

(Parts of pgs. 1-9)

Memory, bits and pieces, and the threads that connect those pieces are often woven through other fragments. It is like a ragged sweater; if you pull on one piece of hanging yarn, somewhere else in the sweater the weave bunches, pulled tight, or perhaps a different sleeve begins to unravel. Once we had a dog that grew old and deaf and nearly blind and began to lash out at people who came near him, assuming that anything unseen or unheard was a threat, and then his hips began to give out and one afternoon I found him dragging himself across the floor, unable to stand on four legs. The vet said that he was unraveling. I can stitch him up, he said, but something else will come apart. You won't do him any favor by tying up the loose ends.

I came down across the meadow in the half dark and the grass beneath my feet was suddenly no longer soft. The temperature had dipped below freezing and the wet grass crunched and I knew that I would have to wade the creek and I wanted to get there before it was too black to see where the water began.

And so the black dog that I had to put down is stitched to other fragments, black threads that span half a century.

A place in my childhood. Woods beyond the fields that were on my Uncle Earl's farm. They were filled with birds, mostly crows. Sometimes in the evening they came in a great cloud and spiraled down into the trees as if the trees breathed them in and they shouted at each other and it grew dark and I could hear the cicadas begin their constant whine that would last all night. I followed the rows of corn back up to the farmhouse, the narrow aisles of corn high over my head. The leaves were sharp and I held my hands in front of my face and it seemed much longer than when I had come down to the woods. There was a creek at the edge of the woods. It was no more than a trickle in the summer, but the water was cold and once I took my clothes off and lay in the water. It was not deep enough to cover my body.

We are all a collection of our childhood. Dog-eared scrapbooks filled with the things that shape us.

I'm remembering a feather I found under those trees. The feather was black satin and the quill was transparent where it had been attached to the wing, ivory as it grew thinner in the rising fan. Light as a feather. It had no weight in my hand, only the soft touch against my palm. There is no weight to what I remember of that summer. It is all rising heat and chaff that floats in the sun.

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There is a picture of me and Ronald in front of the little house in Wyanet. I am blowing out the candles of my second birthday cake. I wear a white blouse and white shorts. I have a full head of curly blonde hair. I could have been mistaken as Ronald's little sister. Ronald has on American flag socks with red, white and blue stripes and stars around the top. The house was tiny. Two rooms and a kitchen. I thought it was on the other side of the railroad tracks, but Paul said no, it wasn't just on the other side—it was next to the tracks and when an Illinois Burlington freight train came past, the house vibrated. Paul will be born a year after that photograph

was taken. There is another memory of that house. It was a hot, Midwestern afternoon, and I ran naked into the street where other naked children cavorted. They filled buckets of water from a standpipe and hurled the water at each other. They were, I was told later, Kentuckians. They were the ones in the front row of the school picture with Ronald in it. They sat, cross-legged on the ground, wearing bib overalls, all of them barefoot. Ronald stands at the end of the second row, wearing long trousers, a white shirt and a tie. He must have been about ten. When I ran naked into the street, my mother came out and pulled me back inside. It was my mother's sense of decorum, an innate sense of dignity that took me from the shouting group of naked children. We were not Kentuckians, whatever that meant. We did not run naked in the street, no matter what our age. My older brother wore a tie for the annual school picture. He was the odd one out, and for the rest of his life he would be the odd one out, the boy wearing the tie, the man wearing a three piece suit and a Homburg hat long after other men had discarded their hats and vests.

I do not think I invented the naked children in the dirt street running in the mud they made on a hot afternoon. How else could they have become a part of my memory unless I witnessed them? It was not a scene that would have been told to me. Where, in my brain, was that scene stored? In some white envelope that had written on it: do not open until you are an old man.

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I went to grade school in Arlington Heights. I assume Paul did, too. Ronald? I don't even remember him living in the same house with us. We had a dog, a cocker spaniel that ran into the snow and when it came inside, ice clung between the pads of its paws and had to be plucked out. The dog cried every time. Once, I remember crossing a vacant lot on the way to school. It was covered with new snow and there was a scarlet tanager on a leafless bush in the center of it. I remember that red. It was like a clot of blood in a whiteness so brilliant that it hurt my eyes.

The school was a two story brick building, a block that resembled an impregnable fortress. High double-hung windows filled the walls of the classrooms. I remember snow gliding past those windows, finding myself outside the glass, the flakes clinging to my hair and the teacher suddenly calling my name, bringing me back into the classroom with a jolt. I often drifted away from the lessons.

There was a basement in our house with a coal bin and an ice man stopped in front to deliver ice. We waited until he was inside the house to climb into the back of the truck and pick up slivers of ice to suck. And then my father went off to the magic mountain and we left Arlington Heights. Only one other event stays with me: Paul and I hiked out to Arlington Park, the race track that was just outside the town. Somehow, we thought it would be an easy walk. We made sandwiches, a piece of bread and a slice of cheese and we walked through the fields. The corn had been harvested and the stubs of corn stalks cut at our ankles. It took several hours to get to the racetrack, a huge, cavernous structure that was closed because of the war. Its emptiness was frightening and we immediately turned around to come back. It began to get dark, the temperature dropping below freezing. I do not remember if I was frightened at that point or not. I only wanted to keep Paul walking. Our shoes grew heavy with frozen mud and when we finally sight-

ed the lights of the houses at the edge of town I was relieved. Once we were on a street, a police car found us and took us home. I must have been in trouble for taking my six year old brother off across the frozen fields, but not much was said. Nothing much was ever said. The words were swallowed in our house.

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Henning Mankell, writing in *Quicksand, What it means to be a human being*, writes: “over the years what one looks like in the mirror changes, but behind that mirror image is always the real you.”

Here I am, writing once again, putting words on paper. I am trying to make sense of something, but I’m not sure what. Sense of my life? Sense of being alive? Sense of what I did for eighty-three years? I have included among these essays dogs, people I remember, places, streams and rivers, birds, my parents, brothers, food, storms, rain, words, moments in the classroom, bits and pieces.

Among the first words of *Ghost Trout*, I wrote: “Memory, bits and pieces, and the threads that connect those pieces are often woven through other fragments. It is like a ragged sweater; if you pull on one piece of hanging yarn, somewhere else in the sweater the weave bunches, pulled tight, or perhaps a different sleeve begins to unravel.”

I wrote that ten years ago. So I pull at the threads, jotting down the bits and pieces, sometimes in the coffee shop on the corner, sometimes in the small hours of the morning here at my keyboard. They come floating back and as I write, I try to give them some shape. It is in shaping them that I remember more clearly. Something else that Mankell wrote: “Nobody wants to be forgotten but nearly everybody is.”

The only people left who remember Aunt Edna and Uncle Howard standing in Mr. Frye’s tomato field are my brother Paul and I. And when we are gone, they, too, will be gone. There will be no one to remember Uncle Howard talking to Mr. Frye, his way of avoiding the work of picking tomatoes, no one to remember Aunt Edna bending over, selecting the biggest, ripest tomatoes that she could spend the next week canning. No one to remember the smell in her kitchen as she made chili sauce and fried big slices of beefsteak tomatoes coated with egg and cracker crumbs in butter, melting cheese on top. And when the two of us are gone, there will be no one who will remember our games of catch or throwing snowballs in the vacant lot next to 123 S. Mitchell Street.

Auden, in the final lines of the film *Night Mail*, wrote, as the train pulled into the vast empty station at Edinburg, “for who can bear to be forgot.”

But Mankell is right. My father and mother will be forgotten when Paul and I are no longer here to conjure up memories of them. My father, squatting in the Victory garden in Arlington Heights is a dim figure. Anyone seeing that photograph will wonder who he was. I can remember his slender figure, his quiet reserve, and what must have been his stark emptiness when he got off the train at Valmora in the New Mexico emptiness. Who can remember when every family had a member suffering with tuberculosis?

So I keep pulling at the threads. I have pulled at several here. In the following pages I will pull more of them.

(p.24-26)

Deeth siding. Great Uncle Howard and my mother commuted to San Francisco on the ferry. The Bay was black at night, no lights because the war was still on. There were seven of us at the dinner table at night, sometime as many as nine: Aunt Edna and Uncle Howard, my two brothers and I, our mother, Aunt Laura, and sometimes Eva Baer or Mr. Brown, who rented rooms in the house on Carmel Avenue. On the way home from work, Uncle Howard would strike up a conversation with a young soldier or sailor bound for the Pacific. Invariably they were from Iowa or Illinois or Kansas and by the time the ferry docked in Oakland, Aunt Edna had another person to feed. Aunt Edna kept everybody's ration book, and she was adept at trading sugar stamps for meat, a meat stamp for enough sugar to make a cake, finding ways to extend the meal when there were extra mouths at the table. She never knew when her husband would show up with another 19-year-old in a sailor uniform, shy and nervous, but there was a mid-western dinner, a meatloaf or a pot roast, lots of mashed potatoes and gravy. It must have seemed like a touch of home to them.

Paul and I slept in a room in the basement and there was an army cot along one wall. This was where the soldier or sailor would end up for the night.

The train that brought us west was filled with soldiers and sailors. When my father was told he had tuberculosis, Aunt Edna and Uncle Howard were the ones who took us in. My father went off to the magic mountain in New Mexico and my mother, my brothers and I spent three days and four nights on that train coming west from Illinois. Paul had his seventh birthday on the train. I would turn ten when we arrived in Oakland.

The porters made up the Pullman berths every night, folding the seats back, pulling down the beds, drawing the curtains. Ronald slept in an upper berth, Paul and I shared a lower. We had a window, and the night landscape rushed by, lights that came and went, far-off houses, sometimes a town. The long aisle of the car was a narrow dark corridor, the green curtains covering the berths on either side. There were the voices of people behind those curtains, women in robes who emerged to walk to the far end of the car where there was a washroom. Most of the passengers were young men bound for the Pacific war. The heavy cloth bulged and moved as people readied their beds, struggled to put clothes into the hanging nets. A curtain opened to let someone climb to an upper berth. and then, when it got late, the voices stopped. The corridor was empty. If I went down to the men's toilet at the end of the car, I would find the black porter shining shoes, and sometimes men who were smoking, standing in their uniform trousers and undershirts.

There was a cousin who was a bomber crewman in the Pacific war. I met him once. He drowned in the sea off Guam. Not because his plane went down. He was swimming. He survived air combat, numerous missions over Japan, and celebrating the end of the war, died like a tourist.

The war ended and the lights went back on in the Bay. It was filled with ships and suddenly the big sign in Emeryville was there. Coming off the Bay Bridge in the evening we were faced with SHERWIN WILLIAMS PAINT in huge letters and then a globe with the outline of North America. A can of neon paint tipped over it and red light splashed like paint and the sign flashed, COVERS THE EARTH as the red lights covered the globe.

The soldiers and sailors disappeared, the ration books stayed in the drawer in the kitchen table and we drove in Uncle Howard's 1939 Packard to the McCloud River. I caught a trout that summer.

The Pullman cars are gone. So are the great steam engines, the twenty-wheeled Malleys that made the ground shake. Standing at the siding in Deeth this afternoon, looking out across the Nevada sagebrush toward the Ruby Mountains, I can imagine that long-ago train rushing past. A family lived in the abandoned house behind me. There was a store. Paul and I might have seen the lights at night.

But Deeth, which had been formerly named *Death*, was empty. Somewhere to the north of me was a trout that should have been dead, too. But for several thousand years it had managed to adapt to the harsh conditions of the high desert, and against all odds it had survived. Survival. Some of us do, some of us don't.

(P.75)

Dancing the Avenue. It is 1960 and I am once again walking up MacArthur Boulevard with a young woman, one that I have fallen in love with, and we stop in a bar. It is a cement block bar, like all of the others in this working class neighborhood. Behind us is the Chevrolet truck plant and there are men working the night shift, the long lines carrying truck chassis and engines and fenders and the workers live in small houses that rise on the slope east of the boulevard. We enter the bar. It is the kind of place where men drink shots and beer and we order two beers and put a quarter in the juke box and punch several numbers and then we dance and one of the men says, "Way to go!" and we dance slowly, pressing against each other, until the song is finished.

When the beer and the songs are finished we go out into the night and go to the bar in the next block. We call it "dancing the avenue." It is sixty years ago. The Chevrolet truck plant is no longer there. The bars have grids of steel on the windows. Young men lounge on the corners, calling out to passing cars, and it feels dangerous. But I can feel the music, dancing close to her, and the years melt away.

Dancing the avenue.

(p. 83-88)

Birds. Take away their feathers and their bodies are tiny, the skulls miniature, all eyes and beak.

The bluebird wears a blue cap and cape and the sandhill crane wears a red cap. The red-winged blackbird has red and yellow epaulets on its shoulders and the Stellar jay has a blue crown, like a warrior's tufted helmet. The water ouzel is soft grey, and shy. The merganser is sharp-beaked with a russet crest and flies astoundingly fast. In the pre-dawn darkness an owl suddenly materialized at the windshield of Geoffrey's truck, wings as wide as the cab and in that same instant it was silently gone. In the woods at the edge of the clearing I can hear birds among the trees, and wish I knew their calls.

Once, when I summered in Chapel Hill, a mockingbird near my room spent part of the afternoons calling out the sounds of an ice cream truck, police sirens and occasionally shouts of boys playing baseball in the street. At Sagehen Creek Mark and his assistant tied fine-meshed nets between the trees to capture miniature songbirds. They needed a magnifying glass to fix the tiny bands to their legs. The birds remained still, Mark's hand closed around the body while an assistant clipped the band around the toothpick of a leg. In flight they were indistinguishable from each other, but when captured, there appeared yellow wings and throats, black caps, and rich brown backs.

Years ago, Garry Sayer wrote to me: *Purple bruised sky, leafless trees bent in the strong wind, pheasants and rooks about their earth-picking business and the odd buzzard and hawk riding the air.* Everything about Dorset is captured in his words.

Egrets stalk the marsh, white question marks among the reeds. They lift their legs a millimeter at a time, their heads motionless, waiting for some movement in the water. In the brilliant green rice fields they are single brush strokes.

The sedge wren weighs only nine grams, about the weight of six paper clips. A mottled brown, its heart beats seven times faster than a human heart. There are other wrens: the rock wren, the canyon wren, the pacific wren, the marsh wren, and the house wren, a delicate bird with a white throat.

Its heart is no bigger than the tip of my little finger, yet it throbs insistently, propelling the tiny bird in flight into hedges, through the branches of trees, its miniscule claws suddenly grasping an oak twig. It would take three hundred such hearts to make up the mass of mine.

My younger brother's heart has failed once, and now struggles again, a valve opening and closing erratically. I think of the wren's heart, the heart of the merganser, the heart of the egret that beats in a stillness that is complete and I think of my brother's heart, surrounded by muscle and flesh, struggling to maintain a rhythm that will enable him to, once again, snowshoe into the mountains in the dead of winter.

There was a bird researcher at Sagehen Creek who shot sparrows with a .22, keeping the tiny carcasses for study. I thought of bird hearts that had been stilled and wondered if, somehow, those hearts could have been installed in my brother's heart, transplanted into the valve that was

erratic, filling the void that would not work correctly. But, of course, those hearts beat seven times faster than his heart. No chance that there would be a match.

It was strange, she said, that she had to kill the birds to study their lives. There were, she said, thousands of study skins in museums. By examining the skins of the birds she had shot, she had been able to determine that a sparrow on the coast was different from the sparrows in the inland valleys and mountains.

Audubon shot some of the birds that he painted so that he could examine them at close hand. Audubon told of seeing a flock of passenger pigeons that passed overhead. "The air was literally filled with pigeons; the light of noon-day sun was obscured as by an eclipse."

They continued to blot out the sky for the fifty-five miles it took to reach St. Louis. He reported that they continued to shut out the sun for the next three days. Millions of birds. None of them are left.

There are no more Bickfords. The only Hills left are my brother and I, and, of course, our children. In the back yard at Grandpa Bickford's house in Wyandot, there was a martin house. A miniature mansion, it was several stories high, on a raised post with multiple entry holes to the nesting rooms, an apartment house for birds. The martins darted toward it, coming to a sudden stop on the peg outside a hole and then disappeared inside.

Grandpa Bickford told me that the birds wintered in Brazil, and I got out my Goode's School Atlas and traced a line south from Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico and beyond, down to the South American continent until it reached Brazil. The legend in the corner of the map told me that they had flown five thousand miles.

They come every summer, he said. Some birds come back, and the mother and father bird are the same, stuck with each other. I wondered at his verb.

The martins were swallows, feeding in the air, taking beetles, flies, damsel flies, midges, bees, cicadas, flying ants, butterflies and moths, grasshoppers and wasps. They drank from ponds, skimming along the surface to take a beak of water in full flight. Their weight, I found out, was a mere 1.9 ounces. Less than two first class letters. How small was this brain that remembered a martin house in my grandfather's back yard, five thousand miles from where they had started? What kind of a heart kept beating five hundred times a minute as they flew six hundred miles across the open water of the Gulf of Mexico?

I sat on the grass between the house and the barn and watched them darting and swooping in the evening air. What kind of eyesight and physical prowess did it take to snatch a flying wasp or a cicada moving from one tree to another?

A half century later I stood in a riffle on the Feather River, casting for a steelhead. The water pulled at my legs and I was suddenly conscious of swallows skimming the surface, taking insects. There were dozens of them, an intricate dance in the air and I stopped casting, watching, wondering how many insects they needed to fuel the metabolism of their tiny bodies.

This morning's crow waited at the top of the driveway. He rose, lifting himself into the oak tree and he scolded me, insistently, over and over. Another crow called from across the canyon.

I have seen them descend in a circular cloud, falling into the trees like a black breath, dark shapes filling the branches, moving against the dusk. There seem to be more crows than there used to be, picking at things in the road, rowing silently overhead, distinct against the pale summer blue, hopping across the street, lifting suddenly when the car is almost upon them, dive-bombing a hawk that hovers over the ridge, harrowing it off.

Crows learn to recognize people. Did this morning's crow know me, know I was getting into my truck? Was it shouting at me to leave something behind? Accusing me of disrupting some morning crow ritual?

There are stellar jays in the Nelson Creek canyon, hawks and kestrels hover over the sagebrush flats, seagulls circle the school at lunch and swoop inside the rim of the baseball stadium. They appear in the ninth inning, as if they know the game is nearly over and the crowd will depart, leaving French fries and half-eaten hot dogs.

But crows stay close to my house, call out in the evening when I sit on the patio with a drink, rise into the oaks at dawn, and they are not silent. They make themselves known.

Here I am! they shout. Over and over.

Eleanor and I met a priest at a shop in Berkeley. He was from Brazil, and I told him about the purple martins that flew from Brazil to my grandfather's house in Illinois.

"Do you know where in Brazil?" he asked.

No, I did not.

"No immigration, no passports, no customs, no borders," he said.

"But it's amazing that they could go all that distance to find the same back garden each year," I said.

"Perhaps not," he replied.

I go to the gym in the early morning, and walk aimlessly on the treadmill, setting it at an incline that will exercise my heart, increasing the speed as I walk. The machine monitors my heart rate, tells me when I am reaching too far. But it is nothing compared to the heart rate of birds. I am a sloth compared to them. My older brother died of a heart attack, a massive jolt that stopped him at his desk in the morning, and then I discovered that the Hill men had a history of exploding hearts. Only my father, who succumbed to tuberculosis, escaped. So, I hike along the North Fork of the Yuba, climbing over rocks, careful not to slip, feeling my heart race faster when I cast toward a long race, and later, in a cabin on the edge of the river, I drink a scotch and the sound of the river fills the air. Paul and I are a long way from our grandfather's back yard. Below me, swifts skim the surface of the stream, picking insects out of the air. Perhaps birds live a life as long as mine, only at a faster pace.