Foldings

Packing for his return to England, Grandfather showed me how to roll socks into little fists, tuck them into shoes, fold shirts into rectangles tidy as sealed envelopes. I was three. His suitcase a marvel of geometric shapes, not a sliver of wasted space. Key twisted in the suitcase lock.

I’m folding sheets now, smoothing squares into smaller squares so they’ll nestle at right angles on the linen closet shelf. I was six when Granny showed me how to iron without an iron, “finger pressing,” she called it. How to smooth the wrinkled, still-damp fabric of a skirt or blouse with the flat of your hands.

In my twenties when Mom called, took a half-hour to tell me what she’d hidden so far down in a drawer it had taken decades to find. She said she’d finally remembered: nighttimes, in the big bed, her little-girl self folded between them, her daddy played with her, taught her to play with him, her mummy right there.

How you can fold yourself in on yourself. The toes of the socks curl innermost, the tops wrapping around them. How you can take your own layers and tuck them into creases.

Grandfather’s origami—on his second visit, he showed us how to fold a piece of plain white paper into tiny triangles, and then—voilà!—open a flower, a bird.

After Mom’s phone call I lay down on my own bed. Over and over I said to myself, “Mom’s going to be all right, now Mom’s going to be okay.”

Forty years later, last summer in Paris, at the Centre Pompidou—the paintings of Simon Hantaï, wide white walls with his room-sized unfoldings. He’d crushed the canvases, folded the cloth so he couldn’t see the whole surface while he brushed the paint. Pliage. Said he didn’t want to know where the edge was, where the canvas stopped.
A different kind of folding. And unfolding. The way you shake a clean sheet 'til it sails over the bed, billows. The way a white-winged dove folds her wings close to her rounded middle, then opens them out, lifts off. Unfoldings, the way a flock of swallows makes pinpricks in the sky, openings. Rents in a reddening evening.

Glenn Herbert Davis, photograph