

GHOST TROUT



RUSSELL HILL

Copyright © 2019, RUSSELL HILL
All Rights Reserved

ISBN 978-0-912887-90-6
Library of Congress Control Number:
2019951257

Cover photograph by Russell Hill
Cover and book Design by Lauren Grosskopf

Pleasure Boat Studio books are available through your favorite bookstore
and through the following:

SPD (Small Press Distribution) 800-869-7553

Baker & Taylor 800-775-1100

Ingram 615-793-5000

[Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and [bn.com](https://www.bn.com)

& through

PLEASURE BOAT STUDIO: A NONPROFIT LITERARY PRESS

WWW.PLEASUREBOATSTUDIO.COM

Seattle, Washington

Contents

PART I

Fragments

PART II

Ghost Trout

PART III

The Dark Current

PART IV

Dogs

PART V

What is True

I

Fragments

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.

A fox crossed the road. It came out of the woods onto the pavement and at first I thought it was a cat or a small dog but the sun caught its coat and it was a sudden burst of flame and it stopped, looked at me, and then it was gone in the brush on the far side of the road. It came out of the wood and crossed into a field. The field had huge rolls of hay and it was near Villeneuve. I wanted to walk and it was hot and I wanted to get in the car and drive to the sea. If I had gone to the sea I would not have seen the fox.

The sun slanted across the pocket valley toward the wall of pines. The creek bubbled softly through the meadow and the cattle were far off. A larger shape that appeared to be a bull stood still, not grazing. At the far edge of the meadow, just before the trees, there was a line of lime green where the spring line faded to a rich yellow as the grass came toward me. I watched the water turn dark, waiting for a big brown trout to begin feeding but there was nothing, only the iridescent blue of damsel flies hovering where the damp grass dragged in the water and the sucking of water over stones. The silence was complete.

An egret rowed along the edge of the road earlier, paralleling the road, its neck bent in an S, the wings like oars parting the air, a sharp white against the intense green of the rice field. I slowed to see how fast it was moving but it veered off, and I stopped and watched until I could no longer see it.

There is a picture of me and Ronald in front of the little house in Wyandot. 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.

We moved to a house owned by a retired Methodist minister, who shared his house with us. It wasn't far from my grandfather's house. Apparently he didn't approve of my father, who by now was working as a carpenter, and we were not invited to share his large Victorian home. I remember nothing of the Reverend's house except that next to the driveway there were hollyhocks, and I could make little dolls out of the blossoms. Tear off the round bud and put it on the stem of the blossom and I had what looked like a tiny woman in a ball gown with no arms, and no features.

And then we moved to Elgin.

That was a narrow house and my father's mother came to live with us. She had a bad heart and spent much of her time in bed, a large woman who was folded into the feather mattress. I tried following my older brother around. He called me "shadow," and he and his friends would let me tag along until we were some distance from the house, in an unfamiliar neighborhood and then they would suddenly split up, confusing me, and I would be left to find my way home. I was in second grade, and my teacher, Miss Higganbothan, had us memorize poems. I memorized a poem that began, "The woodpecker pecked out a little round hole, and made him a house in the telephone pole."

I recited it for mothers who came to the school, but my mother wasn't there. She worked at the Elgin watch factory, which, because the war was on, had switched over to making instruments, including bomb sights for airplanes. My father worked as a draughtsman at the Seneca shipyard where LST's were made that the Chicago Bridge and Iron Works launched sideways into the Illinois River. We went once to a launching and sat on the opposite shore. But we sat among poison ivy and Ronald and I came down with severe cases on our ankles

where our trousers and socks had not protected us. The cure for the blisters that rose and opened, draining fluid, itching like fire, was to submerge our feet and ankles in a mixture of acetic acid and water. The pain was excruciating. I remember screaming as Ronald held my leg in the bucket. I do not remember him howling with pain. He was stoic even though he would have been no more than eleven years old at the time. What I did not realize was that he was different. He knew things I did not know.

He knew that my father was blind in one eye, a fact I did not discover until I was nearly fifty years old. My father had a glass eye, the result of an accident in which he had plunged through the windshield of a truck. I was told, years later, that he was lucky to have survived the crash, and there was speculation that he would lose both eyes. But I wasn't privy to that information; I only knew that we lived a solitary life in a little house in Elgin where my grandmother died. I do not remember that event. Suddenly she was not there. I do not remember grief or tears or anything other than the fact that the feather bed was empty and we would move again. I lived in a family in which emotions were not worn on the sleeve. They were not even worn in the pocket. I do not ever remember anyone crying at someone's death, except, perhaps when my older brother cried at my father's funeral. I was startled at his behavior, as if it were not appropriate, out of character for him and the family, and the moment passed quickly.

And so I carried those scenes from my childhood somewhere in my head, and there was no one I could share them with. We were not a family that shared secrets. We were not a family that shared any kind of emotional baggage. The disappearance of a grandmother, an empty bed, and no memory of a funeral or a ceremony or grief that she had ceased to exist.

The woodpecker pecked out a little round hole. That much I remember.

We lived for a short while in an apartment in Elgin and then moved to 123 S. Mitchell Street in Arlington Heights in 1943, the sixth house we would occupy in eight years. My father always worked, even in the worst depression years, and now he had a job as a high school teacher and basketball coach. But the following spring when they tested teachers for tuberculosis, his world fell apart. What is strange is that I don't remember him leaving us. His letter of resignation to the school board was accepted nearly on April Fool's Day in 1945.

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 sighted 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.

I fell and broke a bone in my ankle and now I'm wearing a heavy boot that immobilizes the joint. It was the fall of an old man, a senseless tumble, since my foot had fallen asleep and when I stood it did not function. So I sat in the waiting room at the doctor's office and I thought, I'm in a room full of old people, and then it dawned on me that I was one of those old people. That face I see in the mirror is not a familiar face, bags under the eyes, lines on the cheeks, the face of an old man.

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 Edinburgh, “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.

ONE NIGHT I DROVE WEST from 73rd Street toward the bay and when I ran out of industrial buildings I suddenly came on a roadway covered with toads. Some secret signal had caused them to migrate and I was driving over a carpet of

creatures that turned the road into a swirling mass of living things. And then they were gone.

Night time creatures. Possums crossing the road, their long pink tails like giant rats, scurrying in the dark toward some house where the skirt revealed an opening in the foundation, a chance to find some warmth in a dark place.

IT IS OCTOBER on the North Fork of the Yuba and the river rushes, low, a quiet whisper at night. There is an earthen bench high on one bank where an old apple tree bends toward the river and in the weeds below it are windfall apples, gnarled little things like the fists of a child, but they are sharp and sweet and the leaves of the aspens float in the afternoon breeze, gold coins that drift toward the water. I sit on that bench and have a scotch, warm brown liquid that burns my throat and I watch the riffle that foams over a granite slab, imagine a trout drifting in the current, waiting for some late insect to tumble toward it.

Earlier that afternoon in a quiet backwater a water ouzel dipped into the pool above me. A soft grey bird, it suddenly went under the water and I knew that it was wading on the bottom, looking for a hellgrammite or the pupae of a stone fly and suddenly it popped up, not ten feet from me and went under again. It was John Muir's dipper, the bird he described on his journey to Yosemite a century before. It was a magic weekend, filled with light and dark and a bright trout not eight inches long that came to a fly in the shadow of a rock and I no longer cared if I caught anything else. I watched the long back cast and waited, held my breath and there was a moon that rose over the river and a blue flame in the wall of the little cabin where I slept. It popped on periodically during the night and each time I heard it, I waited while it flared, and then I slept again.

Art Morris and I slept in a cabin named *Trout*. We sat on the little porch in the heat of the afternoon, drinking a cold beer and waiting for the sun to go off the water, the temperature to drop and the fish to rise.

On another hot afternoon I sat in the cool front porch of the Harrington farmhouse outside of Wyanet. It was a square, two story house, a heavy block that faced the north and endless corn fields. The porch covered the front of the house, deep, with sturdy columns and a slanted floor. Nobody used that porch. Everybody came into the house by the door at the back, next to the kitchen. They came through the gate beside the stock tank, just beneath the windmill, crossed the green lawn and opened the screen door next to the small room that housed the milk separator.

The front door led into the parlor, a room with shades drawn, smelling of furniture polish and dust. I must have been about twelve years old. We had come

back to Illinois to visit and Paul and I had spent the day chasing piglets. My mother's cousin, Howard Brieser, farmed his father-in-laws' acreage, and that day he had been castrating piglets. Paul and I ran after them, tackling them against the fence, dragging them to where Howard and a neighbor farmer sat with their sharp pocket knives.

Work stopped in the heat of the afternoon and somewhere in the house Howard napped while Aunt Blanche, his mother-in-law, began preparation for dinner in the summer kitchen, a screened-in addition at the back of the farmhouse. I sat on that shady porch and looked at the shimmering air across the road.

That same shimmering air hovered over the LaPorte road on a September afternoon forty years later. Art and I climbed out of Nelson Creek, having fished it all morning, taking bright trout from the shaded canyon stream. And now we sat on the edge of the gravel road, looking across into the haze that filled the Middle Fork canyon like faint blue smoke.

Art is gone and I fish rivers that are more accessible to a man my age. October light, John Gardner called it. Aspens are bright splotches of gold against the dark green firs. The North Fork of the Yuba is low and translucent green. Tires rumble on the bridge that crosses above Downieville. In another few weeks the first snow will come, the flakes dissolving in the black water, rounded white caps appearing on the rocks, and the cabins will be boarded up for the winter. In the Central Valley the rain will fall steadily, the rice fields will fill with water and snow geese will blanket the edges of the highway.

Alexander von Humboldt never saw the ghost trout that is named after him. He never sailed in the current that sweeps down from Alaska, bearing his name. He never waded into the Humboldt River or saw the red-winged blackbirds that swarm in the reeds along its banks. He didn't see the solitary egret that stalks the damp headwater near Deeth.

In the high alkaline desert of Nevada, forty miles northeast of Elko, the sagebrush is darkening and the temperature has dropped close to freezing. The Humboldt cutthroat trout will winter in those ice-edged streams, just as they have learned to adapt to the summer inferno that raises the temperature to the point where no other trout can survive.

The towering ridges of the Ruby Mountains are still bathed in soft light.
October light.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>