

The Objects of Our Lives

Installment 11

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We say “things” are not important, it is the people and experiences of our lives that make it rich. But is that always true? This is the question we put to Guild writers, asking them to craft a story—fiction or nonfiction, prose or poetry—about an everyday object that represents an important part of their life. The project was inspired by a *Harvard Gazette* essay by Leslie Jamison (read it [here](#)).



We are overjoyed by the number of writers who participated. Rather than creating one large document, we serialized these pieces. Several pieces have been posted each week since January for our readers to savor and contemplate. This is the final installment.

In Memoriam

“Perhaps all the objects in our installation are placeholders for who and what we have loved and lost. But these objects seem even more so, which is why it is fitting that we end with them.”

Note: Earlier we said we had only one fictional entry. We stand corrected. Steve Conley’s piece reads, as the best fiction does, like truth, but it is, indeed, fictional.”

*Maribeth
RBWG Executive Director*

Michael's Seashell. Circa 2015. Nancy P. Sherman.

Amid the combined collections of my mother's figurines and my mementos in the curio cabinet, a sliver of a seashell sits in an acrylic box. It is the only item of no financial value, yet it is priceless—clichéd expression, but true. On the day it came into my life, I had just started coming to the beach early each morning, hoping to get a healthy dose of salt air and a bit of exercise before the expanse of sand reaching from boardwalk to ocean began filling with families, their beach chairs marking territory, their quilts spread under wide umbrellas. As I walked along the water's edge, I was taking in the sun's rays while I played a one-sided game of tag with a group of plovers that ran in tiny strides toward and away from the trickle edge of the tide. Looking ahead, I saw a broken seashell shaped into an angel wing like a ceramic ornament I'd seen on Etsy. I felt its smoothness, tossed and sanded by ocean waves. Bette Midler's "Shiver Me Timbers" played in my mind. It was my cousin Michael's favorite song, and we'd played it at his funeral a few years before. I knew then that this shell was a gift from him, my cousin-brother-best friend-confidant, the one who'd shown me this coastal town, the one who'd encouraged my writing.



No longer collecting the perfect shells others value, I seek only imperfect ones, those left behind, unique, remembered.

Ashtray. 1972. Steve Conley.



My friend Charlie had nice rides, a need to talk and an addiction. He'd yap and smoke as he made lists by his ashtray or worked on cars.

But, whether lit Camels were in that ashtray or waving from his mouth above the carburetor of his '71 Mustang Mach I, ashes rarely fell.

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Charlie's burning cigarettes were always like Downward Dogs. Hell, I've had wives who weren't that flexible—women who'd die laughing if you asked if I was. Focus, boy.

That Mach I was the last of three Charlie bought in '69, '70 and '71, trading one for another, and smoking above each running engine as he tried to teach me to find Top Dead Center—basically the point spark plugs ignite gasoline vapors fed from a carburetor. Fo-cus.

Neighbors rarely visited Charlie, but everyone expected embers to light up a car or a grocery list, eventually. Never did. Charlie's timing was precise. Seconds before red, veil-thin remains might fall, a tap from his right middle finger would direct them into the wind or into his round, shallow ashtray. That's it.

It was small, maybe five inches across, with clear, pimple-like bubbles outside. Like me then.

Some cigarettes just disappeared as he made lists. A few times, when gray ashes fell into the smooth-glass basin, unfiltered ends fell away, still burning. Maple.

It's dusty, that blond table downstairs.

Charlie's habit left scars. I've left some, too. Maybe that's why I remember the ashtray.

The Photograph. 1917. Mary Ann Hoyt.

I was very fond of my Grandpa McHugh. A kind and gentle man, he used to put me on his lap when I was four years old and let me pretend I was driving his 1955 Mercury. He loved bringing me to the Nay Aug Park zoo every summer, with a bag of peanuts to feed Tillie, the elephant.

As I got older, I would sit on the front porch rockers of my grandparents' Scranton, PA home, talking at length with my grandfather, who seemed so wise and who occasionally recited poetry. I was in awe that he could remember all the lines of "The Village Blacksmith." As the oldest of his 28 grandchildren, I had decided I was his favorite.

Long after he died, my mother was going through her memorabilia, and gave me something she thought I might



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like. I opened the 1917 edition of “The Aquinas,” a monthly publication written by the students of St. Thomas College in Scranton, and who did I see on the first page but a dapper young man with the serious expression that seemed a requirement in photographs of the early 1900s. He was quite handsome, and the starched white collar gave him an executive look.

Edward R. McHugh, my grandfather, was the Editor-in-Chief. I felt a renewed connection at that moment, after seeing this younger image of my Grandpa, and I’m so thankful I inherited his love for the written word.

The Rocking Chair. 1945. Bonnie Walker.



A 75-year-old rocking chair resides in my home, too fragile to use. Once shiny black lacquer with bright gold decorations on the headrest, the color has faded with time and dutiful service. The rocker now holds of memories, a whisperer about times gone by.

Because my mother was busy with household chores, I was directed to hold and comfort my baby brother Richard in the new rocker. I never accepted the chore willingly because he was slippery and wiggly, in perpetual motion. I worried about dropping him and the potential consequences for us both. The battle never ceased because he very much wanted to escape to the floor where he could crawl around and wreak havoc.

One day as my baby brother squirmed on my lap, he suddenly stiffened and arched his back in an effort to break free. His head struck me under the chin, driving my bottom teeth into my top lip. I yelped in pain and let my tormentor slip to the floor. He was unharmed, but we both started crying.

My mother immediately came running. She scooped Richard up and soothed him with hugs and kisses. Then she noticed the blood dripping from my chin. “I hope that doesn’t stain your school dress,” she said.

When my father got home that night, he inquired about the bruise on my chin and my puffy upper lip. “Richard did it to me,” I announced, hoping for sympathy. Instead, he chuckled and said, “boys will be boys.”

18" English Dressage Saddle. 1986. Terry Berry.

Tucked into a corner of my bedroom, next to the nightstand, is a black saddle made for Dorian, my Hanoverian horse. It is a bittersweet reminder of a 13-year chapter in my life that began in 1986, when a gentle giant made my childhood dreams come true.

It is like a bookmark, holding my place on pages I want to read over and over again. The jingle of the girth buckles when I lift the saddle to his back, the squeak of the supple leather as I mount, and the feel of a powerful animal under my seat, all become vivid again. The intimate friendship is renewed on a ride up the hill behind the barn, across the fields to a trail that was once a trolley line along Brandywine Creek.



Sometimes the passage revealed is a dark twist that brings sadness to my heart. The loss of such a beautiful creature to a veterinary mistake. A minor puncture wound that becomes deadly when careless hands turn treatment into tragedy. Suddenly, the final pages of this love story—the part where we grow old together—are ripped from the book.

Despite that, I cherish this old saddle and the memories it holds, perhaps because I would not remember the happiness as sweetly if the sorrow were not so poignant.

English Donald Duck Teapot Creamer. 1930. Lisa Graff.



After my mother-in-law Edna had died, we spent Thanksgiving with my father-in-law Otto, who was struggling to live alone. Not eating much, sleeping less. In the basement we set up a new Christmas tree we bought at the local hardware store, one with multi-colored lights and a spinning wheel that enabled it to change colors. When our family gathered to play cards, I noticed Donald on a shelf. He looked to be the only happy person in the room. I had an awful, embarrassing thought: someday, I would be cleaning out this house and I wanted to keep Donald. Less than a year later Otto learned that he had stomach cancer. Untreatable.

Widespread. Nothing anyone could do. I recall climbing into my bed, curling up like a cat, unable to move. Otto was driven by ambulance to a hospital near our home. I rode next to the driver, an ex-marine who was shaking as he navigated the Washington Beltway. Otto died on January 3, 2004. For years I left his pajamas in the guest closet. Otto was full of laughter and mischief like Donald. He never paid much attention to any object except his golf clubs. My husband has no idea where the teapot came from. And I can't ask Edna. So Donald sits on a shelf in my office, watching me write, as I wish my name were well known like his. Too much writing isn't healthy, he whispers.