

THE HOUSE

Caroline Walker Bynum

Memory is labile, as we all know. We want our own stories to have shape, to take on the elegance of a beginning and ending. Hence autobiography tends toward teleology or fiction or both. But what if I try to pin down memory with objects? Is the new enthusiasm for things and thing theory—in art history, cultural studies, sociology, and literary criticism—any help? Despite Bruno Latour’s or Arjun Appadurai’s arguments for the “life” of things, objects seem to us in fact to sit there, lumpish, inarticulate, enduring. Even if polished or repainted, abused or restored, it is their stuff that migrates through time; something that was there is here—still here. Can things then pin down stories, keep them honest, embody, solidify, crystallize the past exactly because they are both past and present? I want to tell a story about my mother that is inevitably also a story about myself. It is to me a painful story. Will it be a better story, less histrionic and self-involved, more about her and less about my telling of her, if I anchor it with things? I shall try.

I start with a photograph. It stood on the bureau in my mother’s bedroom among a few jars of face and hand cream, her comb and brush, a pin cushion into which needles, pins, and a few of her favorite brooches (including a silver moon-scape given her by my sister) were stuck, and a slightly lopsided wooden jewelry box I had made for her at summer camp. It was a picture of the house where she grew up. There were no other photographs.

The house was three stories high with a mansard roof, and, although the photo was black and white, I knew the house was yellow and the mansard roof

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green. *Mansard* was an esoteric word I was especially proud of knowing as a child. There was a wide front porch, with a swing at one end partly hidden by vines, and on the opposite side of the house, with its own entrance, was the two-room office of my grandfather, who had been the first doctor in that little Virginia town and, at the time he died in his eighties, blind and mostly deaf, was still revered as one of the town's most distinguished citizens. When I was a child in the 1940s, there were on either side similarly large houses with wide green lawns and short fences of iron hoops girding them off from the street. My grandparents' house, along with the two neighboring ones, the edges of whose lawns you could just see in the photograph, filled an entire block on the town's main thoroughfare. By the time my grandmother died in the late 1980s, the street had been widened so much that virtually no front lawn was left, and the lots on either side had been sold. To the right was a strip of squat brick buildings, housing (if I remember correctly) a laundromat and a pizza takeout; to the left was a used car lot. But, in the photograph, which was probably taken sometime in the 1950s, the lawn was broad and the house majestic, isolated, serene.

You could see only the front of the house in the photograph. But I can remember much of the rest. Behind the house was a barn, a carriage house that had become a garage, and a large vegetable garden where my grandfather grew tomatoes and the sweet white corn that signaled high summer when it ripened in late July or early August. Between the back porch and the vegetable garden was a wide swath of grass where my grandmother periodically positioned a series of chicken-wire cages in which her numerous indoor cats were allowed their only experience of the out-of-doors. While these cats were not permitted the hunting or other activities of ordinary yard cats, they were also not spayed or neutered, so there were always litters of kittens to be drowned each spring. Bob, my grandfather's beloved dog, was allowed only in the little hallway that connected the doctor's office to the main house.

The house was far too large for a family with only a single child, even if there was some hired help. The third story, full of spare and broken-down furniture, had never been used. I was not allowed to go up there and would in any case have been terrified. The house, like many of its vintage, had no closets, only curtained off alcoves behind which clothes were hung. The way these curtains billowed out, especially at night, and the queer bulges behind them convinced me they might harbor ghosts or, even worse, the tramps, robbers, and rapists my grandmother talked about a good deal in language that was code for "black men," certain that they lurked in the alley. If even the closets were threatening, what might be on that third floor to which we never ventured?

On the first floor was the parlor, used only when my grandmother played the piano and sang or demanded that her granddaughters do so. Across the wide, highly polished front hall, with the scatter rugs we were frequently scolded for

disarranging, was a sitting room with some hard, green wooden furniture (I realized, after Granny died, that it was mission furniture and at that time quite valuable) and a mantelpiece, on which a radio stood. Above it hung a portrait of my grandmother. It was not an oil painting, although as a child I thought it was. It was only a tinted photograph in a large oval frame. But the soulful brown-haired woman in it was, as my grandfather said, “beautiful.” The grown-ups said I looked like her but “was not as pretty.”

As an adolescent, I occasionally wondered why my mother had a photograph of a house on her bureau. But somehow, in the confusion after she died, suddenly, of a massive cerebral hemorrhage in her midsixties, the photograph was lost, although I kept the little wooden jewelry box, and she was buried wearing a favorite gray silk blouse and the moonscape pin. It was only later that I remembered her saying, after my grandfather died and she made one of her last trips to Virginia to try to arrange care for her mother: “I loved that house.”

I did not think about her saying this until many years later. Although I visited my increasingly demented grandmother after my mother’s death, I never had time then really to look at, to sense, to experience, the house. After my grandmother too was dead and the house had been sold to a young couple who hoped to turn it into a bed-and-breakfast, I went back once and sat across the street and looked at the house. Something kept me from knocking and asking to see inside. What I remember to this day is not so much the house itself as the photograph of the house and all the absences that crowded round it: third-floor rooms with furniture I never saw, siblings my mother never had, kittens that did not grow up, a dog that never slept on the parlor rug. And memory conjures up as well a bureau top not filled with other photographs, a space in which a silver pin and a wobbly wooden box substituted for family and friends whose pictures might have been, but were not, there. I no longer have even the photograph to study, handle, or preserve. Perhaps in writing about the picture, I am remembering primarily my own regret that I did not save it. But I am also trying to celebrate a later act of deliberate destruction: an attempt *not* to allow a thing to carry a story any longer. To explain that attempt means recounting more of my mother’s life and a little of my own.

My mother did not have a happy childhood. An only child, intelligent, intellectually curious, and (she thought) plain, she was desperately lonely. The stories she told her own children were seldom about herself as a girl; when they were, they were tales of punishment and fear, of learning bravely to cope. In one of them, she remembered sitting on the front steps of that yellow house with the mansard roof, watching workmen spread fresh tar on the street in front, and wondering what it would feel like. Warned sternly against venturing toward or touching it, she was irresistibly drawn to the hot viscous stuff until she finally put her bare feet in. After her burnt feet were treated with oil and bound up in

gauze, she was whipped for disobedience. It never even occurred to me to see her as Jo March of *Little Women*, Betsy of the much loved Betsy-Tacy books, or Laura Ingalls Wilder of the *Little House* series, although the models were all to hand, and the heroines were all intellectually gifted little girls who grew up to write books (as the child reader of course knew they would and as I assumed that my mother, with her philosophy PhD, in some sense had). Nor even in my adulthood did she seem to me like the heroines of Flora Thompson's *Larkrise to Candleford* or Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*—heroines whom she in her fortitude and her acute awareness of the world resembled. These heroines of autobiographical novels all had siblings; they all had mothers who, whether or not they understood their daughters, loved them.

My grandmother hated my mother. No one ever knew why. After my grandmother died (her daughter had long predeceased her), one of the neighbors told me: "No one ever understood why your Granny didn't like your Mama, but she never did." My mother was told repeatedly by her mother that my father's early-onset Alzheimer's was "her fault" because she was a "bad wife." Once, when she drove all the way to Virginia to visit her mother, dragging along my poor debilitated father, Granny tried to force her to sleep in a room with a hornets' nest in the corner.

Perhaps there had been some early "failure to bond," as we say now. When my mother was about two years old, she was sent for over six months to live with cousins while my grandmother and grandfather went to a tuberculosis sanatorium. My mother always said she never knew whether they had actually contracted TB. But in the early years of the last century, before penicillin, tuberculosis was a feared and often fatal disease, and my grandparents slept on an open-air sleeping porch on the second story of that yellow house for the rest of their lives as prophylaxis. The cause of the retreat to the sanatorium may simply have been that my grandfather had worked himself into exhaustion by doctoring for that whole corner of northern Virginia. In any case, my mother was separated from her mother at a crucial age. And there might have been a sibling. She could remember screams in the night, for which she had been in no way prepared, and being told the next morning: "You almost had a little brother." Later, in learning to drive, my grandmother killed a little boy who ran under the wheels of her car. Although in no way her fault, the accident meant she never tried to drive again. Perhaps the intense dislike she felt for all children sprang from such a hideous root.

Perhaps my grandmother's hatred of her only child was simply displaced hatred of her husband. Although my mother had her mother's lustrous brown eyes, she had not, unfortunately, inherited anything else. The rest of her face was my grandfather's, and he was a little man with jowly cheeks and a noticeably receding chin. Nor had she inherited her mother's clear soprano voice—the

voice that my grandmother proudly deployed as first soloist in the Baptist choir, although she always insisted she was Methodist, not Baptist. My mother dutifully took piano and singing lessons as her daughters did after her, but none of us, despite a love of music, has any musical talent whatsoever.

But Granny's disdain for her husband went deeper, I think, than a beauty's disdain for a homely suitor. It was rooted in class. My grandfather came from a miller's family, who lived "outside town." To her, he never shook off those rural, lower-class roots, despite apprenticing in a big-city office, becoming a doctor, and earning in the end a great deal of money. Although her father had been only a conductor on the railroad, she was a "Bailey," descended, at least in her imagination, from Virginia aristocracy, and from Confederate soldiers in fact. She collected Confederate memorabilia for the local museum and prized her membership in the United Daughters of the Confederacy—all values my mother would eventually abandon cheerfully. Granny refused to socialize with Granddaddy's family; she did not want them in the front part of the house any more than Bob the dog. And no lower-class hobbies either. My grandfather had to retreat to his office on Saturday afternoons to listen to the ball games once they were broadcast; the sitting-room radio was only for music and the news. When my grandfather died in his eighties, my mother found that everything in the house that had come from his family (there was not much) and almost everything from his office had been taken to the junk shop and disposed of the day after he died. She managed to salvage only two little glass bottles in which he kept thermometers in disinfectant and a large mortar and pestle for grinding ingredients for prescriptions. I have them in my kitchen to this day.

Increasingly demented, Granny remained in the house until she died, well into her nineties. When I visited, she accused me of coming to steal the silver. Because she refused to wear any sort of hearing aid, the only way I could communicate with her was by yelling down a paper towel tube kept by her bed. Leslie, always known as "the colored woman who took care of Miz Grubbs," continued to work for her, but since she refused to raise Leslie's wages, I had to send extra money to compensate. When Granny refused to pay the grocery bills because everything was "too expensive," I sent money both to Leslie and to the neighbors, who would bring food as a "gift." Persuading her to cash the dividend checks she kept in a large plastic pocketbook in bed with her, clutched into her armpit, was a problem, but a greater problem was the loaded gun she kept under her pillow. Finally, in desperation, I arranged with the town lawyer to have someone from the local police come to the front door, claiming to conduct gun inspection. The policeman managed to get the gun away from Granny long enough to take the bullets out. He later told me it was so rusted it would have blown off her hand if she had tried to fire it.

Neighbors, the town lawyer, Leslie herself, and a prominent banker named

Anderson (whom my grandfather had taken on as a kind of apprentice-cum-yard-help and had supported through college, for which he paid) took care of Granny for Granddad's sake. Always known, even by my grandmother, as "the doctor," he was revered as the county's first physician. He had cared for rich and poor alike, had regularly sewn up knife cuts in the county jail on Saturday nights, delivered babies, taken out appendixes and given typhoid shots, sat with the dying. I remember once, when he came back after being out most of the night way back up in the hills, delivering a baby, he said: "I took one look at that baby and put him down as white. It could have gone either way but I figured he'd have an easier time of it in life if I registered him as white." Country doctors had power as well as prestige.

When my grandmother finally died, most of the contents of the house, except a few small ornaments, had to be sold. My sister and I had houses and families of our own, and the cost of shipping furniture across the country would have been prohibitively expensive. Initially ashamed to discard what had mattered to Granny, I did take with me all the records for the Bailey family genealogy that she had worked so hard on and the portrait from over the sitting-room mantelpiece. As a historian, I think I had some idea of contacting a local Virginia historical society to see if they might be interested. But I never did. The papers and the portrait moldered in a corner of my basement in Seattle, festering in my mind like a damp lump of memory that preserved my grandmother's cruelty to my mother. Finally, historian though I was, I threw it all out, including the portrait, which I ripped a little so there would be no second thoughts and no questions from the garbage collectors about whether I really meant to discard it.

I kept Granddaddy's little thermometer bottles, which now stand on a windowsill and usually contain plant cuttings I am trying to root. Carrying shadows of the other places they have stood, they remind me less of my grandfather than of my mother, who rescued them. I tried to discard my grandmother when I put her portrait out with the trash. But despite my best efforts, she lives on not only in the absence of her portrait but also in my memory of the absences that surrounded a photograph of a house that is itself now an absence.

Do objects pull personal stories back from easy fictionalizing, from teleology? Perhaps. If so, it may be less because there is "life" in things than because they are evidence of what we did or did not do. They survive or do not survive because of choices we have made. Mysterious in their otherness, things wait for our interpretation, like mirrors reflecting us back to ourselves. But they are also themselves in their specificity. We stumble over them, wash and dust them; they rot in dark corners. Even when they have disappeared, their absence is there. Although neither the photograph of my mother's house nor the portrait of my grandmother any longer exists, their ghostly "what-ness" and the very different spaces they once occupied anchor my mother's story. Yes, a very particular *I* at a

very particular moment constructs a narrative arc from photograph to portrait, from treasured and lost to treasured and deliberately destroyed; the objects fix the end points of my story. Nonetheless, the objects not only fix the arc; they also force it open, continuing to puzzle. Because they must be accounted for, they prevent me from simply rounding out, creating, an ending that, at this moment, suits my mood.

I do not, after all, really know why my mother kept only a picture of a house on her bureau or why she loved that house. I cannot be sure why there were no other photographs there. I do not fully understand my reasons for throwing away Granny's portrait. Nor did my ostensible motivation in any case work to erase the hurt I assumed had run back through at least two generations. But I know that these objects survived and then ceased to survive. As long as they existed, they carried with them a particular but complicated past, one I have tried to reduce to the arc of a single story but cannot quite manage to do so. I must confront them, wondering what they meant and what they continue to mean. And even in the presence of their absence, they draw my memories back from any simple construction of them and a little way toward something that, in its eerily absent materiality, feels like a multilayered truth.