

# From My Father's Workshop

*Inspiration from father to daughter*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY GWEN DIXON



**What Goes Down the Drain**, hooked globe 2½" in diameter.

This was the first piece I made for "From My Father's Workshop." In the fall of 2018, my siblings and I prepared my parents' house for sale. I took the time to explore the contents of the drawers of my father's workbench and found several glass jars. When I saw one with rubber sink plugs, I had an image of a globe at the end of a plug. I thought about how we let things slide down the small drain opening and go out of view. We might not think about what we pour down the drain, but although we lose sight of it, it remains and returns to us through the water, air, and soil of the Earth.

The globe is needle felted with roving wool and the plug was sewn onto the globe. The globe can be raised or lowered by turning the faucet. The half stump is a found object. The globe is roughly geographically correct.

**M**y father's workshop was in the basement of my parents' house. My father spent many evenings there, enjoying the quiet: tinkering, sorting, and experimenting. As a child, I did my homework on a chalkboard just outside his workshop. I rarely ventured into the workshop, but sometimes curious, I would ask what he was doing or what an object was for. He always gave a brief explanation followed by the phrase, "in case I find a use for it."





**Plan B.** Mat is 9" square, finished with cotton binding. Nest holder is wet felted, 11" in diameter. The nest was a gift from a fellow fiber artist, Heidi Wulfraat, of Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia.

Life sometimes requires us to make a "Plan B." We do all of the planning that we can to create the life or the situation that we want (as in the organized rows of hooking in the 9 squares), but aspects of life can start to change or to combine differently (the ways the wool combined in the wet-felted piece), forcing us to change and to adopt a new plan. For my parents, the "Plan B" was leaving their home of 49 years and moving into an assisted-living apartment. However unwelcome to begin with, Plan B's can turn out to be beautiful and can lead us to develop in ways that may

surprise and give us new life (a nest). I found a jar of springs in my father's workshop and thought about how springs connect parts to one another. They also absorb energy, which can be stored for long periods of time. We can develop strength in those stable, predictable times, to be used later, in less predictable times or during changes. Springs also help parts to return to a previous or desired position. While we may never return to our Plan A, we can hope to return to a state of stability and health.



**Making Plans,** 24" square, wool and yarn on burlap.

I found an architectural-like room schema on a clipboard in my father's workshop. It was a plan my father was making to organize his "office" after he retired. My father was always making plans to build or organize something. I have never used any method of planning to place furniture or to decorate, and my father's approach made me laugh. I considered how planning for almost anything involves units of some sort (days, dollars, people, distance, plots of land, etc.) and I had a different understanding of my father's approach. I hooked this mat to represent units of planning. My father had won an international award for one of his lighting designs, so, to honor my father's way of seeing things and his work, I hooked the background in black to make the colors seem more illuminated.





**I Am Like a Bird**, 10" x 8". Needle-felted bird, nest, and eggs.

Like my father, I collect things. I particularly like buttons, kitchen utensils, and bird nests. Birds are also known for collecting things and taking them to their nests. In cleaning out my parent's home, I reflected on my own collections and thought that someday, someone will need to decide what to do with my "stuff." I took a vintage drill from one of the many in my father's workshop because I liked it. When I Googled vintage drills I discovered that it was an "eggbeater drill." I have collected vintage eggbeaters for years and realized then why I was attracted to this drill. The bent spoon was in a drawer of my father's workbench and seemed like a good place to build a nest.

We recently cleaned out my parents' house. As I helped my mother pack her teacups, my mind wandered to the workshop. Later that day, I returned alone and headed down the stairs. The drawers of my father's workbench were heavy with old glass jars of small sorted

objects, to be sold as scrap metal. I took anything that caught my eye: An Art Deco-style car door handle. A small metal pulley. I didn't know why I wanted them, but I trusted that I would know later.

The next day, I spoke to my father.

"Dad", I began, "can I have some of the things from your workshop?"

"What are you going to do with them?" he asked. I described the jar of plugs and my idea for the needle-felted globe. "I have more ideas, too."





**A Year in the Life**, 28" x 22", wool fabric strips and yarn.

I have always loved trees and decided to look more closely at the rings of the tree, to see what I could learn. The rings represent years, with the innermost rings called the pith. Surrounding the pith is the heartwood, which provides the strength to support the tree but does not conduct water or minerals. The lighter colored rings (further out) make up the sapwood. The sapwood conducts water and minerals from the roots to the leaves. The rings show scars and shakes, which indicate events that have challenged the tree, sometimes an event within a year, sometimes events that challenged the tree for several years. The same things happen in our lives.



**Three Trout**. Each trout is 11" x 13" long. Wet felted and stuffed with roving.

My father and grandfather both liked to fish and often went fishing together. They brought rainbow trout home and my Mom would fry them in butter, flour, and commmeal. This fishing creel had been my grandfather's. I found it stored on a top shelf in my father's workshop, along with old fishing rods and tackle.





**In Too Deep**, 12" diameter, 5" tall. Proddy hooked on burlap.

This shovel handle in a drawer in my father's workshop was another curious item that my father had saved, because . . . well, you never know when you might need the handle from a shovel! I sometimes think that situations feel so entrenched or developed that we wonder how they will ever change, if needed, or improve. These were my thoughts when I made In Too Deep.

"From My Father's Workshop" collection was shown at the Tidnish Bridge Art Gallery in Nova Scotia, in October 2019, as part of the Nova Scotia Fiber Arts Festival. The objects from my father's workshop that inspired the pieces were also on display.

"Well, let's go," he said, standing up and gesturing toward the basement.

My father has dementia and can no longer explain what the items were for, and to be honest, I never really understood his answers. What I wanted, more than explanations, were the moments he took to answer a question, the feeling of him nearby,

and the art, arranged in jars, for future use.

I have used the items saved from my father's workshop in pieces of fiber art, made with hooked and felted wool. Many artists find creating with fiber to be therapeutic. As I look back over the things that I made, I see that during the making of these pieces, I thought a lot about

how my relationship with my parents was changing, and what it means to leave your home. **RHM**

Gwen Dixon is a fiber artist from Riverview, New Brunswick, Canada. You can find her at Gwen Dixon Wool Arts, on Facebook and Etsy.

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