Writing the Stories of My Life: Remembering Through Fashion (or, at the very least, clothes)

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Fashion is a reflection of the time (Anna Wintour editor of Vogue)

Dress like you are going to meet your worst enemy today (Coco Chanel)

I don’t design clothes I design dreams (Ralph Lauren)

We all have a story to tell. Often we think of a life story or memoir as a chronology of events. However, knowing where to begin can become so overwhelming that we put off writing the story at all. This is an invitation to re-collect, record and share the stories from your life through the lens of “fashion”. Our clothes are full of stories, full of history and memories. Are there pieces in your cupboard, stuffed away into your drawers and folded in plastic that you cannot give away? Do you still have clothes from when you were little? Maybe your mother’s shawl, your father’s hat? What are the stories behind the uniforms you had to wear? What clothes protect you, what clothes make you laugh and what clothes make you look at life in a different way? What is the story behind your childhood clothing? What were the best ten items of clothing you owned and wore in your 20’s, 30’s, 40’s, 50’s…Let’s not even start with the shoes! Please bring your own writing instruments to a safe environment where you will experiment with writing strategies using prompts, share your writing with others, and begin your collection of life-stories.

A Short Short Story – The Clothes

By Oliver Miller, January 31s

The Clothes

There came the day when our clothes started to walk around without us, running our errands, going to our office jobs, conducting our meaningless love affairs. We had always distrusted inanimate objects in general: the broken staircase; the kitchen table that had it in for you, always banging your elbow; the bicycle rack that let your bicycle clatter to the ground — but we had trusted our clothes, for they had always seemed a part of us, in a sense; garments that bore the very contours and indentations of our bodies.

But now, they were walking around without us like mannequins, strolling the boulevards like automatons. They abandoned us, our clothes did, became sentient, started lives of their own. Pompous and proud, they strolled the avenues, needing no human bodies to support them.

…And so without our clothes, we were left to confront the very nature of our bodies, so pale and lumpy and misshapen, we had almost forgotten, they had been hidden for so long — and even the best-looking of us did not look so very good in the middle of the day, in the direct glaring sunlight. …And so without our clothes, we began to hide. Without our clothes, we were left to our own devices; shy and trembling; tunneling through a naked world — wishing that we could hug one another for comfort but entirely too uncomfortable to do so.
**Notes to Review Before Each Class**

- This is a memoir based writing class in which we write through the lens of fashion (clothes, accessories) to find and isolate, remember and recollect and finally write the stories that best show who we were, why we did what we did, who we are and who we are becoming.
- Unlike autobiography and biography that are linear in shape, memoir can take the shape of any written form including personal essay, poetry, vignettes.
- Regardless, memoir, auto and bio all fall under the umbrella of “narrative inquiry” – research that honors life stories as a way of better understanding why we do what we do.
- Rules of the Course: Keep everything and honor your writing/stories, everything gets a title, don’t overthink anything, make the course work for you.
- As much as you can develop a ritual of the course – while we meet once a week, our class is the “gravy” your daily writing is the meat and potatoes (or lentils and potatoes) of the course.
- What I can do for you: provide structure and design – ways of thinking about HOW you might go about collecting your stories using writing strategies such as brainstorming to generate ideas, freewriting as a way of generating stories, sharing as a way of moving from writing for ourselves to writing for others.
- Writing for Ourselves/Writing for Others – personal, poetic/transactional
- While we are writing for ourselves as soon as we share we tiptoe from one category to the next.
- Sometimes our unique stories shed light on a shared experience.

**Writing:**

- While this is not a writing course we all want to be more engaging, imaginative and clever writers so to improve: READ LIKE A WRITER, WRITE OFTEN AND WITH ABANDON, PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR VERBS, PUT IT OUT THERE.
- As much as you can, create a daily writing ritual. You have been provided with at least 5 prompts per week – try and write for 15-20 minutes on each of the prompts.
- Choose one piece of writing that you will share with the class. The piece should be about 600 words in length. If you have written a longer piece, simply choose a section to share.
- I will listen and give feedback and encourage you to be active listeners of writing (not story) ie what do writers DO, how do they SHOW instead of TELL, not what they say.
- Go for the small, the unique, what is truly yours and thus authentic.
- Keep the photographs.

**Sharing:**

- Let the writing speak for itself.
- NO preamble, NO commentary.

MAKE THE COURSE WORK FOR YOU
**Week One: Childhood- from bibs and sleepers to overalls and party dresses, bow ties, hats and shoes**

**Reading**

http://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/dresses.pdf The 100 Dresses by Louis Slobodkin

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/fashion/modern-love-transgender-child-identity-parenting.html From He to She in First Grade by Laurie Frankel

**Writing**

Brainstorm, to the best of your ability, all the pieces of clothing you remember from childhood. School days, weekends, special occasions, clubs, organizations, bed-time, holidays, bathing suits, costumes, spring, summer, fall and winter.

Who chose your clothes, where did you buy your clothes or maybe, who bought your clothes, or maybe they were hand me downs – continue this brainstorm.

Do you have any pieces from your childhood – if so why, if not, why?

What was your first party outfit? Your first “uniform”?

What pieces do you best remember? Which was your favourite? Which was your least favourite?

*Choose one. Why are you attached to this garment? Describe the piece and then, to the best of our memory tell your story – who were you when you were wearing this item? What happened to you while you were wearing it?*

**Week Two: The Teen Years – Becoming Aware: 13-19:**

**Reading**

TEENAGE YEARS

**Expectations**
A big group of friends, sneaking out of the house, my first kiss, late nights under the stars, crying on my best friend's shoulder, passing notes in class, going on adventures, getting out of my town, campfires, telling secrets, feeling what it's like to fall in love for the first time, roadtrips, dance parties, driving around, getting lost, endless laughter, happiest years of my life.

**Reality**
Feeling lonely, staying in, late nights studying for that math test, waking up early, tiredness, school all day and homework all night, being stressed out, college applications, trapped in a town I hate, feeling nothing remotely close to love, keeping it all bottled up, crying far too often, spending too much time on the internet, waiting for the better years to come.

**Writing**
The teen years. The firsts of many, the firsts of never agains. You may want to find some tunes from your teen years to play while you dance, saunter, sashay, stride and tred your way back to turning 13.

Brainstorm, to the best of your ability, all the pieces of clothing you remember from your teen years. School days, weekends, special occasions, clubs, organizations, bed-time, holidays, bathing suits, costumes, spring, summer, fall and winter.

Who chose your clothes, where did you buy your clothes or maybe, who bought your clothes, or maybe they were hand me downs – continue this brainstorm.

Do you have any pieces from your teen years – if so why, if not, why?

Did you have rebellious pieces? List them.

How did your mother play a role in your clothing? Who inspired you? Who scared you?

What was your first party outfit? Your first “uniform”? What did you wear to your first dance?

What pieces do you best remember? Which was your favourite? Which was your least favourite?

*Choose one. Why are you attached to this garment? Describe the piece and then, to the best of our memory tell your story – who were you when you were wearing this item? What happened to you while you were wearing it?*

**Week 3: Becoming an Adult and still becoming an Adult**

**Reading**
The New Dress by Virginia Woolf
[https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91h/chapter7.html](https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91h/chapter7.html)
My Year of No Shopping by Ann Patchett

Writing

Brainstorm, to the best of your ability, all the pieces of clothing you remember from the time you identify as having become an adult in the adult world when you first started paying and hating bills. Think of what you wore to work, weekends, special occasions, clubs, organizations, bedtime, holidays, bathing suits, costumes, spring, summer, fall and winter.

Who chose your clothes, where did you buy your clothes or maybe, who bought your clothes, or maybe they were hand me downs – continue this brainstorm.

What have you kept, what have you thrown out?

Did you have rebellious pieces? List them.

Who inspired you? What didn’t you wear that you wanted to wear?

What were and are your bests?

What pieces do you best remember? Which was your favourite? Which was your least favourite?

Choose one. Why are you attached to this garment? Describe the piece and then, to the best of our memory tell your story – who were you when you were wearing this item? What happened to you while you were wearing it?

Week 4: Remembering my family and friends through clothes

Reading

A Red Dress by Alice Munro – you will need to sign up for Narrative to access it here

Writing

1. What did your mother wear? Brainstorm as many of her clothes as you are able to remember. Choose one piece of clothing or outfit. What is it about this piece that you remember? Tell the story.
2. What did your father wear? Brainstorm as many of his clothes as you are able to remember. Choose one outfit or piece of clothing. Tell the story.
4. Who were and are your closest friends? Are there clothes that connect them to a particular story?
5. What pieces of clothing do you own that once belonged to someone else? Choose one and tell the story.
Week 5: Women in Clothes (but really these questions pertain to all of us)

https://www.indiebound.org/book/9780399166563

Women in Clothes (Paperback)
By Sheila Heti, Heidi Julavits, Leanne Shapton

Description

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Women in Clothes is a book unlike any other. It is essentially a conversation among hundreds of women of all nationalities—famous, anonymous, religious, secular, married, single, young, old—on the subject of clothing, and how the garments we put on every day define and shape our lives.

This week, write daily using a question from the list.

SURVEY

When do you feel your most attractive?

Do you notice women on the street? If so, what sort of women do you tend to notice or admire?

What are some of the things you admire about how other women present themselves?

Was there a moment in your life when something clicked for you about fashion or dressing or make-up? What? Why did it happen then do you think?

What are some of the shopping rules you wouldn’t necessarily recommend to others but which you follow?

What are some rules about dressing you follow but wouldn’t necessarily recommend to others?

Was style?

Are there any clothing or related items that you have in multiple? Why do you think you keep buying this thing?

Have you ever successfully given someone a present of jewelry or clothing that you continue to feel good about?

Is there a fashion trend you’ve refused to participate in and why?

Can you say a bit about how your mother’s body and style have been passed down to you or not?

Have you stolen, borrowed, or adopted any dressing ideas or actual items from friends and family?
Was there a point in your life when your style changed dramatically? What happened?

Is there anything political about the way you dress?

What are you wearing on our body and face and how is your hair done right now at this moment?

How do institutions affect the way you dress?

Do you think you have taste or style? Which one is more important: What do these words mean to you?

Do you remember the biggest waste of money you ever made on an item of clothing?

Are there any dressing tricks you’ve invented or learned that make you feel like you are getting away with something?

Can you recall times when you dressed in a particular way to gain a sense of control over a situation that scared you?

Did your parents teach you things about clothing, care for your clothing, dressing or style? What lessons do you remember or did you just pick things up?

What sorts of things do you do, clothing or make-up wise to feel sexy or alluring?

Many people say that they want to feel “comfortable” or that they admire people who seem “confident” – what do these words mean to you?

What is really beautiful for you in general? What do you consider ugly?

When you look at yourself before going out, and you are trying to see yourself from the outside, can you describe a bit what this other person “is like”? How is this “outer-eye” based on someone you know or once knew?

What is your process of getting dressed in the morning and what are you considering?

What are you trying to achieve when you dress?

What for you is the difference between dressing and dressing up?

What would you say is “you”? What would you say is not “you”?

What is your cultural background and has that influenced the way you dress?

What sorts of things do you do, clothing, jewellery or hair-wise to feel professional?

How do (did) you conform or rebel against the dress expectations of your workplace?

What is the archetypal outfit for you one that you could have happily worn at any point in your life? What do you like about it?

Do you ever wish you were a man or could dress like a man or had a man’s body?
If there was one country or culture or era that you do had to live in, fashion wise, what would it be?

Are there any figures form the past or present whose style you admire or have drawn from?

If you were totally comfortable with your body or your body was closer to what you wish it was like, what would you wear?

Is there anyone you are trying to attract or repel when you dress?

What about perfume? Make-up? Jewelry?

Tell us about something in your closet that you keep but never wear? What is it and why don’t you wear it?

Is there an item of clothing you once owned but no longer own and still think about and wish you had it back? What was it and why do you want it back?

If you had to throw away all of your clothes but keep one thing, what would you keep?

What is the first “investment” item you bought? Do you still wear it?

What there ever an important paradigm shifting purchase in your life?

Is there an item of clothing you’ve always been on the hunt for?

Were you ever given a present of clothing or jewelry that especially touched you?

What is your closet and what are your drawers like?

How and when do you shop for clothes?

Is there anything you wear everyday?

Did anyone ever say anything to you that made you see yourself differently on a physical and especially sartorial level?

**Week 6 : Dressing Up**

1. **Choose one piece of writing that you would like to work on, revise, polish, present and submit to an online journal and/or give to a family member. Follow these directions at the end of the course outline. Please provide one copy for each participant. Double space and number your pages.**

2. **Collect all your writing and organize it in a way that makes sense. Write an introduction and conclusion. Give your collection a title.**

3. **Create a list called “Pieces not yet written” and include this piece in your collection.**

This week we share our polished pieces and receive written feedback. We also present our working portfolios – a collection of our writing to date.
Suggestions for Editing

1. Read through your draft once. Now, read it OUT LOUD. The best way to catch grammatical errors, inconsistencies, awkward wording is by reading your work out loud.
2. Have somebody else read your piece.
3. Have you provided some kind of “hook” in your introduction? Does something happen or do you prepare the reader for something?
4. Does one paragraph logically connect to the next?
5. In your closing, have you tried to bring your piece full circle? Perhaps there is something else you have done to “complete” your piece without leaving the reader hanging in an awkward way.

Specifically:

Go through your paper and underline all your verbs twice.

1. Have you used the most powerful/effective verb?
   Eg: Instead of she ran furiously through the door
   She charged through the door

   She whispered instead of she spoke quietly

2. Are actions and reactions in chronological order?
She drank her coffee after she poured in a shot of Kahlua
She poured in a shot of Kahlua and drank her coffee

3. Are you overusing “seem”? 

She seemed happy when she opened her gift.

She wrapped her arms around her father and squeezed him after she opened her gift.

The boat seemed to be sinking.

The boat was sinking.

4. Are you over-using passive verbs? Name who did what.
Not: The bananas were left on the counter.
But: Jonathon left the bananas on the counter.

5. Crying, Sobbing, Tears and Other Cliches

Where you can, have you showed the action instead of relying on clichés?

She held onto his knees sobbing “please help me!”
She sank down, clutched his knees and whispered, “please help me”.

6. **Decided to…** Have characters do things rather than decide to do things

Not: She decided to go for a swim before sunset
But: She went for a swim before sunset

7. **Dialogue**

**Edit dialogue to the barest of essentials** and avoid the overuse of names (remember, this is not being read out, it is being read internally)

Indent dialogue

8. **IT**

Be careful and name things when you can

9. **THINGS** – Replace “thing” with a specific word.
10. Check for inconsistencies.

**What follows are the loyal friends of all writers.**

Goldberg, Natalie. *Old friend from far away*
Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing down the bones*
Goldberg, Natalie. *Wildmind*
Heffron, Jack. *The Writer’s Idea Book*
Johnston, Anthony (ed). *Naming the World (and other exercises for the creative writer)*
King, Stephen. *On Writing*
Lamott, Anne. *Bird by bird*
Roach Smith, Marion. *The Memoir Project*
Roorbach, Bill. *Writing Life Stories*
Truss, Lynne. *Easts, Shoots & Leaves (the zero tolerance approach to punctuation)*
Ueland, Brenda. *If you want to write*
Zinsser, William. *Writing about your life*
Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*
A Quick Brainstorm of some of my favourite memoirs

**Ashton-Warner, Sylvia. Teacher**

“And the design of my work is that creativity in this time of life when character can be influenced forever is the solution to the problem of war”. (p.88)

**Beah, Ishmael. A long way gone.**

*When I was a child, my grandmother told me that the sky speaks to those who look and listen to it. She said, "In the sky there are always answers and explanations for everything: every pain, every suffering, joy, and confusion." That night I wanted the sky to talk to me. (p.16)*

**Crozier, Ruth. Small Beneath the Sky**

“Who but my mother held those small pieces of my childhood? Where would they go when she was gone?”

**Ephron, Nora. I Feel Bad About my Neck**

“Here are some questions I am constantly noodling over: Do you splurge or do you hoard? Do you live every day as if it's your last, or do you save your money on the chance you'll live twenty more years? Is life too short, or is it going to be too long? Do you work as hard as you can, or do you slow down to smell the roses? And where do carbohydrates fit into all this? Are we really all going to spend our last years avoiding bread, especially now that bread in American is so unbelievable delicious? And what about chocolate?”

**Gallman, Kuki. I Dreamed of Africa**

The friends took the ropes, and slowly, inch by inch, lowered the coffin with my baby inside into the deep brown earth, where it landed with a soft and final thud. *A murmer ran through the crowd, a baby cried. The music grew splendid and exalting, absorbing sounds of weeping, sounds of birds, leaving only the mute rising tide of anguish. (p.217)*

**Gibb, Camilla. This is Happy**

“We come to know ourselves through stories. We listen to the stories of others, we inherit the stories of those who came before, and we make sense of our own experiences by constructing a narrative that holds them, and holds us, together. Stories are how we make sense of our lives.” (p. XI)

**Hemingway, Ernest. A Moveable Feast**

“When spring came, even the false spring, there were no problems except where to be happiest. The only thing that could spoil a day was people and if you could keep from making engagements, each day had no limits. People were always the limiters of happiness except for the very few that were as good as spring itself.”

**Huggan, Isabel. Belonging**
“But I did not want to be good. I wanted to be a writer.”

Johnson, Plum. They Left Us Everything

“Mum loved to name her houses.”

McCourt, Frank. Angela’s Ashes

“When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.”

Patchett, Ann Truth and Beauty

I was starting to wonder if I was ready to be a writer, not someone who won prizes, got published and was given the time and space to work, but someone who wrote as a course of life. Maybe writing wouldn't have any rewards. Maybe the salvation I would gain through work would only be emotional and intellectual. Wouldn't that be enough, to be a waitress who found an hour or two hidden in every day to write?”

Reich, Ruth. Tender at the Bone

“She was a great cook, but she cooked more for herself than for other people, not because she was hungry but because she was comforted by the rituals of the kitchen.”

Sedaris, David. Let’s explore diabetes with owls

Wiesel, Elie. Night

“Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.”

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”

Zinsser, William (editor) Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir

“I was looking for a way to narrate a life story of a woman that would pay due respect to her attachments to men and to family but would be about something else entirely. I wanted to convey my sense of my education, of my liberation through access to education, and of the variety of steps by which I arrived at taking charge of my own life. Philosophically, you only have to perform one free act to be a free person”. Jill Ker Conway on her memoir The Road from Coorain.
“There’s enough misery. What readers want is experience. There’s nothing new in my book. It’s an old fashioned book – all the old elements are there....Well, if we didn’t have a sense of humour in those days we were dead”. Frank McCourt on his memoir Angela’s Ashes

“I recommend that to memoir writers: Make a nice dinner for everybody – something that makes you feel you’ve done good for someone. Fortunately, most people do want to be written about. They want their lives to be known and remembered. They may be wary when you describe your project to them, especially if you look like some kind of loose cannon. But once it’s done they’re usually happy.” Ian Frazier Looking for My Family

PARTICIPANT PUBLICATIONS

Glebe Report

White Oak Surprise by Kit Flynn in the Glebe Report
https://issuu.com/glebereport/docs/gr_june_2017_web


The Globe and Mail

The Birthday Gift by Diane Gorman from The Globe and Mail

The Door I Can’t Open by Kit Flynn in Facts and Arguments, Globe and Mail

A World of Breakfast Beckons by Carol Sutherland Brown in Facts and Arguments in the Globe and Mail

The Black Hole Over My Shoulder by Nancy Wehlau in Facts and Arguments, Globe and Mail

Setting the Holiday Table by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, First Person

Welcomed by War Survivors in Vietnam and Cambodia by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, Dispatches

STORY-QUILT.COM ON LINE JOURNAL

Brandied Cherries by Barbara Robertson http://www.story-quilt.com/brandied-cherries/

Moving On by Erica Sher http://www.story-quilt.com/moving-on/


Tommy by Margaret Pimm http://www.story-quilt.com/tommy-3/


Christmas on the Island by Pamela Parkin http://www.story-quilt.com/christmas-on-the-island/

The Saphire Ring by Edie Fauquier http://www.story-quilt.com/the-sapphire-ring/

Fervour Young by David McCabe http://www.story-quilt.com/fervour-young/