

# The Objects of Our Lives

## Installment 5

February 15, 2021

**Faith Lord, Nancy North Walker, and Mary Jo Balistreri**

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.

**“Love needs the things of the world,” novelist Margot Livesey writes in *The Hidden Machinery: Essays on Writing*. The day after Valentine’s, these three objects reveal the many ways love can be lost—through death, circumstances, perhaps a quiet erosion.**

*Maribeth*  
RBWG Executive Director

## Stained Pillow. 2020. Faith Lord.

We both had a pillow filled with tiny Styrofoam beads. It wasn't washable so I made sure mine was used only by me because his pillow had sweat and other bodily fluids forever marking the cover that housed its insides. I wanted to toss it.

It remained his favorite during his lengthy illness. It supported his dangling neck caused by the corkscrew curvature, barely noticeable in youth, now pronounced by the drawing pull of Parkinson's. His frame so bent, he could no longer straighten to meet my gaze. Weeks turned into months and months into years. The beady pillow supported his head everyday up until his last breath, yet I still wanted to replace it with something new.

My husband died on October 5th of this year. I picked up that pillow to throw it away, but couldn't. I stuck it in his closet. I busied myself with funeral arrangements and thank you notes for flowers and food; I forgot about it.

Sobbing alone in our bed one night, I went looking for his scent: a t-shirt, his fleece jacket, a pair of pants. I prided myself on clean laundry and now hated the freshness of his clothes. Finally, I remembered that awful pillow. I sunk my face into the many stains, breathing in every bit of him, now my source of comfort, a treasured possession.



## Rhoda Lee Woodman North Chair. 1924. Nancy North Walker.



Whenever I went to my grandmother's house, I gravitated to the dainty upholstered chair with fluted back and deep ruffle, not just because it was cute and swiveled, but because it was my grandma's most prized possession. It was designed by her first fiancé, a young furniture company tycoon from Grand Rapids, Michigan, as a tribute to her. He sent her The Rhoda Lee Woodman North chair as a wedding gift after she married my grandfather in 1924. It was featured in his company's catalog for many years.

As a young girl, I loved that story. I conjured various iterations of the man who loved her so much he created a special chair in her name, even though she broke off their engagement. It struck me as a very public declaration of unrequited love.

His love wasn't entirely unrequited, though, because my grandmother always kept the chair, re-upholstering it many times through the years. It even adorned her assisted living room when she passed away at 101, her signature splash of rouge on her cheeks.

I was honored she bequeathed her special chair to me. It sits in my bedroom, and sometimes I imagine her sitting there, telling some silly story, laughing and slapping her thighs. At her memorial service no one wanted the photos scattered on a table, so I claimed them. Among them was her first engagement portrait. The man beside her was just as I'd fantasized: tall, dark and handsome.

**Blue and Yellow Plastic Travel Mug. 1989. Mary Jo Balistreri.**

Shards of fog rise  
from the pond this silent dawn  
ghostly shapes  
a stratum of faces  
life's broken pottery  
Startled by carp  
shadows in gray  
uneven  
in a mood of blue  
sustained languorous  
like the slide of a trombone  
long and sinewy  
down the arched limb  
of the tree falling into the reeds  
a pitch-bending wail  
Is that me?



When did our life together  
begin unraveling?  
Our choice to love less  
when was that?  
Was it like the cat slipping  
through the house  
or like wind shifting sand  
into new patterns  
we didn't recognize?  
I pour coffee from the stainless thermos  
notice how fog shrouds even the marigolds  
on the deck. Holding the blue and yellow  
Brewers mug with both hands  
I notice the players' signatures  
are no longer there  
smoky erasures  
those long-ago names  
all that's left the warm mug