

# The Objects of Our Lives

## Installment 1

January 18, 2021

**Stuart Vining, Victor Letonoff, and Elise Seyfried**

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](#)).



Photo by Jim Tegman

We are overjoyed by the number of writers who participated. Rather than creating one large document, we are serializing these pieces. Several pieces will be posted each week for our readers to savor and contemplate.

**As we send out the first installment of “The Objects of Our Lives” on this day when we celebrate the author of the “I Have a Dream” speech, it seems fitting that we begin with objects that capture something of our own dreams... *Enjoy reading!***

*Maribeth*  
RBWG Executive Director

## The Case. 1967. Stuart Vining.

Scrimping every week of my summer job, by the day after Labor Day, 1967, I had saved enough to buy my dream guitar, a Martin 12-string. At noon that day I was in the biggest music store in Washington, D.C., money in hand. My Dad was there to make sure his naive 17-year old son didn't get fleeced. The salesman opened the guitar case and there it was! "I'll take it," said I, handing him all my money—\$220 in crumpled bills—exactly the price of the guitar alone. "You want the case, too?" the salesman asked, "It's \$40.00." Now broke, I said I'd have to get it later. My dad could see such a fine instrument deserved a custom-fitted carrying case, so he spoke up, "I'll buy the case for him."



That evening, my Dad used his model railroad lettering kit to hand paint my initials in gold foil on my new guitar case. He was proud of me for following my dream, I reckon. I still have the guitar... and the case, which is scruffy but solid, the plush lining holding up well. It still smells of the day I got it 53 years ago. Occasionally, I get some gold paint and my artist's brush to touch up the faded monogram and think of Daddy. **Click [here](#) to view the video Stuart created to complement this piece.**

## Icon Anvil. 1990. Victor Letonoff.



Late fall 1990, and I'm back from spending six months in a small town (Herlichofen) outside the city of Trier, Germany. Before Germany, I spent eight years training to be a decorative blacksmith. American blacksmiths are purists, viewing ironwork nostalgically, revering the old ways. Germans favor a more modern approach, using the skills, knowledge, and technology of the 21st century. Learning this has blown open doors for me, creating vast possibilities. I can make this a career! I can produce affordable decorative iron products that are part of everyday architecture.

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That fall, I've got no responsibilities. I'm all about art. I'm a skilled craftsman, the guy (when you pay me enough) who can make your art last for generations. I've studied with some of the best. The art world is mine.

This anvil epitomizes that time. The anvil is the surface on which I beat iron into a beautiful product, my hammer forging that iron into the shape of my vision. I designed and made this anvil even though everyone told me it was futile: Anvils must be made from drop-forged steel; the top must be made of hardened steel.

I told them they were wrong.

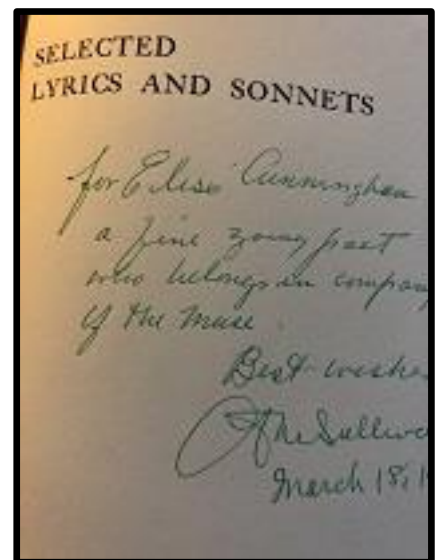
I knew I could make my anvil and I did—my first insight into the world of “You-can’t-but-I-know-I-can.” Although I rarely use it, I look at it often and remember those days when nothing was impossible.

### Autographed Book of Poetry. 1973. Elise Seyfried.

It has a tattered purple dust jacket. It has occupied many bookshelves as I've moved from place to place. But though I've given away many of my books, I will never surrender this one: *Selected Lyrics and Sonnets*, by A.M. Sullivan.

My childhood home was not exactly The House of Literature Buffs. I taught myself to read at age four, but my primer was TV Guide, by far the most perused volume in the Cunningham household. My earliest poem was a heartfelt clunker penned when I was six (“Dearest President Kennedy/Who lay in a hospital bed/And it was such a tragedy/When doctors said, ‘He’s dead.’”). The tiny audience for my scribblings consisted mostly of kind teachers. As I approached high school I grew discouraged, and wrote much less.

But then came March 18, 1973. A neighbor had arranged for her brother, a noted poet, to speak at a local event. I loved A.M. Sullivan’s presentation, and went up afterward to speak with him. I summoned the courage to share a poem I’d written, then asked him to autograph one of his books. Sullivan signed it: “To a fine young poet who belongs in company of the Muse.”



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Did he mean it? I have no idea. But those words were enough to make me think of myself, from that day forward, as a writer. Even now, on tough days, I re-read that inscription. I'm inspired to persevere, and also to support struggling young writers.

Because encouraging words do matter.