

MARIANNE BORUCH

The History of The

first, we weren't anyone

or a cloud taught us. Then rain,
then the slow moving toward.
Which is to say, it was the sun
we saw, the sky
blue because certain vast machinery
in the eye tells us what is
color. Second, we found two whose
bodies might invite us here. Past
the dark room of that
though it was pleasant enough. Third,
the long slide. Then the longer
learning simple massive things: food
goes into the mouth. And on its way out?
Well, there are other things
of mystery: how one number equals those
two birds on a branch, why sleep comes
and forces you to lie down straight.
Remember, we weren't anyone.
And then, that changed
and changed again.

• • •

I had a book once

and opened it. Maybe it was important.
I watched my grandfather read like that, his lips
moved, silent, and I saw his eyes go
word by word, left to right. Forty years ago.

And to see that now? How could it matter?
Under the knife, the body is quiet.
And the surgeon gathers himself like water
to the sponge. The room is cool
as the past is cool in its
immaculate way. Dark hallways. Even in the summer,
the rooms there. . . . Meanwhile, my grandfather
read by the window. And I gathered myself

though there was no self yet
to gather. How to say this? I watched
light fall on him and all his years:
beautiful, courtly.

. . .

the bone house

and we build it, one of childhood's
great triumphs. Rib, spine, femur, skull
to take the weight of days, release

of nights: knuckle, vertebrae, joints
for every moveable minute—up, down,
in, out. Is the soul a tent

draped under it? Tiny fractures that
curve the spine, that change the walking
forward or backward, the cadence,

the way we imagine here to there.
Over so much time. And now this
stiffening, this clicking, each step,

each step down. Ghost of the old ones
passing into my tent where we
sit down wordless, no tea to pass.

• • •

the history of

the, says the linguist, began grandly
as *that*. As opposed to the plainest *a*
meaning a man, a woman, a day like any other
day between them. Oh ancient
the!—as in *that* second cousin I loved, say,
or *that* afternoon once, when you
looked down into the empty lot,
the old woman saying: sometimes, it's
just filled with cars! *The*
with a hat on, a wild feather
in such a hat, spotted, streaked,
even tipped in red. Until, until
the great graying into
the, oh lord of balance, oh
polite nod to center the blooming
whatever-it-is
on the tablecloth.

• • •

guesswork

is work: one eye open, the other—
always building back to that
earliest half-lit place
where days were an inch, the night
miles of inching through space,
one dim star

to star. I only mean
I liked those times
sitting in the woods alone,
nothing quite locked
in my binoculars, my confusion kept to
which bird and what flower
as if, for a moment, that
right on the verge of knowing were
a kind of knowing. So clouds
have no idea they're
clouds. The *almost* in us,
billowing.

• • •

snow melting on roof

isn't a halo. Isn't memory really
though in certain places, the shingles
next door—made to look old, that

cobble-looking old—show through
the way forgetfulness clears
for a second, and you're back

on the hospital stairs where
a nurse breaks down in tears,
looks up, startled—who were you

to be there? So much is unexplained.
It's all melting anyway—snow,
the thought of snow, its intrepid

invention: winter, that private
knock-knock no one answers, though
in bad poems, there's always

a voice for it, maybe a low moan.
In truth, it's merely cold
and cloudy—no glitter

off the roof's half snow.
No wind just now: sometimes
the mind stays here.

• • •

drawing, of course

I would draw my cat,
but she'd look back. I would
draw her but she's
way past sleep and sheds her
quiet like tickertape
down the long hallway, talking
cranky and offkey.

Of course, it's winter. I would draw
that, but a pencil isn't
fierce enough for branches stripped
to nothing. To one leaf, which
is as good as nothing. And nothing—
that gift needs invisible ink.

I'd draw the way words feel
in the mouth after too long without
words, or the way the body rises after
hours of dream, gravity
on every bone again, that anchoring
and ache.

Or I wouldn't. Or I couldn't.
Or I'd bury the treasure
in the most obvious place.

• • •

old photographs

take a moment and pretend
it's a life. The happy picnic. The happy
look-at-us amid flowers and soiled napkins.

My friend Joan took a picture once,
three nuns, all strangers in the solid flowing white,
peering into the Grand Canyon, that

astonishing void. I see them
from the back, a hand just so, pointing.
A head tilted. There. And my eye, poor eye,

moves from one to the other to the other,
restless. And pleasure? The canyon's vast
and empty, and endlessly still. And so small,

my looking at their looking.

• • •

no one in the library this early

so it's all sleep, talkative
books silenced by their covers.
And Xerox machines dreaming that
one rare uncopyable thing. And computers
still pinned to their home sites. Gladness is
human: none of that. Neither

is there sorrow, or sweetness, or—
no—no jubilation. And just to invite
tears into this place, one needs a full life
or at least one afternoon,
the traffic blinding someone
driving straight into the sun: *Officer,*
I just didn't see it. But is it solace?
Here? A quiet, clean corner. A book of poems
no one has touched for ten years. I open it
to the middle, a poem not
particularly good, maybe an afterthought
added the last few hours
before mailing off the manuscript.
Because one line, maybe
that one. . . .

. . .

crossing the street at dawn

or not dawn, not yet. A few cars in the dark.
A young man with a backpack
in front of me. Stars? Too cloudy.
I left my car somewhere.
And walk. Too stiff to walk
this early. And the great university's halls—
looming sturdy as lament.
Across the quad, a door opens and closes.
The street lamps—one must
pass under them: the reverse
of shade. A kind of weird mist,
that light. So I let a pencil
bring it back, writing this by hand,
plain as it was: glowing, uneventful.

. . .

something flashes

in this hollow between buildings. Closer,
a notebook, smallest ambition
of the binding machine, big enough
to reduce the world to faded ink—one bird
and its color, say, someone carefully
writing the date: late winter, early spring.
Or it's just a phone number there,
no name. Mysterious
least of things, stained, open. One page
turning, turned back, this day
in a new century—one hour
or one life. It was mine, I'll say, or
it was yours. What do we call that?
Wind? Was that it?

• • •

really, I remember a window, nothing

special. A young tree flowered
once a year. The flowers pink, or they
were white, the stamens yellow
in the folds. Maybe the green finches

had turned their brilliant gold
by then, hanging funny on the feeder
to earn their thistle, seeds so tiny,
flying out of my hand through the wind—

hardly anything. A slow buzzing
of frogs those springs. At first we thought
insects, the pitch higher
on warm evenings. I know exactly

when it stopped. By June or so, only birds
slowed the twilight, not
many. We sometimes walked then. It was
cooler, the sun out of the world, everyone

tired of the day and what it brought. What did
it bring? I remember only the same things
over and over, the way a song remembers,
coming back like that.