most of the time it feels like I only know myself through these objects. I am haunted by objects that belonged to loved ones I have lost. I found myself avoiding writing this essay because I have been actively experiencing loss. It can be

unbearable to dredge up these feelings, it is even more unbearable to attempt to explain these feelings in an essay. The objects in my exhibition no longer hold their previous function; instead, they are confirming that they no longer function as they once did. Tightly gripping onto objects that are disfigured by death not only confronts me with loss but also forces me to confront my own mortality.



Fig. 15 “Wishbone,” 2022 This image was initially taken in 2013 as part of the series “Falling Asleep While Chewing Gum”

Creating this work forced me to confront the echoes and the traces of my family in my identity. Enduring a childhood marked by familial trauma has produced personal feelings of shame. I associate unsavoury traits with my family and distance myself from them as a result. This project helped me uncover and excavate warmer memories, long forgotten; These memories are reflected in the objects that became lost within my concrete slabs. I watched them glimmer, slowly sinking below the surface, I dug away trying to catch them before they disappeared.

*Where will my belongings go after I die? Who will be able to read the penmanship in my journals? A window opens in another room, a piano softly plays in harmony with the rain. The world feels too big, too heavy lately. I'd like to head somewhere else, but I can not fit everything into my suitcase. These attempts to run away from the heaviness are futile when I try to pack it up with me.*

*The weight of my belongings does not change when I simply move them. In another city, in an apartment, I somehow still live in my childhood home with all my childhood things. I stay in waiting, hoping to play my cards right. A good luck charm lives in my left-hand pocket, a coin with an angel on both sides, this keeps me going. The sun rises and sets, I see the whole world through a blue curtain. Dead flies, thimbles, and wishbones from the last decade live on the window sill, traces of my life.*

Word Count: 7029

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## Appendix A- Documentation of Exhibition



Installation image "Over My Mother's Shoulder," 2022





Installation image "Without These Things, I Would Be Invisible," 2022





Installation image (Swan Song, Through the Screen Door, Wishbone, Deepest Sympathy, and Crown of Thorns) 2022



Installation image (A Longer Day of Spring, I Wear The Chain I forged, and Over My Mother's Shoulder) 2022



"I Wear the Chain I forged," 2022  
Approx. 30"x40"  
Glazed and unglazed stoneware



"The More I Talk About You, The Less I Know You," 2022  
Approx. 12"x 6"  
Audio piece played on a cassette player





"Over My Mother's Shoulder," 2022

16"x20"

Concrete, plaster, digital photo print, gel wax, dead bugs and sentimental objects 2022



Detail of "Over my Mother's Shoulder," 2022



Detail of "Over my Mother's Shoulder," 2022



"A Longer Day of Spring," 2022

Approx. 30"x40"

Concrete, plaster, digital photo print, gel wax, steel chain, found rocks, raccoon jaw, fabric, and vinyl print





Detail of "A Longer Day of Spring," 2022





Detail of "A Longer Day of Spring," 2022



"Out of Pocket," 2022  
Approx. 5"x7"  
Glazed and unglazed Stoneware, digital photo print



"Out of Pocket," 2022

Approx. 5"x7"

Glazed and unglazed stoneware, and digital photo print





"Untitled 02," 2022

12"x9"

Concrete, plaster, digital photo print, gel wax, steel chain, leaves, and found objects



"Untitled 03," 2022

12"x9"

Concrete, plaster, digital photo print, gel wax, steel chain, leaves, and found objects



"Untitled 01," 2022

11"x17"

Concrete, plaster, digital photo print, gel wax, steel chain, leaves, and found objects





Detail of "Untitled 01," 2022



"Untitled 02," 2022

16"x20"

Concrete, plaster, digital photo print, and ceramic flower





"Untitled 04," 2022  
Approx. 12"x9"  
Concrete, dried flowers, coin



"Swan Song," 2022

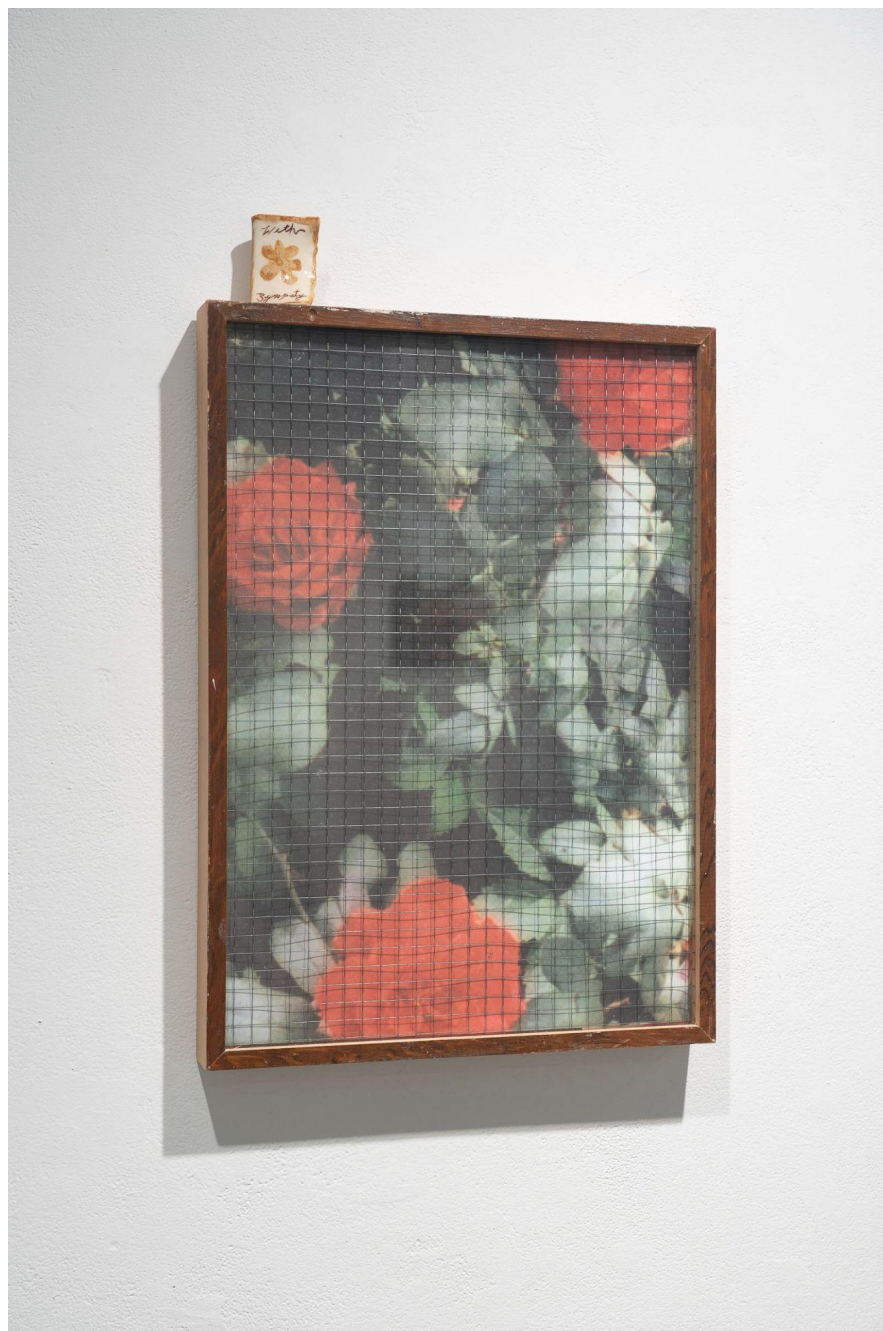
Approx. 30"x40"

Concrete, plaster, digital photo print, gel wax, steel chain, found rocks, raccoon jaw, fabric, and vinyl print



Detail of "Swan Song," 2022





"Through the Screen Door," 2022

17"x24"

Digital photo print, door frame, safety glass, and glazed stoneware



Detail of "Through the Screen Door," 2022



"Wishbone," 2022

16"x20"

Concrete, plaster, digital photo print, paper, and dice



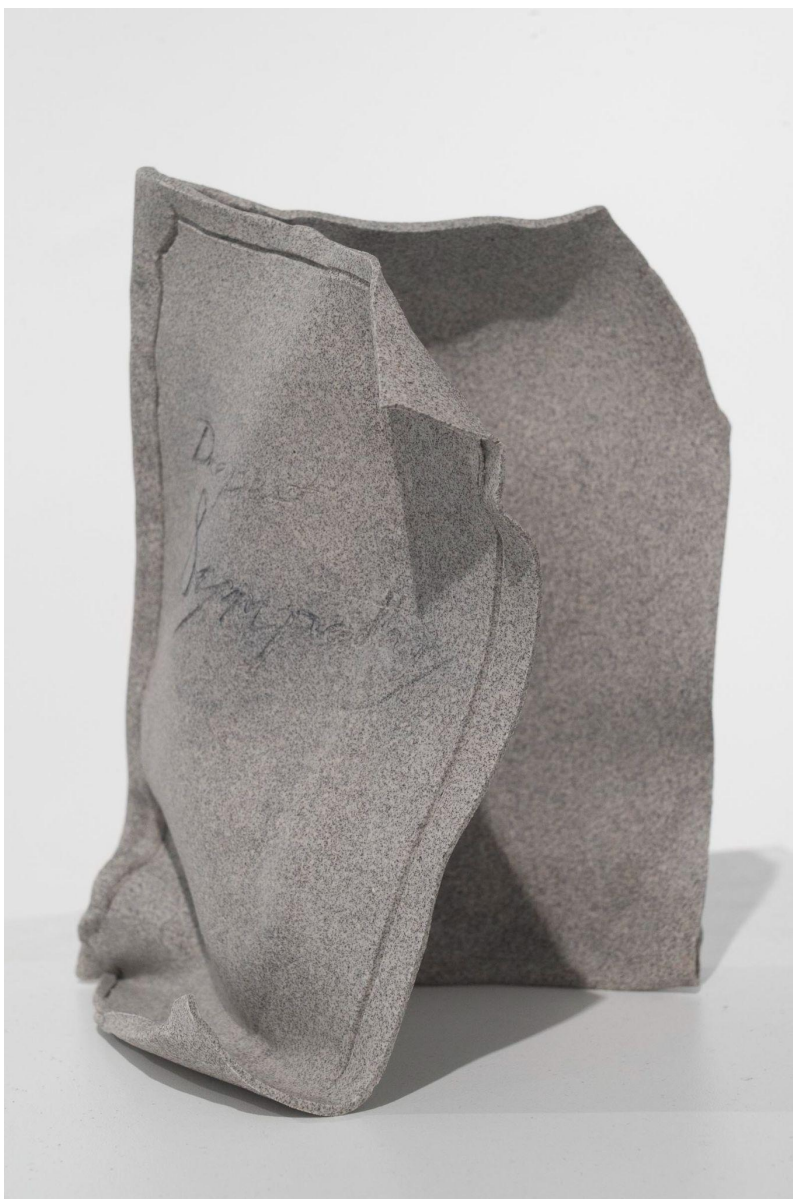


Detail of "Wishbone," 2022



"Crown of Thorns," 2022  
12"x5"  
Glazed stoneware





"Deepest Sympathy," 2022  
13"x6"  
Unglazed stoneware



"Nest," 2022  
12"x7"  
Glazed stoneware



Artist in the exhibition "Without These Things, I Would Be Invisible" 2022