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OPA'S SUIT

MEMORIES IN PERSPECTIVE

A written component presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Design in Fashion Design at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

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ABSTRACT

The ability of clothing to retain a sense of person enables memories to be reinterpreted and a person brought 'back to life'. *Opa's Suit, Memories in Perspective* is an investigation into the memories attached to clothing of lost loved ones, looking to the presence of absence for its ability to transport us through time. A multi-dimensional examination of the jacket has provided a new understanding of the importance of absence and space in the interpretation of memories inspired through clothing. This study of memories in clothing proposes that what is lost is as relevant to design as what is left behind.

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CLOTHES HAVE NO MEMORY

BEVERLY PAGRAM

Pagram, Beverly. "Clothes Have No Memory." *A Second Skin. Women Write About Clothes.* Ed. Kirsty Dunseath. London: The Women's Press, 1998. 79-83.

We fought over it, the lace dress. I'd seen it first, you see, in the window of the charity shop. Looking for all the world like black ice ferns sewn together, it trailed forlornly over an old-fashioned dressmaker's dummy in between a basket of corsets and a mound of sad handbags.
'I'm having that,' I announced briskly as we went into the fug of the shop from the sletty street.

Fluorescent lighting and walls covered in aluminium baking-foil certainly didn't do the clientele or the clothes any favours at the used goods emporium belonging to the Little Sisters of Perpetual Redemption. The scruffy, shuffling masses seemed pale and luminous as if they had just arrived from a distant, depressed planet. The donated clothes and accessories – the usual mix of dodgy nylon wigs, vast nylon housecoats and Polynesian-themed shirts, lay about unappealingly in the irradiating dazzle. Over this alien scene presided Mrs Zolinda, a minute Armenian lady who wore a towering bun and many religious armlets. She fancied herself as a sort of nun-by-proxy, and on many of our previous visits searching for elusive sumptuous stuffs among the acrylic cardies, scuffed boots and plates of tangled beads like mournful eyeballs, she dropped to the ground in prayer without warning.

'Mrs Zolinda has fainted!' you cried the first time this happened, ferreting about for the varnished manageress in the swivelling islands of musty ex-nursing home daywear. Located by a barrage of Hail Marys issuing mysteriously from behind an ankle length chenille garment, Mrs Zolinda finished her orisons by petitioning

the Almighty that 'this nice two gels finds zomesing verry nice right now,' and making an extravagant sign of the cross with a rosaried claw-hand.

Strangely enough we almost always did. Assorted acts of grace allowed us to find a crystalline diamante necklace in the pocket of a plastic mac; a 1940s crepe blouse with tiny shimmering buttons; a wonderfully sleazy tit revealing jumper in mauve mohair; a flared skirt emboldened with cobalt-blue tulips; a shellwork brooch in the shape of a ship. Usually we shared these finds out equally and affably, taking it in turns when we both spotted the same treasure at the same time. Not on this occasion, however.

I went to Mrs Zolinda's counter, with its stern sign "IN THE INTERESTING OF HYGENICS PLEASE KEEP ON YOUR PANTS! IN THE CHANGE ROOM' to ask her to take the black lace dress out of the window. Unfortunately she was irritably busy, wrapping some beige acrylic trews and a copy of 'Karmic Kooking' for a leather-skinned gent wearing a flight bag from a long defunct airline across his chest-exposing shirt. It was then that you appeared breathlessly behind me, with the gossamer black dress over your arm, if you please.
'I climbed in the window to get it. I'm having it. I know it's your turn. I'm sorry. I've got to have it!' you whispered stridently, fixing me with a baleful glare.
'Pardon me?'
'I said I'm having it!' Your eyes glittered dangerously, your skin was damp and pale. 'I *need* it!'

Mrs Zolinda attempted to lighten the ensuing insufferable silence by calling on us to remember the unbeatable generosity of Our Lord and offering me *gratis*, by way of compensation, a mother-of-pearl and cork diorama of the shrine at Lourdes, bearing

the entreaty: MARY SAVE US. I regret to say it was refused ungraciously.

When we got outside the shop the weather had cleared, the sky a pellucid pale grey. I continued my sulk as we waited for the bus, and you unwisely prattled on about your new purchase. It was in a dream last week, you related, that you'd seen this actual papery dress, so when you saw it in the charity shop you just had to have it.

'You said yourself that the reason we go to charity shops is not just for reasons of economy, but because the older things have unknown past lives, secret histories...'
'Bullshit', I said. 'They're just dead ladies draperies. Clothes have no memory. You just wanted that atticky old frock because you thought it looked rather special and it gives you exquisite pleasure not to let me have it.'
I told her the dress almost certainly wouldn't fit over her big bum cheeks. That it looked like a pile of flies in a coma.
'Anyway. Who was wearing it in your dream? The Princess of Darkness?'
'Just a woman,' you muttered. 'I couldn't see her face. Only her back.'

Dream schmeam, I thought later that night when just to annoy me you wore the dress to the pub. Even teamed incongruously with a denim jacket there was no denying that it looked fabulous. The voluminous shadowy lace skirt swirled and eddied about, momentarily shrouding seated imbibers in a nocturnal fog. The sleeves were long filigree tubes, the architecture of the bodice a poem of intricate web-like stitchery. Sly smiles of triumph were forthcoming from your direction.

For a while you wore it constantly, usually in congruous settings like parks, supermarkets and inconsequential midsummer parties, where its glamorous dark presence always drew confused and/or admiring glances. Then one day it got torn, the delicate veining of the lace shockingly wounded, its quiveringly surprised criss-cross edges smeared with dank green from the elder twigs that had rent them asunder.
'I can't wear it now. It's spoiled. The magic's gone.'
'Don't be daft. Take it to one of those Invisible Menders places,' I said. 'It'll be as good as new.'

Of course I knew that this wasn't true, and gradually I grew used to not seeing that frock at all. We went back to Mrs Zolinda's and bought a consolation skirt in rippling pleated ruby silk, with only the tiniest scorch mark near the waistband.
'To tell you the truth I was getting fed up with that dress,' you confided. 'I handwashed it carefully several times but I could never get rid of its strange odour.'
'Odour? Of what?'
'Oh, the usual charity shop pong... plus something else in the background.'
'What exactly?' I asked. In fact I knew exactly what she meant because I had occasionally caught a whiff of this near undetectable scent myself.
'Well... it's a bit musky like patchouli, a bit like cats, a bit like damp earth... a bit like the inside of a very, very old wardrobe. Really, it smells of HER. And that puts me off.'

I assumed that the dress had long since gone out with the rubbish, in fact had almost forgotten its existence, when your sudden death put me in the position of desolate archaeologist, conservator, and chucker-outer of some of your more ephemeral effects. Drifting between shadowy, sparsely furnished rooms I

felt drawn to a trunk in the corner. It was full of fabrics, mostly badly spotted with damp and hosting silverfish. Underneath the vivid violet-blue dragon silk, a gift from Beijing lay a black rag – the tight frenzied loops of its lace forced into droopy fish-scale shapes by the depradations of countless moth children. It was really just an idea of a dress now... a neckband, waistband, hem and cuffs just joined by confused tightropes of cotton. There was just one strip undamaged, and with a snip of scissors I freed it for ever.

I wear it as a scarf occasionally. Sometimes it seems completely non-perfumatory. On other occasions the sweet-sour aromatics it exudes are overpowering. Remembering what you said about the Dress Woman, I wonder if it is her I am smelling, or you, or both. All I know is that bits of the scarf unravel when I'm out walking, and disappear into the clear, bright air.