



Source: Lauren Frayer, AP, Reuters, [‘Saddam farewells his family in ‘high spirits’](#), *The Age online*, 30/12/06.  
Tags: [child/parent](#), [Iraq](#), [death](#), [desert](#)  
Writer/s: [Diana Wood Conroy](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

As a child I was always aware of my aunt's beautiful clothes, the tailored dresses in soft fabrics with rows of delicate buttons, the shapely shoes. She gradually filled her house overlooking the harbour with paintings and tapestries, bought from struggling artists she knew, including me. Once she gave me a box full of belt buckles and clasps from the 1920s, curvilinear metal of twining leaves and stems, with filigree decoration studded with purple and blue stones. The presents I had from her as I was growing up were lavish, indicative of the gorgeous possibilities and excitement that life might offer—a small microscope, a manicure set of tiny scissors and files with mother-of-pearl handles, a twisted gold bracelet.

Her last gift to me was a day near the end of her life. I was called to the twelfth floor of the hospital, on Boxing Day, looking out high up over the harbour streaming with yachts. The blue-grey room was functional with a smooth floor and metal furniture, a little chipped, but airy and full of light. When I came in I didn't recognize the sunken old woman in a hospital gown, very tiny under the sheets, propped up on pillows. But when she woke, I knew her familiar vivid presence, the kindness of her regard, her distinctive voice. 'Oh you are here', she whispered 'You know I never had a mother or sister, and now I see how you look like my daughter.' Her mother had abandoned her in infancy and gone to live in another continent, leaving her to an impersonal childhood brought up by teachers and minders.

In her suffering now she used precise and careful words. Her eyes were very curious, very deep and black, like pools without light, and would suddenly close in desperate fatigue, and then open. I remembered those beautiful eyes, so deep set with long straight lashes as profoundly familiar, and now almost all the life had gone from them, so that I glimpsed an edge, an emptiness about to engulf. 'I had wanted to say something important to everyone in the family, and then the pain caught me'.

I sat there alone with her for hours and she slept for much of it. Then she would suddenly say, very clearly 'Painting was advantageous to me, such a pleasure'. Or 'When I woke this morning I thought I was in heaven'. She clutched her bottle of water, and had to have sips constantly, gasping for air, needing a touch of the hand. Her own hands had become blotched and clawed, with a fast fluttery pulse. She didn't want me to talk about the past—she was still interested in the present. 'I want to just consider people, how many differences there are between them. Your father is so calm, but your mother is exhausted looking after him.' She looks at me, and the look is her, her eyes regarding me, as they have done for more than fifty years. There was nothing in this room of her rich belongings, the elegant objects that defined her

living spaces. She only wanted mothering now, having become tiny, limbs curled up in the bedclothes; she needed her head stroked, her hair brushed. 'Harder, harder!'

She died the next night while her son sat with her. Unable to speak, she had lifted her arm and waved at him, and was gone. Being present at her dying gave me the gift of a day's intimacy where every moment was heightened by the imminence of loss. That time with her emphasised the nuanced senses of sight and touch, so that the hours of her passing mirrored the infinite and wordless feeling of the mother for the newborn.

As the year went on I thought how the manner of my aunt's dying enlarged the immediacy of living. A month or so later a friend in Cyprus talked about her work as a military forensic archaeologist in the mass graves in the deserts of Iraq. She showed pictures of the endless sand, the pitiless containers of remains, the Spartan living conditions in almost Roman camps, consisting of a grid of demountable buildings set up near the inaccessible sites. Bedouins who criss-crossed the remote deserts had alerted the military to the presence of mass graves. The graves are shallow, and date from Saddam Hussein's atrocities in the 1980s. Individuals are identified by their personal effects through rigorous stratigraphy and archaeological precision of documentation. The archaeologist presented an image of a tumble of rags among many others spread out in long heaps under the sun—some striped cloth, a cotton knit T-shirt. 'This bundle', she said, 'contained the skeletons of a mother and child killed about 1986. Even in death the mother still clasped the hand of her child in an inexorable grip. This is why I continue to work in those conditions, to find evidence of what happened.'

'The object brought forth from the depths of forgetfulness and history burns with the memory of the senses' wrote Nadia Seremetakis.\* Those diggers in Iraq have brought to light the forgotten things that give irrefutable links to the vanished senses, the turbulent emotion of the past that forms the present.

What I will remember of my aunt through the jewelled clasps over my chest, the gold twisting around my wrist, or the silver buckles fastened around the waist, is the inexpressible, entwining sense of touch in the relationships that formed me.

Nadia Seremetakis (ed) *The Senses Still: perception and memory as Material Culture in Modernity*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1996, 144.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Diana Wood Conroy.*