

The Objects of Our Lives

Installment 2

January 25, 2021

**Kathleen Martens, Sharon Hoover, Beth Ewell,
Aleida Socarras, and Karen Strine**

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



Photo by Jim Tegman

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 are serializing these pieces. Several pieces will be posted each week for our readers to savor and contemplate.

The five objects in this week’s installment all serve as reminders of strong women.

Maribeth
RBWG Executive Director

Tiny T-Shirt. 1982. Kathleen Martens.

The snow-white cotton memory is the size of my outstretched hand. Running my fingers over the angled neckline and silver snaps, I lift the tiny T-shirt from my dresser drawer. Has it been thirty-eight years since my daughter wore it on her fragile first day? Her returning to live with us now is as unexpected as her premature delivery six-weeks before her anticipated birth.



I've packed and unpacked this memento on every trip I've taken since she was born—from Mexico to France, Indonesia to Thailand. Today, I resurrect the shirt as a symbol of her survival and pray my daughter can cast off her dreadful role as pandemic prey.

Stunned by the world-wide COVID catastrophe, I prepare the guest room for my daughter's arrival from Brooklyn. Thoughts of her surging symptoms, screaming sirens, and shocking statistics in the news haunt me. My chest tightens, and pressure builds behind my eyes as I relive the garment's history. Now, this dazzling author, professor, world traveler, grown-up-version of my infant, is coming home into my care again. I cradle the shirt like a fragile bird and place it on her pillow.

My weakened daughter is carried upstairs by her husband. He lays her on the multi-colored quilt. Her breathing labors; her heart races. Glancing at the tiny T-shirt on the bed, she smiles at me. She understands the miniature remembrance is a message of hope, and we know she will thrive again.

Grandma's Apron. Circa 1945. Sharon Hoover.

My mother-in-law, always called Gramma, had a sprigged cotton apron with two generous side panels and a large middle one. The edges and seams, piped with bright aqua cord, complemented the paler aqua flower sprigs. Two wide straps ran from the bib over the shoulders and down the back, and two long, wide straps tied around the waist. When I was young, the long ties wrapped around me and tied in front. When I was pregnant, and as I became older, I tied them in back like Gramma.

Before holidays, as I ironed the apron, I gave it special attention. At 5 a.m. on Thanksgiving, I hugged Gramma in her apron. She was busy making a dozen pies

The Objects of Our Lives

before anyone else was awake—six pumpkin, four apple and two cherry. We cooked the turkey in a roaster so the stove's oven was available for pies.

At the end of the long day, after everyone else had gone to bed, I wrapped the apron around me, smoothed it down while thinking lovingly of Gramma and picked the turkey bones for soup stock.

After Gramma's death, I wore it on special days, then more often, as I missed her more and more. The colors faded. The fabric became thinner.

Finally, when I was 83, forty years after Gramma's death, eighty years after my mother's, I placed the soft, fragile cloth in my mother's hope chest where I keep special things for my children.

Hallmark Shoebox Greetings Mug. 1999. Beth Ewell.

I remember the summer of 1999: Saturdays stuck in beach traffic, no A/C in my Camry wagon, the sweat trickling down my neck. And then a blast of cold air that gave me chills each time I entered the nursing home and saw her standing by the door.

Mom would follow me from the lobby to her room. One scorcher, I had to change her top before taking her out to lunch. She lifted up her arms as I pulled off a long-sleeved turtleneck over her head, exposing three twisted bras—one on top of the other, multiple layers clumped together like the plaques and tangles of dying nerve cells occupying her brain, the very thing that would take her life and change mine forever: Alzheimer's disease, the memory-stealer.

No one gave me a roadmap back then. At forty-one, I had to navigate times of uncertainty and fear, times often filled with sadness. But that journey was also filled with laughter. And the blessing of friends like my former co-worker Kitty who gifted me a mug from a yard sale that reminded her of me and the story of mom's bras. I still have that mug with the picture of a frazzled young woman and the caption beside it: "Things could be worse...you could put your bra on backwards and it could fit better."

When I reach for that mug, it still makes me smile.



Lucky Bamboo. 2010. Aleida Socarras.

My mother-in-law, Yoya, was an extraordinary woman with an infectious laugh and unique joie de vivre. The summer of 2010, after a long hospital stay, we gave Yoya a six-inch, two-stalks Lucky Bamboo to cheer her up and bring her luck and good health.

When Yoya passed in 2012, we brought the pint-size bamboo to our house. Over the years, we moved several times, always finding in every home a perfect spot for the tree. Just like Yoya, it has had a singular place in our homes and in our hearts. The Lucky Bamboo has become an omen of our good fortune. Our prosperity hangs on each limb. From its evergreen leaves, Yoya watches over us, making sure we are safe and happy.



A decade later, as we face our mortality, I wonder what will happen to the bamboo when my husband and I cannot care for it. Yoya’s Lucky Bamboo has propagated its fortune over us and our home, not because it is lucky but because we were blessed to have known and loved Yoya. I hope our kids feel the same about us and will one day happily bring our seven-foot giant into their homes.

Depression Glass Candy Dish. Circa 1930s. Karen Strine.



May is my favorite month of year, full of new life. I gave birth in May and my mother died in that month. I inherited a Mayfair pattern Depression Glass candy dish that was hers. It had been her mother’s, too.

The turquoise candy dish is beautiful to me. It’s on a shelf in our house where I pass by it daily. Depression Glass was made in the 1920s to 1940s to bring some hope and brightness during those hard economic times. Someone said it was “pretty glass that brought families together during the Depression era.” Tables were set daily with Depression Glass. It was inexpensive and sturdy, yet dainty and feminine. The Hocking Co. made the monochromatic colors to appeal to women and to entice them to shop.

The Objects of Our Lives

Women were viewed as dainty then, too. But in the late 1920s, women earned the right to vote after many years of fighting for it. My mother was pretty and a strong fighter. She lost her mother when she was only four years old. She also lived in an orphanage for two years with her handicapped sister. Later, she lived with cousins, one of whom was active in the local Suffrage Movement.

It's an object of little economic value but my Depression Glass candy dish is brightness to me during these hard times and a reminder that while life is fragile, I will survive just as my sturdy women did before me.