

Text to accompany "Loss and Memory " website
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For most of us, at some stage in the months after our parents die, there is a black plastic bag lying in the corner. It is half full, slack, inert, the lip facing outward. Clearly, it is not ready to be tied at the top and thrown out yet, it is waiting for more. It is easy then to make a ruthless sweep of the mantelpiece, take everything, the clock that stopped, the tiny ash-tray that was never used, the calendar with a separate square of cardboard for each date, each day, each year, and has not been changed for a long time. There is no point in checking now how long ago it was changed. It is not hard to make it disappear. That is what the black bag is for. A clean sweep

This is the very machinery of grief, the walking into the well-used room and looking at the objects, useless now and slight and sad and over and done with. These are the things no one ever thought about. Once, they were nothing compared to the vastly warm human presence which gave them meaning. Now they are brimful of ironic meanings, little worn things in bad taste, or old taste and, of course, dead taste.

It is these small things at the bottom of the wardrobe, on the mantelpiece, in the drawer or on the dressing table that are laden with grief. It's the shoes under the bed, full of lived worn life, the belt, the little figurine, the frayed box, the purse, the handbag. How can these things be simply swept away?

I have gone there twice now, to the upstairs room over the optician's shop. I met her father once and have a sharp memory of his warm, welcoming, bustling, vivid presence. She says that I might have met her mother too, but her mother would have stayed in the background.

Amelia Stein has always loved to photograph still objects or still people, with traces of light and glamour and theatrical power. But she has loved the darkness behind these objects and figures just as much.

I realise as she puts the new photographs on the floor that she has taken them to save her life. Unlike the rest of us, she did not have to use a black plastic bag to sweep away the objects when her parents died. She had her camera, her eye, her desperate need to honour and preserve.

These are her parents' belongings and she has photographed them as though they too are disappearing. There is a sense of a mysterious darkness beyond each object, and a sense of encroaching darkness around them even, so that sometimes there is just one bar of light, or one tiny space that shines. She shows me each thing, and even after all this artful capturing of her parents' small possessions, naming what she has photographed and what they meant is precious time for her.

She talks about her father with light in her eyes, points to the photograph of the cups he won for table tennis, which no one could stop a Jewish man playing, no need for exclusive clubs like tennis or golf. She goes and gets photographs of his boxing days and his boxing friends. And then the little weights he used to keep fit to the end of his days. And his belt - so neatly coiled, he was so neat. And his shaving brushes that won't be needed now.

Her father's ebullience and his zest for life make it easy to talk about him. But her mother was different, and Amelia becomes much sadder when she talks about her mother. She gives the impression that the marks her mother made on the world were deep, albeit private marks, albeit in a limited circle. Here are her mother's gardening tools, with the string attached so they could be hung up; here are her purses for

travelling so that she could keep the currencies apart; here are her cooking utensils; here is the box she kept for cards; here, strangely, are the tiny knitted baby shoes she kept. She was so orderly and careful. Even if you opened a drawer that was hers, she would know it had been disturbed even if you touched nothing.

These photographs dramatise the mystery and ambiguity of things that once were full of meaning and usefulness and hope even, and now would not be missed. They have a withdrawn air, as though they did not expect too much from the future. But just now, in these moments when Amelia Stein photographed them, they have an odd, embattled dignity and a fierce presence. They are part of the urge to create a monument to those she has loved, to hold time still for a moment in a dim, sad light.