

## Things

Kristine Bybee-Finley

I collect things. I collect nothing specific, nothing categorical; but my house is full of things. Functional, non-functional, metal, cloth, paper, glass, stone, manufactured, natural, purchased, made, borrowed, stolen, and smuggled—they are smushed together into my home for a reason. Perhaps it was the combination of a mother who kept a house where clutter feared to dwell, even in the cupboards, and a tidy father who did not believe in keeping anything but bare essentials in the house. Five children and rarely an errant newspaper or toy or sock was to be found throughout the public and private rooms. Nothing lasted in our house. I lost a childhood I could grasp. Therefore, I vowed never to lose the tangibles of my adulthood.

My mother in all her wisdom threw away my moldering black and white, much-hugged teddy bear of many years and replaced it with a synthetic brown bear with a ribbon strangling it. The result of that maternal error: we have every stuffed animal purchased or received during my daughters' younger years. Because I remember that moment of dispossession, my daughters will never have to recall such a brutal memory. They do, however, donate any detritus that no longer retains sentimental value. My dutiful husband boxes the recollections of childhood that need to give way to more mature collections and hauls them up to the attic.

Book stacks are tantamount to mountains in our home. Books were the escape route I took when things got scary, hairy, or very alcoholic while I was growing up, and now I find solace in the multitudes that surround me at home and at school. My oldest book, *Tales of India*, sits on the bookshelf as a life lesson. I had asked for *The Arabian Nights*; my dear and wonderful grandmother delivered this huge storybook instead. My displeasure was obvious, and my grandmother defended her choice and the choice of the bookseller that had convinced her to buy it. "Just open it, honey. If you don't like it, I'll take it back," she promised as she gave me a bosomy hug. Huge, glossy, and illustrated with great beauty and detail—it was better than anything I had ever seen. I discovered this after my disappointment dissipated enough for me to follow Grandma's advice and pull open the front cover. I understood then that sometimes what you get is better than what you asked for. In my youth, books made me happy. Maybe I collect books to retain happiness, even though it is unnecessary; call it a remedy for hangovers of the past.

Upon my return from three years of overseas living, I broke down and bought two curio cabinets—big ones with lights and glass shelves. Treasures from afar that would otherwise be stuffed in storage boxes were now stuffed into huge display boxes. At first, the cabinets only consumed things with a foreign taste, similar to a gourmet who would not digest the mundane. The delicately carved Meerschaum perfume bottle purchased at the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, elegantly painted with scenes from a Turkish harem, held an honored singular place for about a year. But, that changed when homegrown works of art appeared from the local schools and camps. The cabinets became absolutely gluttonous and are now overweight with anything even remotely palatable. The perfume bottle stands amongst the flotsam of art camps and a series of mistakes—cutesy pottery, glow in the dark sculptures—purchased in honor of birthdays and holidays. I gave up the true works of art with love; I eye the stuff of others' dreams and know they are signs of love.

Acquiring rugs became a sport of sorts while in the Middle East. My first forays were made with my lovely Baharainian friend who came as my companion and teacher. She negotiated with the sellers and taught me how to stand up and walk away, with everyone knowing it as a bargaining ploy, but still enjoying the eloquence of it. Middle Eastern words swirled around me and I finally got my Arabian nights—carpets and all. After those initial lessons, I learned to relax. At the end of my stay in Kuwait, I made my largest purchase, a room-sized silk rug of the highest quality. Two years of practice and I felt ready for a single day of big-league play. It was the last day of the traveling rug market, a market I had visited every day for a week, without buying anything, and the sellers knew I would make a decision that day. I handed the various sellers their portraits I had taken the first day—one of my better strategies because these were men who were far away from home for years and could send the photographs to loved ones—and promptly plopped Ann, my beautiful and patient seven year old daughter, on a lush pile of carpets and started the long process of bargaining. Madam—I was always madam—took her time and selected a carpet that glimmered with luxury and the promise of a family fight when parental loot would be divided by the two daughters. Ann will claim rightful ownership at that dying time because of her aforementioned charming behavior and the ability to speak flecks of Arabic in order to lower the purchase price. Peace be with you, Salam Aleikum, as it was always said there, and should be remembered.

If I were to practice my feng shui more assiduously, I know that my containers of photographs would be reduced to a few prized pictures. According to ancient Asians, the weight of memory holds us back from moving forward—but, how much of what we keep is a burden, and how much is an anchor? Image after image brings to mind all that has happened, and so much of it has been good, no—has been remembered as good. A portrait of Karen at Lake Lugano in Switzerland, so peaceful and calm—two minutes shy of a horrible tantrum that left my patient husband swearing his five year old daughter could walk home to America. A detail of a wrought iron gate painted a garish aqua that helped enclose a home that needed to be tamed—a keepsake of Kuwait where good taste went on permanent holiday. Snapshots of annual celebrations, quick pics of incidents that mark the passing of time and life and the results produced. Throwing away could never be considered in this arena. It would prove too costly to my heart.

Letting go of it all is impossible. I don't see how my parents did it. I don't remember garbage cans filled with children's drawings or old toys in a box for Goodwill. I don't remember them being heartless, yet I know I have nothing from my childhood except one book. I know I've done better for my own daughters. They will have the choice to grasp their memories or let them go. For now, I am holding on to my things.

## Dark Brazil

Kristine Bybee-Finley

Another storm on the horizon  
Approaching in stages  
Mounting an offensive  
Gathering forces  
Storming the beach soon.

All linear against the gray eternity  
Grim clouds paled by the  
Meeting of the blacker line of heaven and watery  
earth  
Degrees of depth delineated by hues.

Stark white foam  
Screeching across the blackboard of breakers  
Pockmarked rocks accepting the heavy waves  
Hoping to be cleansed of their rough skin.



## Looking Forward

Kristine Bybee-Finley



When I don't take care of myself  
My love holds my hand and  
Talks about the years to come.  
He wants to grow old with me.

I look at his face.  
"We already did that."  
He eyes the future.  
I sift through photos.

So much history,  
So much behind me,  
Turning around and  
Gazing at what happened.

Driving with my eyes on  
The rear view mirror  
Hoping the past doesn't rear end me.  
Looking forward,  
Checking the miles gone by.

## Thanksgiving-Grazie

Kristine Bybee-Finley

Everything was different. The names on the freeway signs were all strange sounding and always seemed to end with vowels—as if all the words and all the names were a question. Nothing looked like Morgantown or Clarksburg. Nor Pittsburgh either. These were places like someone made up words, and they weren't quite sure if they were right. Milano? Bergamo? Vicenza?

Mom and Dad sat in the front seat, excited. Dad one handed the steering wheel and flashed his lights at cars in the fast lane that got in his way. Mom read loudly out of a guidebook about Venice and its churches and stuff as if everyone wanted to know about this place we were going.

Karen sat next to me rereading a book she'd read an hour ago. That was like her. Read. Reread. Look through it backwards. Read the best parts. Reread the best parts. I never liked it when she read the book the first time because she'd ask what things meant constantly. I asked her why she asked questions constantly and she asked me what 'constantly' meant. She's a good sister because she makes me laugh but she's hung up on animals and hurts me when she's mad at me. But, she's smart and likes to play the games I like.

We passed a group of tall, swaying trees and an old brick farm house. The sound of the car changed from solid roaring to a hollowed echo as we sped across a bridge. "Over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go..." my mom started singing. The railings gave me a view of dented gray metal. Who knew there was a river down below?

"We're not going to grandma's house so please don't sing that song," Karen blurted with contained anger -- and she didn't even look up from her *Black Beauty* book. Mom stopped abruptly on the word "sleigh" and turned around to look at Karen, but my sister was hunched in the far corner of the back seat and not within my mom's view so I got the 'look' instead, and I think it was supposed to bounce off me and hit Karen somehow. It wasn't one of her glares -- you know, killer raygun eyeballs that seem like they'll shoot deadly streams of venom that will numb your brain and make you into some kind of angel for at least a half an hour. No, this was one of those 'tired of the crap' looks that if you catch it and mind your manners will keep the killer raygun stares from coming at you later on.

"That's right. We're not going to Grandma's for Thanksgiving. We're going to Venice," my dad remarked in his 'tired of the crap' voice.

"Venezia," I corrected him.

I knew the minute I said 'Venezia' that I was going to get into trouble. Mom got down and dirty with her look now and it was all for me. "Don't correct your father," she warned.

Now my dad doesn't yell as much as my mom does, but he's with us less. The thing is my dad doesn't give us any real good signs on when he really has had enough. He just blows up. My mom reminds me of the thunderstorms we get in West Virginia -- you can hear them coming for a long time so that when they're finally on top of you, there're no surprises—you know they're going to be loud and flashy and do their best to scare the living

daylights out of you. That was my mom's way of getting mad. My dad's like a friendly dog that you tease and torment and nothing happens for awhile but then all of a sudden you've got teeth coming at you -- not that my dad bites or anything -- but he turns and snaps all at the same time while you still think everything's just fine.

"I want to go Grandma and Grandpa's," Karen let loose with her super loud voice. "I don't want to go to some stupid city where they don't have any cars and you have to take boats everywhere. I want to eat turkey at Grandma's. I want to play with cousin Stephanie. I want to help Grandma make mashed potatoes. I want to sit at the counter and help her cook. I want broccoli with cheese sauce and cranberry sauce..."

"Broccoli with cranberry sauce?" I put in as a joke.

"Shut up," she yelled.

"Don't say shut up," Mom and Dad said at the same time.

"And don't tease your sister," Mom hissed at me in the same breath. Uh oh, the killer eyes might be next. I could already hear the rumbling thunder getting closer. Mom started ranting in the front seat about how lucky we all were and that people would pay lots of money to be where we were and we can have a good time if everyone behaves. Karen and I looked at each other. She really wanted to fight with Mom and Dad, really let loose with a full tantrum, but there was no way she was going to do that now, so she pretended to stretch and kind of knocked my shoulder with her fist.

"Stop it, Karen!" I warned her so that Mom and Dad would hear me really well.

"I'm just stretching," she complained even louder.

"Stop fighting now!" Mom shouted out the last word and I could feel that pointy punctuation mark coming at us like a sword, so Karen and I stopped immediately, only we did it with one last mean look at each other. Karen went back to *Black Beauty* and I opened up my mystery novel that wasn't that good, but it was better than fighting and getting yelled at.

We didn't say anything for a long time, just read our books, but all of a sudden Mom turned around and told us in her serious voice, "Quiet now. Daddy and I have to concentrate on where we're going. We've never been here before and we don't want to miss our exit."

"We weren't talking," Karen protested.

"Shhh"

"But we weren't..." She tried again.

"Quiet!"

We finally got on a long bridge straight out from the mainland with huge curved street lights bending over us like vultures. Mom and Dad were really excited now. They spied the giant parking garage that they were looking for. Mom did a little victory song and called

herself the greatest navigator in the world. Karen announced that she really had to go to the bathroom.

We parked and struggled with our luggage -- two suitcases and three backpacks. Daddy always carries the heavy pieces. Karen was in the whine mode about needing a bathroom. We all told her to hold it. It was past lunch time, too, and I waited for her to want something to eat. Karen needing a bathroom and hungry is a terrible sight. Karen needing a bathroom, hungry, and hating where she is so totally awful that you want to click your heels and make her or you or it or something go away.

Daddy went to buy tickets for the vaperetto -- that's the water bus. We went searching for il bano -- that means bathroom. 'Dove il bano?' means where's the bathroom and it's the first words Mom learned in Italian. The bathrooms were located in some sort of trailer and the line was long to get in. We waited and waited and finally got into the trailer but the toilets were really messy and stank so bad that Mom started gagging so Karen wouldn't go in at all. She claimed she could hold it now. Dad found us. We wanted to hold our own tickets, but he said he'd hand them out when we were ready to board. We waited for our bus.

Karen was at triple threat level now. I stayed away from her. Mom held her close and loved her. Mom's big and warm and soft and so comfortable to hold on to. I wanted Mom, too, and Karen and I got into a fight about Mom space. "We're almost there," was Mom's chant to us. She talked about all the old buildings and how Venice -- Venezia -- used to be a really rich country and how it's built on lots of tiny islands and how it's always sinking. The big boat finally came and we argued about where we wanted to sit. Daddy had the two big suitcases and it was wet and cold on the water; he wanted to sit inside in the back. Up front, though, where the weather could get you, you also got the best views. We went with Mom toward the front. She held our hands so hard that we complained. We complained about the cold, too. And that our seats were wet. And Karen reminded us that she still had to go to the bathroom.

Mom told Karen to remember the rule: we say it together: "First time is a comment; second time is a reminder. Third time is a complaint and there's no complaining allowed." Well, Karen forgot how to count because she reminded us about a hundred more times that she had to go.

The boat engine throbbed underneath our feet and the water churned past us in dirty white foam. We turned a corner, away from the parking garage and all the modern stuff of our life and went under an arched brick bridge. Then, all of a sudden it was a world of old palaces with Arabian Nights' windows, gardens climbing up over high walls, tile and stone buildings with the water lapping against them, *lapping into them*. Then there were the boats and more boats carrying everything for living in Venice--Venezia. Vegetable boats, iron stuff boats, dirty laundry boats, a boat with so many flowers it looked like a garden growing around the man at the wheel. No cars. Just boats. No roads. Just canals.

Mom saw the magic of Venezia; you could see she was empty of modern life and had turned the corner, too. Daddy came forward and she blew him a kiss. We huddled around her to keep warm.

We finally got off the boat, along with most of the people. Daddy had a hard time with the luggage. It banged against his leg and some people didn't go around him enough and hit

the luggage, too. We walked a little ways and reached a vast, open place called a piazza, surrounded by really old buildings of stone and brick. And, in this open decorated place were about ten million pigeons all floating and gusting about like they were leaves blown by the wind. A man selling small bags of dried corn came up to us. Mom and Dad shrugged a 'why not' answer to the man and gave him money for two bags.

Karen and I stood in the middle of this ancient plaza and opened our tiny bags of corn. The birds knew the sound. Around us they rose and circled to pinpoint the source. They saw us-- alone, with corn and swooped with their rushing, thrashing wings to be the closest to our trembling excitement. They landed on us -- our arms, our shoulders, our hands, even our heads. Dainty beaks pecked lightly at our clothes. We tossed a handful of corn in front of us and they left us in mass. We waited and they returned to us. We tossed, they lunged, they ate, then returned for more. We tossed and they maneuvered greedily around our feet, then they blossomed into the air, and the wind from their wings stirred our hair.

We laughed. We laughed out loud. We squealed with joyful noise. It was our first experience that tickled us, that thrilled us, that erupted from calm to chaos with a rattle of bag, a rattle of corn. We couldn't feed them fast enough. "More bags! " we shouted. "More bags! " Dad provided us with extra corn while Mom took pictures of our glee, our bliss. We placed the corn on our heads and felt the light clawing and the gentle peck-pecking of the pigeons. We could not stop. Other visitors bought the corn now so they could take our pictures with all the birds. The corn man gave us bags because we were like a sweet song that everyone wanted to hear. We loved it. We loved it so much that we forgot that our grandparents and our cousin were not with us. We forgot that we were not in America. We forgot to complain and whine and fight. We forgot we were in Italy. All we knew was that this was fun.

The sun set on our wonderful time and the cold reminded us of our need to eat. It was an odd time to eat--not lunch time and certainly not dinner time for the late-eating Italians. Restaurants around us were closed for lunch, closed for dinner. Only one stood open and ready for whatever, whoever, may come. The name was in Italian and Chinese. Mom and Dad looked at each other and their faces said a silent yes.

"It's Thanksgiving," Dad reminded us. "I think it's a Venetian rule that if you're in Venice for Thanksgiving, you're supposed to eat Chinese food."

"Yep. It's in the guidebook somewhere," Mom agreed.

We pushed through the door and filled the tiny restaurant with our warm bodies and our high spirits. Mom ordered Chinese food in Italian. Then she gobbled like a turkey to the waiter and he laughed and laughed and shook his head. There were no other people except the Chinese staff that waited on us. When they brought the food out, it looked and smelled delicious. No turkey on the plate, but the waiter gobbled for us and we all laughed.

Dad said it was time to give thanks and asked what we were thankful for. I said family. Karen said family and food. Daddy said family and our good health. Mom then bowed her head and closed her eyes really tight, her hands clasped in front of her. "Thank you, God, for pigeons," she sighed.