

MEMENTO MORI

a review by Molly Sentell Haile

Julia Ridley Smith. *The Sum of Trifles*. University of Georgia Press, 2021.

A native of Louisiana, **MOLLY SENTELL HAILE** has lived in Guilford County, NC, for more than twenty years. She has taught creative writing at Salem College and has been instructing children, youth, and adults in other schools and organizations since 1994. She currently teaches writing for cancer patients and their caregivers at Hirsch Wellness Network in Greensboro, volunteers with Greensboro Bound Literary Festival, and is at work on her first novel. Her short story "Little Things" won the 2020 Doris Betts Fiction Prize, and her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *NCLR*, *Oxford American*, and elsewhere. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and an O. Henry Award and was recognized as notable in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from UNC Greensboro.

When I was in high school, my beloved grandmother sewed a red and blue patchwork quilt for me. I slept under that twin-sized quilt for years. In college, on pretty days I would spread it under my favorite tree near the quad and spend the afternoon half-studying and half (or maybe mostly) flirting with my boyfriend. Years later we were engaged on that very spot. And several years after that, we took a family picture under the tree with our small children perched in our laps on the quilt. The quilt came with us to Japan for a year and then to California for three. When the kids were little, I would throw it in the back of the station wagon for our weekly trips to the public library. We would lay the quilt on a grassy spot near the birdfeeders and start reading the newly checked-out books without even having to wait to get home.

And then one day the quilt was gone.

I checked every closet, every storage box, and under every bed in our house. I checked the trunks of our cars, every local library we had ever visited, friends' houses, the preschool, and my in-laws' house. Nothing.

That was more than a decade ago, and I'm still grieving the loss of that quilt – in some ways

more than I grieve my grandmother, who died almost twenty years ago at ninety-three. Even though she hadn't slowed down much in her last years, we – her family – understood that we were running out of time with her, that we would lose her one day. I never imagined I'd lose the quilt, though. It was the object that, more than any other, kept her in my life. Even as I write this, the familiar knot tightens in my gut. It's a knot of regret and loss, of failure to hold on tighter, to be more careful with something I believed kept my grandmother's love for me alive. It's an ache, a desire to be reunited with that one thing she made especially for me.

Why do we humans form such powerful attachments to objects? Why do we transform them into receptacles for our grief and placeholders for memory? In what ways do they become a part of our very identities? What does it mean when they're gone? Or how, when packing up an entire house, whether our parents' or our own, should we go about sorting a lifetime of objects into one of those three, seemingly straight-forward piles – keep, donate, or trash? These are some of the questions Julia Ridley Smith asks in her eloquent

JULIA RIDLEY SMITH grew up in Greensboro, NC, where, at twelve, she was the only kid in her first creative writing class, a Guilford College continuing education class for adults taught by Marianne Gingher. A freelance editor of academic books for university presses for almost two decades, Smith also served for several years as editor of *Inch* magazine and associate editor at Bull City Press. She helped launch the Greensboro Bound Literary Festival and has served as a volunteer docent at the Weatherspoon Art Museum. She taught creative writing, composition, and literature in the English Department at UNC Greensboro and was the 2021–22 Kenan Visiting Writer at her alma mater, UNC Chapel Hill. Essays from *The Sum of Trifles* have appeared in *Ecotone*, *New England Review*, and *Southern Cultures*, and been recognized as notable in *The Best American Essays*. Her fiction has been published in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Electric Literature*, *Southern Review*, and elsewhere.

and thought-provoking memoir, *The Sum of Trifles*.

Ten years ago, Smith's parents, who had owned an antique store in Greensboro since the 1970s, died within six months of each other, leaving Smith and her brother to go through their parents' personal and professional collections of antiques as well as, among other things, their mother's yellow legal pads of notes, their father's journal, and his prosthetic legs. Grieving the loss of both parents, Smith and her brother put off cleaning out their house. "When

COURTESY OF JULIA RIDLEY SMITH



Mom and Daddy died, I believed, a chasm would open between me and my past," Smith writes in "The Art of Dying," one of ten linked essays that comprise *The Sum of Trifles*. "As their things went away, the chasm would grow wider, harder to bridge. What if, once they died and we got rid of their stuff, I could never find my parents again?" (83).

When Smith turned to books for guidance and solace, she was surprised to discover that few addressed "the existential questions associated with relinquishing your parents' belongings" (15). With humor, wisdom, and intelligence, Smith does exactly that. In "Jazz on School Nights," her father's nine-foot-

long, mid-century modern hi-fi and his jazz albums allow her, as a girl, to see a different side of a man whose anger and self-absorption often kept him at a distance from the family. As

her father warms up the stereo, a young Smith perches "on the wing chair nearest the hall, ready to slip away if his friendly mood downshifts" (23). When he drops the needle onto a record, "The beat vibrates through the floor into our tapping feet. We thrum with its energy, electrified by what we're hearing. Daddy listens, is happy, and his rare happiness overjoys me. I bob my head and snap my fingers, imitating him. So giddy am I with his pleasure in the music that it becomes my pleasure too" (28–29).

In "Legs," Smith vacillates between compassion and frustration with her newly widowed father who becomes more vulnerable after a lifetime charac-

terized by bitterness. Holding his deceased wife's hand, he tells Smith, "I wish I'd done more. I have so many regrets." When he dies six months later, Smith and her brother accompany

his body to the crematorium. Their father's prosthetic legs turn out to be difficult to donate, and Smith jokes to her brother, "We could film ourselves . . . Candid Camera fashion, going around public places, each with a leg casually tucked under an arm, asking people if they'd seen our dad – an older man, grey hair, beige windbreaker?" (117).

Throughout her memoir, Smith's sharp and well-timed humor offers the reader something more than just a chance to

take a breath. It reminds us of how human, how redemptive, a laugh can be, even—or especially—at the hardest times.

With her yellow legal pads, her Salem Ultra Lite 100's, her "Dossier" (a binder filled with clippings and research about a pair of nefarious neighbors), and her razor-edged wit, Smith's mother takes center stage in Smith's life and also in her memoir. *The Sum of Trifles* is, among other things, a love letter to Smith's mother, a petite and charming sea of contradictions (*But aren't we all?* the book gently reminds us). When Smith brought home a friend from high school, her mother, cigarette hanging from her mouth, greeted the friend with, "Welcome to hell!" At the

antique store, when Smith's parents would flip over a piece of furniture to study its provenance and craftsmanship, her mother liked to tell the observing customer they were performing a "full rectal" on the piece. And yet, with her pedigreed and wealthy ancestry, Smith's mother also had exacting ideas about "nice" people and proper homes. In "The House Beautiful . . . or the House Good Enough," an essay, in part, about Smith's decision whether to keep or let go of her mother's *Tale of Genji*-inspired Japanese screen, Smith recounts her mother's "articles of faith" on house decorating. In summarizing the last rule, Smith is also describing her mother: "Above all else a well-appointed room conveys a sense of ease. A successful room, like a successful person, is permitted to exhibit flare, even high drama or



PHOTOGRAPH BY FELIPE TRONCOSO

eccentricity, as long as it exudes confidence. There must be no hint of striving or trying to present a false image, of pretending to be what you're not" (44).

Smith uses the antebellum, heirloom quilt she and her brother inherit from their mother to interrogate and reckon with a family history that includes ancestors who enslaved fellow humans. As she grapples with what to do with the portraits, the quilt, and other inherited objects that are remembrances if not celebrations of a part of the family legacy Smith wants to let go of, she studies Sanford Biggers's *Codex*, a collection of antique quilts Biggers painted and appliquéd to tell the layered story of this country's racial history. Smith also draws on the writing of Toni Morrison, Eula Biss, Rebecca Solnit, and Sherry Turkle to help her think about

racism and its relationship to objects and stories passed down through the generations.

If *The Sum of Trifles* is a love letter to Smith's mother, it is also a love letter to the written word and to the practice of writing. Joan Didion, Italo Calvino, Leo Tolstoy, Roland Barthes,



PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE MITCHELL

William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams, and George Eliot are just a few of the writer-companions who accompany and enrich Smith's search to understand how to grieve her parents and how to live with or let go of the objects that filled their lives. Smith turns an idea over and over and holds it up to the light of other thinkers' words. She uses white space to highlight juxtapositions. The white space also suggests silence, a place for readers to think and make their own associations and connections. The structure of *The Sum of Trifles* invites us in ("Come in the house" [3], Smith's mother would say). And somewhere along the way the reader realizes that Smith has not only written the book she had searched for in the aftermath of losing both parents, but in writing it, in composing each quilted piece of the memoir that is *The Sum of Trifles*; she has created her own *memento mori*. ■