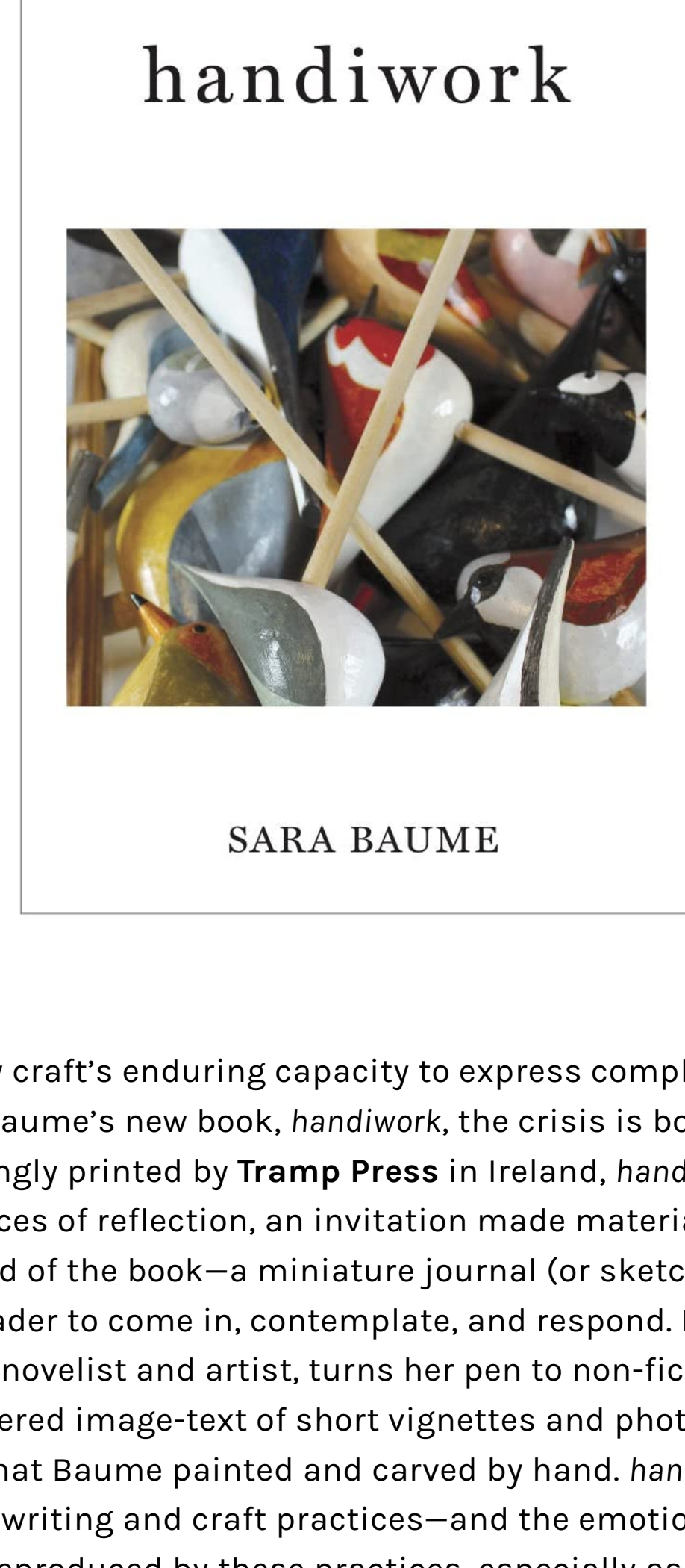


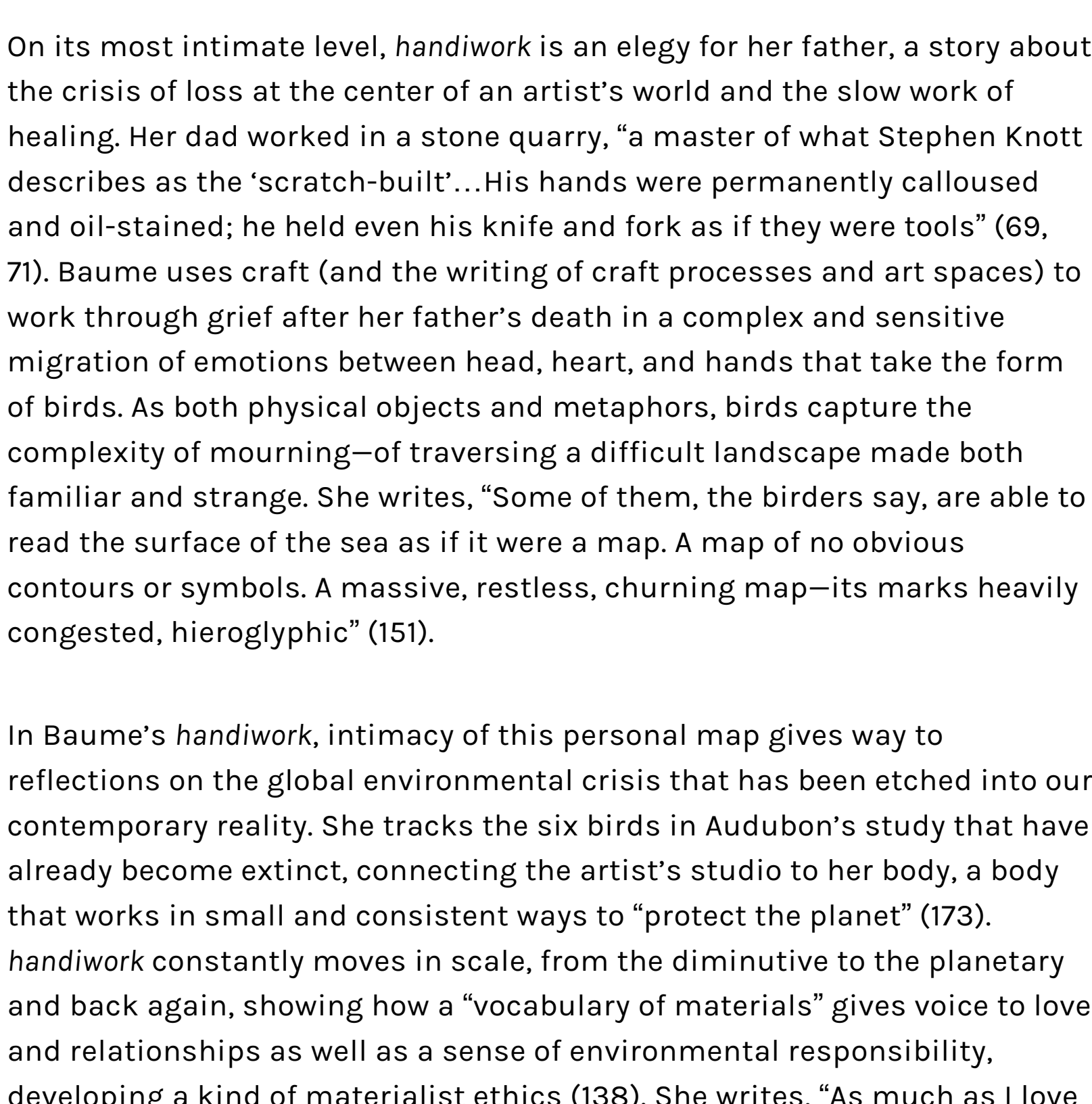


handiwork's Crafting of the New Global Elegy

Amy E. Elkins reviews *handiwork* by Sara Baume



I am amazed by craft's enduring capacity to express complexity in a time of crisis. In Sara Baume's new book, *handiwork*, the crisis is both intimate and global.^[1] Strikingly printed by **Tramp Press** in Ireland, *handiwork* invites the reader into spaces of reflection, an invitation made material by eight blank pages at the end of the book—a miniature journal (or sketchbook) that beckons the reader to come in, contemplate, and respond. Baume, an award-winning novelist and artist, turns her pen to non-fiction with *handiwork*, a layered image-text of short vignettes and photographs of painted birds that Baume painted and carved by hand. *handiwork* is a book about her daily writing and craft practices—and the emotional lives produced and reproduced by these practices, especially as they relate to the natural world, the thread running through it all.



Photograph for *handiwork*, used with author's permission

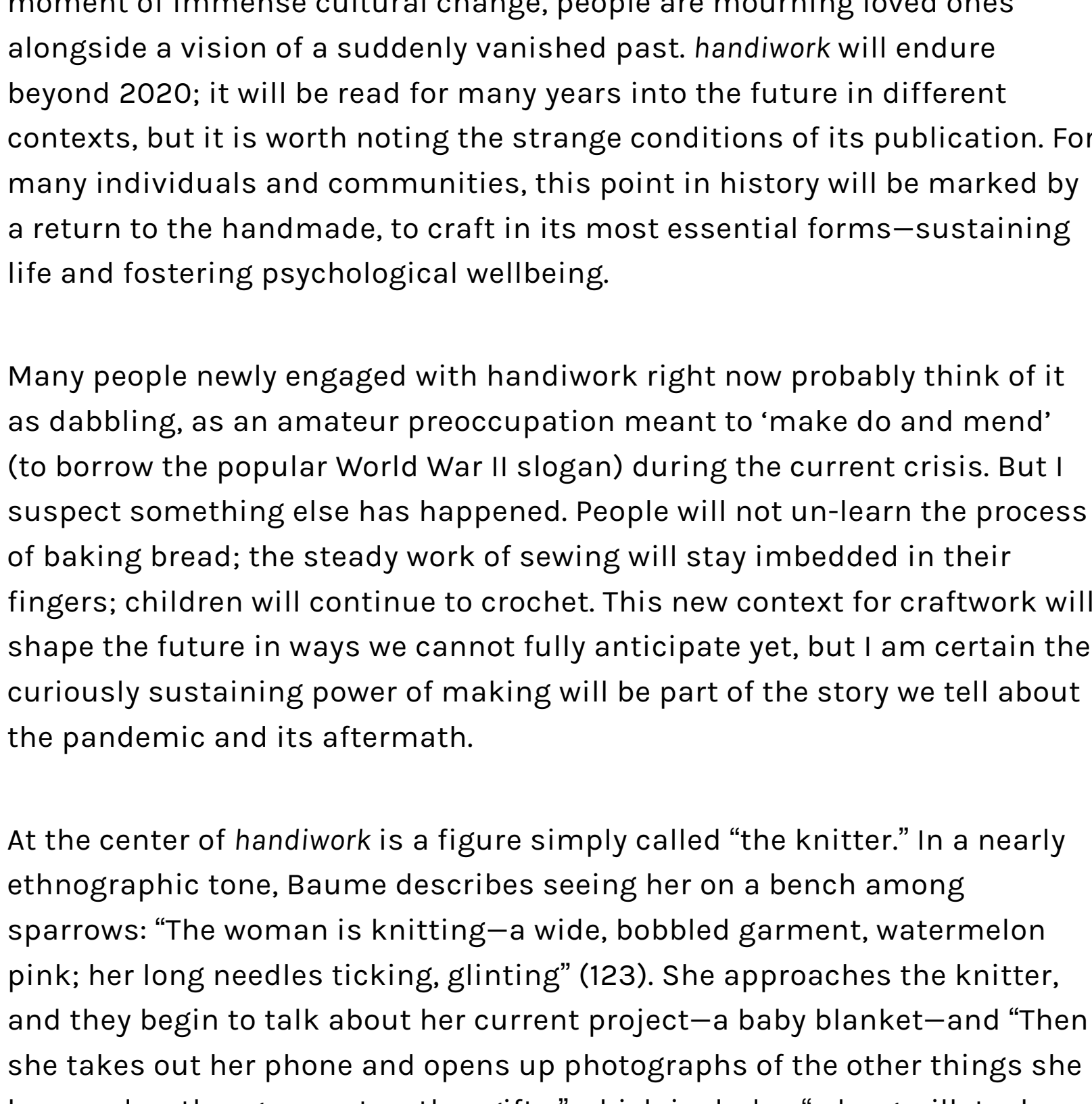
On its most intimate level, *handiwork* is an elegy for her father, a story about the crisis of loss at the center of an artist's world and the slow work of healing. Her dad worked in a stone quarry, "a master of what Stephen Knott describes as the 'scratch-built'...His hands were permanently calloused and oil-stained; he held even his knife and fork as if they were tools" (69, 71). Baume uses craft (and the writing of craft processes and art spaces) to work through grief after her father's death in a complex and sensitive migration of emotions between head, heart, and hands that take the form of birds. As both physical objects and metaphors, birds capture the complexity of mourning—of traversing a difficult landscape made both familiar and strange. She writes, "Some of them, the birders say, are able to read the surface of the sea as if it were a map. A map of no obvious contours or symbols. A massive, restless, churning map—its marks heavily congested, hieroglyphic" (15).

In Baume's *handiwork*, intimacy of this personal map gives way to reflections on the global environmental crisis that has been etched into our contemporary reality. She tracks the six birds in Audubon's study that have already become extinct, connecting the artist's studio to her body, a body that works in small and consistent ways to "protect the planet" (173). *handiwork* constantly moves in scale, from the diminutive to the planetary and back again, showing how a "vocabulary of materials" gives voice to love and relationships as well as a sense of environmental responsibility, developing a kind of materialist ethics (138). She writes, "As much as I love materiality, I hate materialism. And try, at every opportunity, to avoid buying plastic articles mass-produced for the overstuffed planet. Instead I haunt the charity shops and car boot sales and flea markets—because I want to believe that each thing I own has at least one story older and other than the one I will give it" (165). The maker's ethical dilemma—how to create and how to conserve—collide as Baume grapples with the "daily magic" of making things on a "damaged planet" (183). She is a careful custodian of art worlds and the environment, reminding her readers to connect to the sanctuary of both.

Written as a series of vignettes, *handiwork* unfolds like a patchwork quilt, as if you're watching the quilter sew the pieces together—a social fabric, scraps carefully stitched into a brilliant pattern. Tactile and textile metaphors provide momentum for much of Baume's writing, as in her opening line: "There is an Alaskan songbird, the northern wheatear, and every autumn she flies about as far as 300,000 balls of wool unspooled in a westerly direction, disentangled across Siberia and Kazakhstan and Iraq and Saudi Arabia, finally coming to a definitive stop in East Africa (10). We follow this yarn, slowly unspooling and guiding us through Baume's world of *handiwork*, a complex disentangling that still maintains the complexity of the journey. It is the global and the intimate, complete with all the knots and messes of daily, reflective making.

In *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, Julia Bryan-Wilson unspools the history of textiles and politics, claiming "that to textile politics is to *give texture* to politics, to refuse easy binaries, to acknowledge complications" (7). Bryan-Wilson's work calls our attention to not only the way we might feel frayed—pulled loose at the edges, undone—but also how we write from places of personal crisis, finding ourselves pulled into the fray of conflict (4). Baume's distinctive patchwork narrative design, interspersed with images of some of the objects she has crafted, follows the linking of text and textile as "at once interwoven and unfinished" (Barthes qtd. In Bryan-Wilson 4). The last line of *handiwork* reads, "My daily *handiwork*—an unfinished sentence, which captures the unfinished work of making. There is an odd comfort to the book's final, frayed edge, an invitation into the writer's home, which is also her studio, a conclusion embedded in a final reckoning with the fact that this work is never done. Even the book's elegiac arc, moving from grandfather, to father, to daughter suggests that Baume's interwoven design transcends the boundaries of death.

In 2018, I visited Baume in West Cork,^[2] so I instantly recognized the room where she recorded her virtual launch of *handiwork*—her home office, a space where much of the book is set.^[3] Her in-person book launch and talks were cancelled due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, a moment of cultural crisis that has people across the globe feeling frayed at their edges. In the launch video, Baume pulls her dog, Wink, up into her lap—a dog readers might know as One Eye from her first novel, *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*. She bends to him and says "How do we do this, Wink?" before giving him a cheesy nibble from her own bowl. This moment gets me in the gut because there, sitting in her home like we all are, cuddling her four-legged friend like the lucky ones among us are, creating comfort in the form of craft, books, snacks, and a glass of wine—Baume poses the question on everyone's mind. How do we do this, now, in this new context?



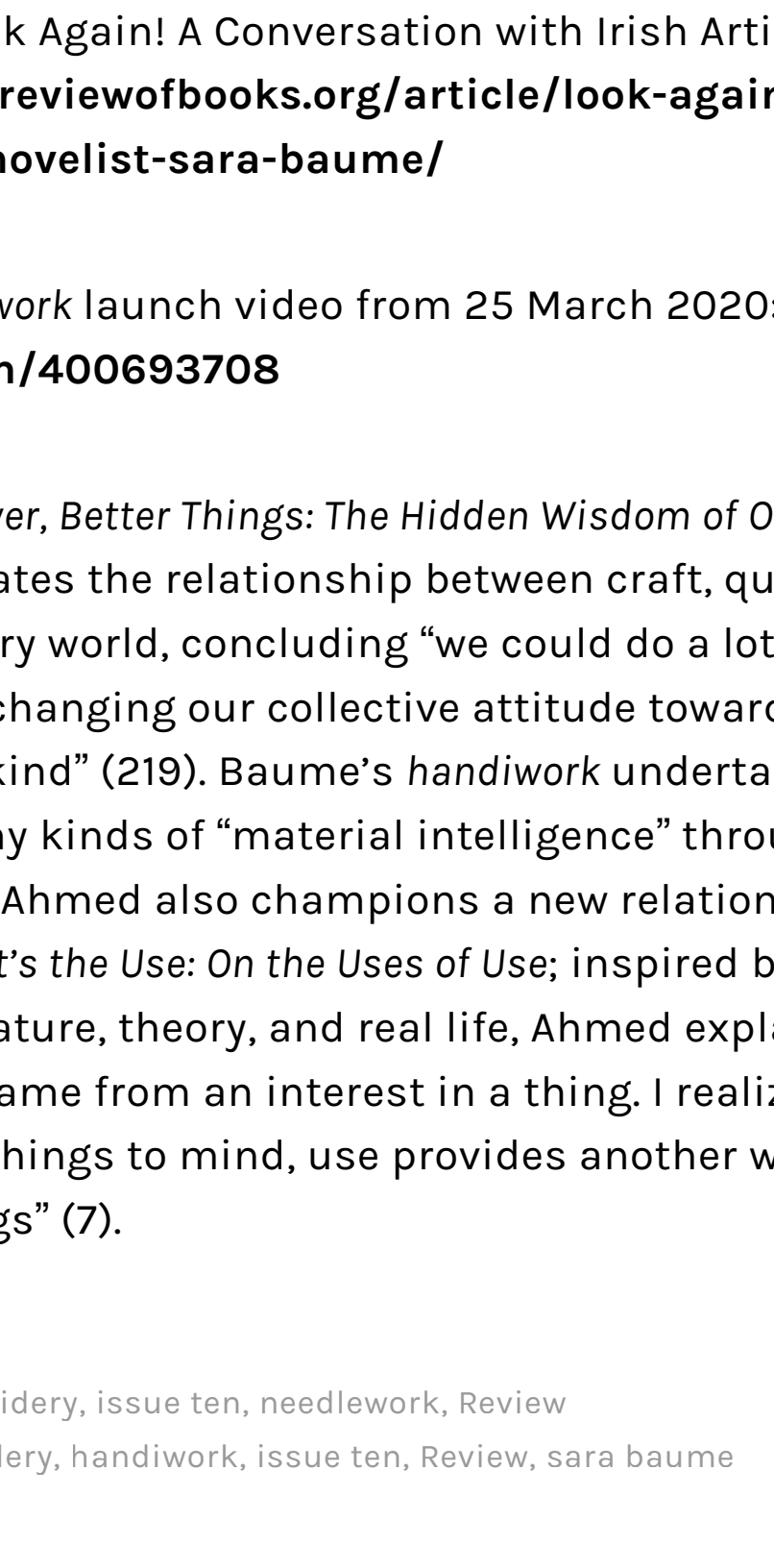
Photograph for *handiwork*, used with author's permission

The first and last sentences of *handiwork* link the northern wheatear's long and steady journey to the "daily practice" of craft, making it clear that *handiwork* is an occupation, it is the daily work of making, learning, and sustaining. Lately as I scroll through my social media newsfeed, I am overwhelmed by the number of people who have learned embroidery, taught their children to garden and crochet, baked homemade bread (in my neighborhood, demand for sourdough starter and yeast has reached a fever pitch) and headlines in national outlets championing the return of craft in a time of chaos—such as "**Getting Through a Pandemic with Old-Fashioned Crafts**" in *The Atlantic* and "**DIY Fashion: Designers' Tips on What to Make From Home**" in *The Guardian*. Entire communities have organized around sewing masks, many people learning to sew or dusting off long-neglected sewing machines for the purpose, and indigenous makers such as the Association of Popular Artists of Sarhua in Peru have attracted renewed interest in the cultural significance of their craftwork by applying traditional embroidery motifs to pandemic masks.

The terms of productivity have shifted as people around the world have self-isolated in order to protect themselves and others from the spread of a mysterious and deadly virus. Baume's quiet book offers comfort to its readers in a time when the real world feels like a dystopian novel—in a moment of immense cultural change, people are mourning loved ones alongside a vision of a suddenly vanished past. *handiwork* will endure beyond 2020; it will be read for many years into the future in different contexts, but it is worth noting the strange conditions of its publication. For many individuals and communities, this point in history will be marked by a return to the handmade, to craft in its most essential forms—sustaining life and fostering psychological wellbeing.

Many people newly engaged with *handiwork* right now probably think of it as dabbling, as an amateur preoccupation meant to 'make do and mend' (to borrow the popular World War II slogan) during the current crisis. But I suspect something else has happened. People will not un-learn the process of baking bread; the steady work of sewing will stay imbedded in their fingers; children will continue to crochet. This new context for craftwork will shape the future in ways we cannot fully anticipate yet, but I am certain the curiously sustaining power of making will be part of the story we tell about the pandemic and its aftermath.

At the center of *handiwork* is a figure simply called "the knitter." In a nearly ethnographic tone, Baume describes seeing her on a bench among sparrows: "The woman is knitting—a wide, bobbled garment, watermelon pink; her long needles ticking, glinting" (123). She approaches the knitter, and they begin to talk about her current project—a baby blanket—and "Then she takes out her phone and opens up photographs of the other things she has made, other garments, other gifts," which includes "a long, silk teal dress" (124). The knitter is a regular person, making things to stave off "the gnaw of boredom" and to provide a creative outlet. And yet, she describes an additional layer to the process of making, a beguiling aura imbued in quality, handmade items: "And everyone at the party, the knitter says, complimented my dress, asking where I had bought it—as if the real silk which she had sewn herself, which she had fingered all over—had an ambiguous radiance that the shop-bought dresses lacked" (125).^[4] During the pandemic craft boom, we, too, are handling our world all over in new ways, building connections to home, objects, and traditions. In isolation, crafters feel connected to something bigger—to other makers but also to the magic of self-reliance, tapping into *handiwork*'s unique ability to combine beauty and social justice. Now, as in other points in history, craft has become something intergenerational, transhistorical, and cross-cultural. *Handiwork* is shaping our cultural memory, from the most intimate acts of love to the global work of healing during crisis, and Baume's delicately frayed edges reveal both the beauty and the complexity of that work.



Photograph for *handiwork*, used with author's permission

About: Amy E. Elkins is assistant professor of English at Macalester College. She researches twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and feminism, as well as contemporary art, craft, and critical making. She is currently finishing her first monograph, *Crafting Modernity: Remaking Feminist Time from Literary Modernism to the Multimedia Present*. In addition to her scholarly publications, Elkins lectures on creative pedagogy and writes a series of author interviews that explore the intersection of visual culture and women's writing for [Los Angeles Review of Books](https://losangelesreviewofbooks.org). Her website is at <https://amyelkins.net>.

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[1] In their "Introduction: The Global and the Intimate," Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner suggest the rich potential of these categories: "the intimate and the global extends a longstanding feminist tradition of challenging gender-based oppositions by upending hierarchies of space and scale" (1). In my work, I argue that craft, understood as a cultural practice built on playing with and between these categories, similarly upends hierarchies of space, scale, gender, industry, activism, and time.

[2] See my interview with Baume in *Los Angeles Review of Books* for the conversation that grew out of this visit and a series of images of her other craft projects: "Look Again! A Conversation with Irish Artist-Novelist Sara Baume" <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/look-again-a-conversation-with-irish-artist-novelist-sara-baume/>

[3] Baume's *handiwork* launch video from 25 March 2020: <https://vimeo.com/400693708>

[4] In his book, *Fewer, Better Things: The Hidden Wisdom of Objects*, Glenn Adamson investigates the relationship between craft, quality, and quantity in our contemporary world, concluding "we could do a lot of good for our society simply by changing our collective attitude toward material intelligence of all kind" (219). Baume's *handiwork* undertakes a similar exploration of many kinds of "material intelligence" through both theory and practice. Sara Ahmed also champions a new relationship to objects in her new book, *What's the Use: On the Uses of Use*; inspired by things circulating in literature, theory, and real life, Ahmed explains: "My interest in the word [use] came from an interest in a thing. I realized very quickly that if use brings things to mind, use provides another way of telling stories about things" (7).