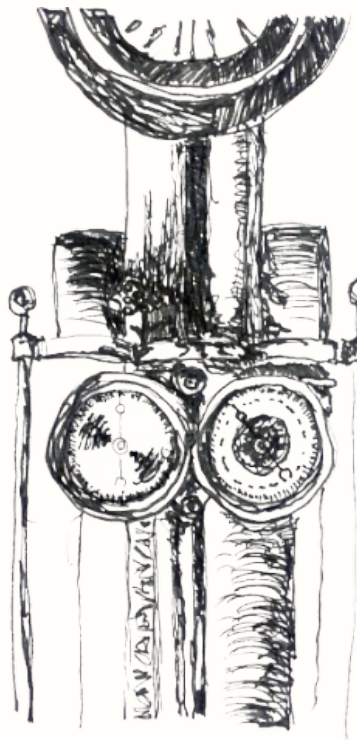




Jewellery as Memory
Charlotte Chase

There Will Come Soft Rains
Chloë Eia Hancock

Sennen Cove (illustration)
Chloë Eia Hancock

CHARLOTTE CHASE

Jewellery as Memory

The revered fragments of a saintly body, a treasured lock of a loved one's hair, suspended ashes in a resin pendant: each of these objects share the common goal of perpetuating the consciousness of the deceased, to preserve presence in the face of loss. Whether worn or held, displayed or concealed, these items render the abstract tangible in their capacity to invoke memories and sensations through material form.

In *Death, Memory and Material Culture*, Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey argue that material forms such as memorial jewellery function as externalised memory objects, sustaining connections between personal experience and cultural expression.¹ Positioned between materiality, memory, and loss, these objects are not merely passive repositories of sentiment but actively participate in shaping their identity through both embodied and affective engagement. As fragments of a lost whole, such objects evoke presence through absence, operating as sites where emotion and memory are embodied. The wearing or handling of these pieces cultivates a tactile relationship that entwines the body of the living with the memory of the deceased, an 'interplay of embodied action and material objects' that reawakens memory through physical intimacy.² Memory emerges not as a stable cognitive process but something shaped through ongoing interaction with physical objects which are themselves interwoven into wider cultural and historical processes.

By focusing on the interplay between materiality, affect, and innovation, this study examines both the continuity and the refashioning of bodily commemorative practices, from medieval relics to contemporary 'ashes jewellery'. Central to this inquiry is the tension between authenticity and representation: how is an often reconfigured or insignificant fragment able to compensate for an identifiable whole? Does efficaciousness rely on visual or emotional imperatives? How do

synthetic materials challenge traditional practices of bodily representation? And finally, how have social and technological developments shaped the creation of tangible forms of memory?

I. Medieval Relics as Memory Objects

The relic, more than a simple vessel of remembrance, emerged in Christian practice over the third and fourth centuries. Ranging from scraps of fabric to corporeal remains, these objects were often obtained through pilgrimage, reconfiguring sacred geography into objects that could be possessed, displayed, and worn. Both corporeal fragments or contact relics, defined as items sanctified through a saint's touch or possession, worked as active mediators between sacred history and lived experience. As Julia Smith notes in 'Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West (c.700–1200)', these physical reminders gave 'palpable form to the holy', enabling believers to see beyond the mundane and merge past, present, and future within the material framework of devotional life.³ Smith pinpoints the relic's enduring power in its 'incompleteness, indeterminacy, and portability', qualities that transform its function from a static symbol to a dynamic trigger for devotional engagement.⁴

These qualities are not merely functional but temporal. The relic's ambiguous materiality positions it at the threshold of memory and oblivion, where what has been lost stubbornly retains its power. As Annabel Wharton suggests, the relic is best understood as a remnant of a threatened history, a fragment that collapses time and evokes the absent whole.⁵ As a fragment of what is materially dead yet devotionally active, the relic carries an intangible resonance through the very fact of its survival. For both Smith and Wharton, the relic is situated within a suspended temporality in which presence and absence are contemporaneous.

This ability of the relic to 'record duration and postpone oblivion' emphasises its mnemonic function, drawing attention to the performative nature of memory itself.⁶ Within medieval thought, memory was not understood solely as a passive act of recall, but also an active process of recollection shaped through material and sensory

engagement. External objects played a crucial role in this process, stabilising mental impressions and enabling recollection through physical association. In this sense, memory was constructed through interaction with the material world rather than stored independently of it.

Regardless of format, relics are not just symbols of memory but carry memory as a physically persistent presence, with material endurance strengthening their mnemonic function, embedding remembrance within substance itself. At the same time, this endurance operates in tension with fragmentation. Relics are powerful precisely because they are incomplete: fragmentary by nature, they function through metaphor or synecdoche, standing in for an integral whole that can never be fully recovered.⁷ Their mnemonic force lies not in totality, but in the sustained negotiation between what remains and what has been lost.

The desire to both honour and inhabit the sacred past also shaped the physical form of relics themselves. Many were housed in miniature reliquary pendants or rings designed to be worn close to the skin, shifting them from static jewelled objects of display to mobile, intimate carriers of presence. This portability, as Smith notes, transformed faith into tangible fragments integrated within the normality of everyday life.⁸ Often encased in gilded materials such as gold and gemstones, reliquaries not only protected their sacred contents but also elevated them, transforming relics into prestigious objects that allegorically invoked virtue.

The relic's agency, arising from its perception as an animate object empowered by divine presence, was intensified by physical proximity to the believer.⁹ This proximity asserted both a devotional and functional significance. Relics acquired sanctity through public ritual, a process that transformed 'mere human remains' into miraculous agents and affirmed both their saintly identity and spiritual potency.¹⁰ Once consecrated, a system of reciprocal exchange was established: intercession given, and veneration received. The efficacy of relics, therefore, did not reside in inherent power alone but in ritual recognition and embodied interaction, reconstructing them as

relational agents with the ability to mediate between the living and the dead.

Relics thus functioned as material anchors of memory, mirroring mnemonic systems that relied on physical locations to organise knowledge, and ensuring the continuous remembrance of the sacred. By transforming bodily remains into portable, wearable objects, medieval reliquary jewellery operated as wearable memorial shrines, aligning closely with structured models of memory in which material form is central to the act of remembering. Further, reliquaries could move between various social settings, from private devotion to public ritual. Worn around the neck or set into brooches and belts, these vessels of sacred memory constituted a dynamic and mobile part of the social and spiritual fabric of medieval life.

II. Victorian Mourning Jewellery: Secular Relics

The transformation of the relic from an object of sacred veneration existing within a shared and codified signifying system to a more intimate and secular form of remembrance marks a significant shift in the cultural life of material memory. Deborah Lutz traces this transition to the end of the Elizabethan age when human remains from ordinary individuals began to be incorporated into jewellery.¹¹ Whilst these commemorative objects, often crafted from human hair, could function as sentimental tokens of friendship, familial affection, or love, they became increasingly utilised within mourning practices from the eighteenth century onward, culminating in the highly codified grief culture of Victorian Britain. Although the exaggerated grief and prolonged public bereavement of Queen Victoria after the death of Prince Albert was exceptional in its intensity, it nonetheless came to exemplify Victorian ideals of grief, securing the image of the eternal widow as a cultural model. This shift marks not a rupture with earlier relic traditions, but a reorientation of their mnemonic and affective functions within a secular framework, where remembrance became increasingly personalised and domestic rather than liturgical or communal.

The Victorian period witnessed a wide-ranging proliferation of death-related memory objects, from collected teeth to post-mortem photography, yet hair retained a particular potency. Bridging the living and the deceased through their intimate proximity to the body, hair jewellery became a socially sanctioned way to materialise death. Whilst this practice originated as a seventeenth-century marker of elite status, the transformation of hair jewellery into an industrialised product saw it enter the domestic sphere in the guise of an everyday handicraft. Hairwork patterns infiltrated manuals and newspapers, instructing the bereaved in how to fabricate their own memorial objects. Deriving significance from emotional and biographical proximity rather than liturgical authority, these relics functioned as private records of loss rather than public affirmations of faith. Yet despite this movement away from religious doctrine, these objects continued to operate through structures of belief that granted material fragments the capacity to carry memory, affect, and presence across time.

Despite a shift in terrain, the secularisation of the relic in the Victorian period did not strip it of mnemonic force. Rather, the relic's defining traits, its 'incompleteness, indeterminacy, and portability', are not diminished in mourning jewellery but recontextualised within the intimate architectures of grief.¹² These same qualities, which once enabled the relic to operate as a dynamic trigger of sacred memory, now facilitated secular modes of remembrance that were no less ritualised or affectively charged. As Marcia Pointon argues, hair retains a residual sacrality in its capacity to inspire 'reverence, awe, [and] fear', an agency produced through the same cultural patterns of belief that once imbued the sacred relic with authenticity.¹³

Linking death culture to materiality, Hallam and Hockey analyse how such material objects anchor the dead within mnemonic space: not simply as traces of loss but as performative agents of temporal and emotional continuity.¹⁴ Designed to foreground preservation against decay, mourning objects often highlight their own fragility and limitation, positioning themselves between presence and absence.¹⁵ As Lutz suggests, death not only transforms subjects into objects, but paradoxically animates inanimate things, investing them with

affective and mnemonic charge.¹⁶ For Lutz, these 'fragments of the moment of loss' reflect a deeper Victorian desire to resist death's finality, to capture and preserve the deceased using their own material remains.¹⁷ Moreover, Lutz suggests that concerns over misidentification, intensified by the industrial production of hairwork, reveal how hair jewelry's agency as a memory object was contingent upon its authenticated connection to the deceased.¹⁸

Simultaneously objectifying and incorporating the subject, mourning jewellery operates as a form of secular reliquary or 'micro-museum', one that miniaturises memory while rendering grief portable and embodied.¹⁹ As 'exhibited secrets', there is a tension between visible function and 'hidden story', vital to such objects' mnemonic power, which exposes loss while enclosing it within the private domain of the wearer's body.²⁰ This performative ambiguity, where the fragment becomes both evidence and encryption of grief, prepares the ground for hair's transformation into ornament: a material language that fuses design, mourning and embodied remembrance.

The reworking of body material into designed, contained, and visually coded grief objects finds its most intimate expression in the use of hair. Liminal in nature, hair exists as both an extension of the self and a detachable, durable material that can be manipulated into new forms. Rendering grief visible, tangible, and repeatable with every glance or touch, hair jewellery is an object that never remains static. As Pointon suggests, the very structure of the hair reflects the 'repetitious remembrances of mourning': plaited, woven, or knotted, its looping gestures mirror the cognitive and emotional processes of reliving memories.²¹ Through mourning jewellery, hair is recoded into a new material language that fuses ornamentation with mourning, visual appeal with emotional depth.

From the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth the popularity of mourning jewellery declined as the practice of preserving the remains of the dead fell out of fashion. Overshadowed by a rise in secularism and ineffective in consoling the traumatic aftermath of the First World War, when bodily remains were often unobtainable, Victorian mourning customs collapsed under the strain of mass death.

Not only did the solemn, sentimental vision of death, perpetuated by Victoria's years of public mourning, give way to repression and denial as the death of the 'other' became increasingly distanced and private, but the growing popularity of cremation, which destroys all recognisable physical composition, also contributed to a turn away from Victorian commemorative objects. Further, the development of photography provided alternative means of preservation, gradually replacing bodily relics as dominant memory forms, trading the tactility of flesh for the affective resonance of the image.

Yet rather than signalling an end to mourning jewellery altogether, this decline marks another moment of transformation, as new technological, cultural, and theological frameworks reshaped how memory might be materially sustained.

III. Contemporary Memorial Jewellery: Technological Innovation

Despite its twentieth-century decline following shifting commemorative practices and the rise of digital media, contemporary memory practices reveal a subtle resurgence of memorial jewellery that speaks not to nostalgia, but to evolving needs around permanence, presence, and the body. Whilst technological advancements in photography and social media provide an abundance of digital mementos, their limitations become apparent when compared with physical memory objects. Digital mementos are often perceived as emotionally thin: representational rather than symbolic, rarely accessed, and functioning primarily as unstable memory triggers. By contrast, physical memory objects sustain dense, layered significance, harnessing both representational and abstract values comprehensible only to the owner. The renewed desire for a re-materialisation of memory, in which the body and its material extensions take centre stage, reflects a broader shift in Western memory culture.

As new commemorative objects emerge, incorporating or formed from human remains, this cultural shift becomes evident. The growing demand for the preservation of cremation ashes in intimate

and personal forms signals a movement towards material engagement with the deceased. The incineration of the corpse is no longer understood as a definitive point of physical separation between the dead and the living; rather, the commercialisation of cremation has produced a portable and malleable residue that lends itself to individual custom and private ritual, particularly within the permissive legal frameworks of Britain. As Samantha McCormick notes, the rise of personalised ash-incorporated objects over the past twenty-five years reflects an increasing inclination to locate the cremated dead outside landscapes traditionally associated with burial, internment, and scattering.²²

While these contemporary mourning practices are no longer bound to fixed locations or collective forms of memorialisation, they remain concerned with achieving symbolic coherence. Prendergast et al. affirm that ash objects often seek to restore the deceased to the familiar boundaries of their former social and emotional worlds, re-integrating them into the ongoing lives of the living.²³ In this respect, ashes jewellery does not abandon earlier memorial logics but adapts them to a context shaped more by individualisation and consumer choice than ever before.

The impersonal reduction to an unrecognisable base material during cremation offers a provoking perspective on the materiality and identity of bodily remains as memory objects. Just as Victorian hair jewellery utilised a physical fragment to invoke presence in the face of absence, contemporary ashes jewellery functions through a similar logic of bodily extension. However, unlike hair jewellery, which preserved a recognisable and unambiguous body part that was visibly continuous with the deceased, cremation ashes are materially indistinct and virtually indistinguishable. This lack of recognisability threatens the traditional association between bodily remains and individual identity, an ontological conflict, as McCormick notes, amplified by the 'uniformity of modern creation'.²⁴

Yet death paradoxically transforms subjects into objects, while animating matter with affective and mnemonic force. Cremation ashes occupy an ambiguous position: neither fully person nor inert

substance, but what Williams describes as a ‘potent mnemonic material’, at once human and formless.²⁵ Their amorphous and anonymous nature may weaken visual markers of individuality, but it simultaneously enhances their capacity to function as vessels of projected affection. Possessing the formlessness and flow of a liquid while remaining bone dry, ashes offer a material openness that accommodates a wide range of commemorative forms.

Rather than preserving identity through physical recognisability, ashes objects reassert individuality through narrative attachment. Those providing these ashes-objects turn away from notions of commodification by emphasising the bespoke craftsmanship of commissioned pieces, highlighting the singularity of the creation process. Ashes-object practices in the Netherlands corroborate this conclusion, with producers often labelling their products as having ‘relic-like qualities’, invoking a special status that distances them from mass-produced commercial goods.²⁶

Sørensen’s concept of ‘commemorative subjectification’, in which he proposes that contemporary memorial forms have a tendency to become a reflection of the mourner’s own emotional relationship to the deceased, rather than the deceased’s formalised social identity, can be applied to further illuminate this distinction.²⁷ Ashes creations do not merely commemorate and preserve the dead but serve as mirrors—reflecting the absence of the deceased and ‘a pre-mediated emotional sense of nearness’ in the bereaved.²⁸ This merged identity-space is born from the amplified intimacy of a relational proximity that is private, often ineffable, and unlike its predecessors, resistant to public codification. Ashes objects exceed the function of memorials; they function as active agents, capable of assuming and sustaining the personhood of the deceased within the ongoing lives of the living. In doing so, they resist clear ontological boundaries, occupying both subject and object positions simultaneously.

This intimacy becomes further complicated when considering the distinction in materials between varying forms of ashes jewellery. While cremation jewellery functions as a container, housing ashes as a tangible residue of the body, ashes jewellery fuses cremated remains

into a new material substance, typically by integrating them into resin, glass or synthetic stones.²⁹ A crucial difference between ashes and earlier mourning materials like hair lies in their origin: while hair can be cut during life or after death, ashes always derive from the whole corpse. This irreversible process reshapes the material conditions of memory. Following Brown's notion that the fragmented saintly body altered the materiality of its reliquary container to perform the 'fullness of the invisible person', McCormick argues that in ashes-jewellery, the cremated dead do not simply dwell within an object but are materially reconstituted through it, enabling their humanity to permeate the blended material.³⁰ Heessels et al. similarly emphasise the continuities between ashes jewellery and religious relics, identifying shared qualities of uniqueness, tangibility, proximity, and emotional charge.³¹ Contemporary ashes jewellery therefore represents not a rupture from earlier mourning practices, but a reconfiguration of their material logic—one that privileges intimacy, narrative, and affect over visual continuity.

IV. Ashes to Diamonds: Authenticity vs Representation

Promoted as tangible memories, sensory immediacy is a vital quality to ashes-jewellery. Heessels et al. observe that this tactile nature provides comfort to the bereaved and, through continued contact, functions as a material continuation of a bond.³² Mourning jewellery historically allowed the bereaved to choose the level of visibility or concealment—for example, locks of hair could be openly displayed or held privately. This flexibility preserved the intimacy of the object while allowing selective revelation.

By contrast, many forms of ashes-jewellery forgo this flexibility. For example, memorial diamonds, formed in laboratories under intense pressure and heat, transform ashes into a new synthetic element, visually and materially unrecognisable as the deceased. Without a familiar visual trigger, their significance, therefore, resides in attached narratives, invoked through the embodied experience of the wearer, as presence is felt rather than seen. Resin objects, however, offer a different mode of engagement. Whilst some ashes objects suggest the preservation of a visible trace, as ashes are suspended in clear or

coloured resin, the extent to which these remains are recognisable varies significantly. Fragment size, density and colour differ due to the unpredictable nature of the process and the aesthetic choice of the customer, allowing for varying degrees of visibility and personalisation. This variability reinforces the need for sensory intimacy, with ashes objects frequently being polished to enhance their active comforting effect. Even when ashes are partially visible, their meaning remains privately coded, unrecognisable to outsiders and intimately bound to personal memory. Unlike the religious relic, and to some extent Victorian hair jewellery, the identity of ashes-jewellery as an object of mourning remains private and hidden.

The variety of ashes creations available today not only cater for differing aesthetic preferences but also varying economic conditions. Resin-based objects, for example, offer a more accessible alternative to diamonds, both in terms of technical process and cost. In this sense, resin objects echo the widespread uptake of hair jewellery in the Victorian period, when manuals and ready-made lockets enabled more inclusive forms of material memory-making, though still largely confined to the middle and upper classes. The contemporary spread of ashes-creations across studios, workshops, and even domestic spaces suggests a similar accessibility to mourning, enabled by permissive legal frameworks and the growth of small-scale artisanship.

Memorial diamonds present a different mode of memorialisation, prioritising material permanence and symbolic resilience; marketed as 'eternal', they offer a durable, tangible object that counters the transience of loss.³³ Whilst other ashes-creations seek to conceal their contents within decoration, keeping grief intimate and individual, memorial diamonds pursue a more polished aesthetic agenda. The success of these objects depends on their capacity to sustain a sense of presence, highlighting the relational nature of memory objects: emotional resonance emerges from associations constructed between mourner and material. Thus, while the unique results of diamond production fulfil personalisation desires, they also risk emotional dissonance.

The unpredictable outcome of the creation process, far less

controllable than with resin-based objects, introduces a variability that can complicate essential emotional connection to the final product. As the value of a finished diamond is inherently linked to its capacity to conjure the deceased for the bereaved, variations in colour are capable of strengthening or threatening symbolic weight depending on perceived associations. The aesthetic appearance of the memorial diamond is shown to directly affect its function as a mnemonic object, as beauty in the eyes of its beholder becomes inseparable from embedded emotional intimacy, reinforcing Sørensen's notion of 'commemorative subjectification'.³⁴ Whilst chemical processes can resolve this tension, tailoring the colour to the commissioner's preferences, some companies argue that such manipulation distorts the balance between synthetic and natural, and, consequently, further distances the connection to the deceased.³⁵ Drawing on Gell's argument of object agency, the memorial diamond exemplifies his notion of agency not as intrinsic but relational—dependent on the emotional, symbolic, and contextual associations that shape its perception.³⁶ Therefore, it is the recognition of these associations, provoked by the diamond's physical appearance as a material extension of the deceased, that spark interaction and agency. Whilst resin-based creations lend themselves flexibly to contemporary needs for personalisation, memorial diamonds expose the tensions between individualisation and emotional authenticity.

Moreover, the tension between 'natural' and 'artificial', central to the discourse surrounding 'lab-grown' diamonds, is particularly pronounced in the context of memorial diamonds, which blur the boundaries between the organic and the synthetic. Whilst their molecular likeness is identical to that of a mined diamond, memorial diamonds, they report, are often viewed as more 'real' than natural counterparts, as their human origin adds a dimension of authenticity through symbolic memory. As Calvão and Bell argue, by 'literally', 'figuratively', and 'materially embodying the deceased', these objects recast 'the relation between death and life'.³⁷ This raises the question of whether the 'realness' of a memorial diamond depends on its material composition, or rather the emotional and symbolic meaning it acquires through the act of memorialisation. A useful comparison lies in hair jewellery, where emotional power was hinged on the belief that

the hair belonged to a specific, irreplaceable individual. As Lutz notes, fears of substitution by unscrupulous jewellers reveal the extent to which perceived material authenticity was vital in the symbolic function of the memorial object.³⁸ Similarly, memorial diamonds rely on a belief in bodily origin; lacking visual confirmation of identity, the tendency to seek resemblance in aesthetic appearance is reinforced, and emotional resonance depends on the claim that the carbon used during creation was sourced from the deceased. Thus, although it is the symbolic meaning of the diamond that carries its emotional weight, it must be underpinned by a credible material connection to the deceased to retain its potency as an authentic memory object.

Ashes jewellery fulfills the enduring human need for material presence in the face of loss. Malleable, mobile, and relational, these objects demonstrate that memory efficacy is shaped as much by belief, narrative, and tactile engagement as by material continuity. Authenticity remains central: without a credible connection to the deceased, the object loses its potency as a mnemonic vessel. Contemporary ashes jewellery, like its historical antecedents, shows that the emotional and symbolic value of memorial objects resides as much in the lived engagement of the bereaved as in the materials themselves.

V. Towards a New Age?

Across religious relics, Victorian mourning jewellery, and contemporary ashes objects, the impulse to preserve memory through bodily material has proven remarkably persistent, even as the forms and meanings of that material have shifted. From bone and blood to hair, ash, and synthetic substitutes, each historical moment reconfigures the relationship between body, matter, and remembrance. What endures is not a specific material, but the desire to sustain presence in the face of absence through tangible means. Medieval reliquary pendants anchored memory in divine presence, fusing the sacred with the corporeal. Engaging scent and touch, they transformed memory into a physical performance capable of substantiating absence through sensory immediacy. Their efficacy lay not only in their materiality, but in the shared ritual beliefs that

validated the relic as a site of spiritual authority. The Victorian period secularised this performative function, internalising grief and substituting the collective for the individual. Mourning jewellery brought consolatory remembrance into the domestic and emotional realm whilst retaining a focus on the recognisable, preserved fragment. This tradition persists into contemporary practice, albeit with significantly altered material composition. The transformation of the body into formless ash has not destroyed the impulse for materialisation, but has instead reconfigured it into new bespoke objects that privilege intimacy, narrative, and touch. This shift addresses the perceived inadequacies of digital memory by anchoring remembrance in tangible forms that merge subject and object, presence and absence.

Bodily remains possess emotional power because they materialise memory, anchoring personal and collective loss in physical form. Such fragments condense absence into presence, functioning as agents of remembrance. Authenticity, in this sense, is not fixed in material substance alone, but emerges through cultural belief, emotional investment, and trust in provenance. Synthetic memory objects, from resin to diamonds, challenge traditional relic practises by demonstrating that memory efficacy is not tied exclusively to visible identity, instead representation is embodied through form, narrative, and symbolism. The enduring power of these objects lies not in what they are made of, but in what they enable us to remember, feel, and perpetuate.

The expanding landscape of digital commemorative practices, increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, now looms over traditional material habits of remembrance. Early work on 'digital immortalisation', notably Savin-Baden and Burden's study of 'virtual personas', anticipated a future in which identity might be assumed and developed post-death, challenging both established attachment patterns and the perceived finality of death itself.³⁹ More recent research, including Fabrizio Degni's analysis of contemporary mourning culture, suggests that such technologies do more than preserve memory; they actively reshape how relationships with the dead are imagined and sustained.⁴⁰ Whether through chatbots or

virtual simulations, digital likeness blurs the boundary between memory and artifice, raising unresolved questions of authenticity, ethical responsibility, and grief.

Yet despite increasing abstraction, historical precedent suggests that the desire for physical, touchable remains continues to structure how memory is made. Across periods marked by profound technological and cultural change, remembrance repeatedly returns to material form. Even as virtual media offer ever more refined simulations of presence, the physical object retains a distinctive affective power, operating as a counterweight to the volatility and ephemerality of digital life. From relics and hairwork to resin and cremation diamonds, memorial jewellery demonstrates that the interplay between materiality, memory, and technology remains a vital site of cultural negotiation—one in which absence is continually reworked into presence through substance, touch, and belief.

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CHLOË EIA HANCOCK

There Will Come Soft Rains

Mother died yesterday. She lived through the rise of the oceans that swallowed up the shoreline and made our little town coastal. She always joked that she could never afford a shorefront property, so she made the sea come to her. She said it was like watching a bath run and run and overflow all over the bathroom floor and leak down the radiator pipes into the neighbours living room. Most of the houses on the coast now are the beginnings and ends of small towns that were further inland; we live on the new coast just outside of Cambridge.

People knew that things would be bad when the ocean started to edge further and further inland. But no one guessed that when the ground became saturated, things would start to move around. The earth spat out years of things buried. Every graveyard on the coast of England turned into a fleet of floating caskets, waves bringing them back to shore. At first, the tops of submerged buildings a few miles offshore were used to offer our dead to the weather and the birds. Then tall towers were built on top of them—"towers of silence". Giant and peaceful, dotted around the country.

Mother's favourite place was Sennen in Cornwall, where the first of the towers were built. We are taking her body there today. In her will she left me her little finger. When we shave her head before the offering, I'll keep some of her hair and weave it into a bracelet with a few of her bones. We will prepare her body today and drive down the coast to Sennen tomorrow. The undertakers came to our house and bled her;

this usually happens before travel to the site. It doesn't hurt to see her like this, the body is not my mother anymore.

...

Driving down the coast reminded me of the trips we used to go on when I was a kid. A dozen more sky platforms had been built between Cambridge and Sennen; the sea was calm, and the towers looked pretty in-between the wind farms and sailing boats. The sky was pale blue. The birds circled around a tower a few miles away as we passed the New Exeter Shoreline.

The sun was high when we pulled up to the site. She told me all about this place when I was young. It was built with a viewing deck, which was a big part of educating people who, at first, rejected the burials. Most people my age have been to the Sennen funeral home. We read stories in school about the birds carrying us into the sky after we die. Later we learnt about the work of local birds in burial and how they do their own sort of pollinating, bringing our flesh back to whatever part of the ecosystem they know needs nourishment. The stories always made me feel close to the seagulls that hung around car parks, and the starling that used to sit on my window in the Autumn and bask in the winter sun until joining its friends in murmuration when it was time to roost. I remember walking along the coast with my mother and going inside the funeral home for the first time. The smell of the birds, the smell of the grass and cows on the wind from the farms to the north. I held her hand.

Celebrations of life happen after the body is offered to the birds. Favourite songs are sung, and people dance. The dead person's clothes are given to their family and friends. Every bit left over is passed down in memoriam. We got out of the car and the attendants helped my

father carry my mother's body into the building. I carried a box with her precious knick-knacks and favourite CDs. Her friends and the rest of our family met us at the door. They blew kisses to her as she was carried past. The celebration started. We cried and embraced, laughed and sang. My father left the room to score her body. We went out and sat on the cliff with a view of the beach, watching them deliver her body to the platform. We ate fish and chips and ice cream from her favourite chip shop with the platform in the distance and the birds flying in. Masses of them. Circling overhead and then swooping down. Some carried lumps of flesh to feed fledglings in nests nearby. The sun was setting, I looked over at my father and held his hand.

