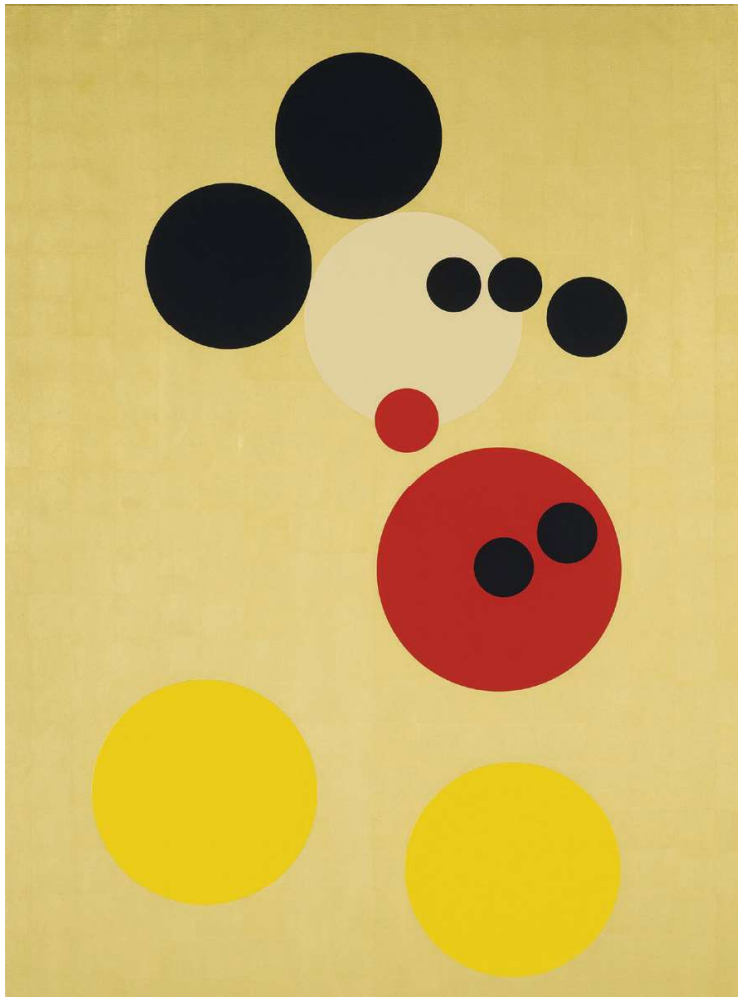


DAMIEN HIRST

Gold Mickey, 2014
Household gloss and gold leaf on canvas,
72⁴/₅ x 53⁷/₁₀ x 1³/₁₀ in



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BILL RICHTER

After I Lost Sienna

I thought Sienna was my life and after losing her, I started losing other things. They were small things at first. The first one was my night guard, for my teeth, the one my dentist told me I needed to use. He told me this during an appointment two weeks after I lost Sienna. He said that I was grinding my teeth and if I didn't start using one, horrible things would start happening to them, and he casually rattled off issues like enamel loss, toothaches, and nerve damage, all of which could eventually lead to dental surgery. I started using the night guard and kept using it even when I had dreams in which it made me suffocate. Sometimes I'd consciously, or unconsciously, pull it out during the night and drop it on the floor or the nightstand, or if I was in the throes of a nightmare, toss it across the room. One morning I woke up without it and could not find it. Not on the nightstand, not on the floor, not under the bed, not under the dresser, not in the closet. I stripped the bed, shaking out the sheets and pillowcases. It was concerning, but I looked at it as an anomaly and figured that sometime during the course of the next couple of days it would turn up the way things do. After a few days I bought a cheap new one from the pharmacy but didn't take it out of the package. This should have caused the other to reappear somehow. A few days later I started using the new one and that still did nothing to bring the other one back. Something had changed.

I thought Sienna loved me. I thought that some day she would love me the way that I loved her. I knew that I might have to wait for her to feel that way; I was playing a long game and I was okay with that. I thought that in the end it would all work out. Happily ever after and all that.

I lost my running shoes next. After a run a certain level of exhaustion usually sets in with me. I am not a runner with a strict schedule or anything resembling a training plan and I can be careless about where I put my shoes after finishing a workout, but after making the rounds of the house, I usually find them in one of a handful of regular places. This pair had just become perfectly broken in. After losing them, I only waited a few days to buy a new pair, but the perfectly broken-in pair was never found. It was as if they had never existed and the more I looked, the farther away they became.

I considered these first losses unusual and they didn't really concern me. Losing Sienna still hurt and I tried to

chalk up these losses to being distracted and absentminded, as that happened to be true. Maybe in the middle of the night I spit the night guard into the trash can and dumped it in the garbage without knowing. Maybe I left my shoes outside my front door and somebody took them. Both scenarios seemed plausible.

On the Monday after the running shoes were replaced, when I went to pull my Metro pass out of my wallet to enter the station, I found that it was not there. This is an object that I am paranoid about losing, because I need it every day. It is an ongoing expense that always surprises me in just how much it adds up to and because it is something that I always keep in the same place: in the middle card slot of my wallet behind the grocery store card and in front of the library card. Because of my certainty about this, I got paranoid about the possibility of someone messing with me and taking seemingly random objects from me. I thought of who might do such a thing and whether or not there was something that connected the objects to each other, other than their all being objects that belonged to me. Before leaving the station, I did the practical thing and asked the station agent if anyone had turned in a card that morning but all I got back was the disinterested shaking of the man's head while his crossed arms rested on his protruding belly. I paid for a new ticket and made my way to work.

I didn't know if I should connect these losses to the loss of Sienna, but they kept on happening. I thought of each as a reminder of the greater loss, each a sharp elbow in the ribs or a sharp jab to the heart of what was truly missing in my life.

The day after the Metro, I was running late in the morning and to save time I decided to drive to work. Along the way, I rolled a stop sign, an everyday occurrence among the thousands of us who drive on any regular basis and we are not pulled over for it most of the time even when a policeman is there. On this day though, it resulted in a traffic cop materializing seemingly out of nowhere to request my driver's license, which somehow was not in my wallet, and my registration, which was not in my glove compartment. Given the recent events of my life, I think I began to tear up as the situation became apparent. The only fortunate part of this was the not-unsympathetic cop seeing me about to break down and taking some pity on me. I got off with only a stern talk about my driving and a ticket requiring

me to produce the license and registration within thirty days to avoid a fine. At the end, he asked me if I was okay and for a second I thought that he really wanted to know. I nodded and said that I was and I almost started to tell him about Sienna but stopped myself short of that.

I'm not really sure whether I was losing anything at work or not. It was a rare slow stretch at the office and I took advantage of it. I was distracted enough each day that I probably wouldn't have gotten much done anyway and might or might not have even noticed what was missing, what was merely misplaced, and what was gone for good. The work was fine, there just weren't material objects there that I prized or paid a lot of attention to. When I got home at the end of the day, though, I was more than a little disappointed to find that the chips and salsa I'd bought at the farmers' market over the weekend and the big bottle of IPA I'd bought to go with them were nowhere to be found.

A couple of days later the keys were next. The car key, my house keys, all keys. Everything on the keychain, but the keychain itself remained. When I couldn't find them as I made my rounds around the house during my morning routine, I tried to take it in stride, to not let it bother me. Like most people, I've misplaced my keys any number of times, so I tried to treat it as just another one of those occasions and not yet another mystery befalling me since I'd lost Sienna. With the keys at least, I felt that I had some history and knew all the places that they could possibly have been left and, since I had not left the house for a single second since I'd come home from work the night before, that they absolutely had to be inside the house. Unless I left them in the lock of the front door. Or the lock of the garage door. I've done both and once I realized the keys were gone, I couldn't one hundred percent remember which door I'd entered through when I came home. This brought me to a low point and a dark place. I needed someone to talk to. I went through the contacts on my phone, calling anyone and everyone I could think of whom I still talk to on anything resembling a regular basis. I reached the voicemail of each and every one. I covered my face with a pillow and screamed. I paced the hallway and walked up and down the stairs several times. Not feeling suicidal, but feeling like someone there had to answer the phone and talk to whoever called, I reached for the phone to dial a suicide hotline. My phone was nowhere to be found.

Exiting through the garage and leaving the door unlocked, I left the house and began to walk around my neighborhood. I continued into the next neighborhood, and soon I was through that one and then into the neighborhoods beyond. It was a cool night with a cold breeze and I only wore a long-sleeve shirt and a thin windbreaker, but the brisk air felt refreshing, reminding me that there are times when I enjoy feeling a little bit cold, that the feeling can reinvigorate me. I walked through the night, reaching the river at the north end of town, crossing over the footbridge, following the river back around the bend heading south, and crossing back over into my neighborhood at dawn. My neighbor Stan and his greyhound Cyrus were out on their morning run as I descended the pedestrian overpass a few blocks from my house. Stan called to me, asking me if I would be able to dogsit Cyrus over the weekend as he was unexpectedly going out of town. Considering the recent events in my life, I apologized and told him that it really just wasn't a good idea for me to watch over anything right now.

A few moments later I rounded the corner of my street, trying to motivate myself for the day despite the exhaustion that might overcome me later in the day. That is when I looked up and saw that my house was gone. Not destroyed, not burned, not a pile of rubble, but simply gone. A vacant lot stood in its place. The front and backyard plants and gardens were gone too, all replaced by weeds and prickly brush as they must have existed there decades ago, before the house was built. A few other neighbors were up and staring in the same disbelief as I was, but then they looked at me with their hands raised, palms up, and a questioning look on their faces as if expecting a rational answer from me about what had happened. That at least let me know that I wasn't just seeing things, that I was not delusional. I approached Damon, my neighbor across the street.

"I was out," I offered as some sort of excuse. "Did you hear anything?"

He just shook his head and looked over his shoulder to his house, as if hoping to make sure the same thing did not happen to him. I saw others doing the same and looking back at me. I was surely the cause of this and would be the cause of their houses disappearing as well.

With nothing left besides the clothes I was wearing and the items in my pockets, I began to walk again; this time

I went straight to the train station. Once there, I picked a destination and bought a ticket for the next train out. Upon my arrival, I stopped at the gift shop to purchase a few essentials and a tourist T-shirt and sweatshirt with the name of my new town plastered across the front. I was ready to start over again.

Bill Richter is a writer living in San Rafael, California, with his wife, his son, and their dog. His fiction has appeared in *So It Goes*, the journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library, and in the *Kentucky Review*. He has had other work published in the books *Hungry? San Francisco Bay Area* (Glove Box Guides, 2015) and *Thirsty? San Francisco* (Hungry City Guides, 2010).