

## The Stairway · Marianne Boruch

Once in a houseful, against everything  
elusive and too loud, I kept  
the smallest solitude.

I could cup my hands and see it, that flame  
a brief blue. Which is to say  
I was twenty, dragged along—of course, a party—  
my roommate had a new  
wild boy, remote and sweet, those two,  
as another species. Believe this:

we said nothing, crosslegged on the floor.  
But my god—one second  
just a wall before us, whole and blank,  
it flashed open to a stairway,  
*stairs* in the nowhere upward gloom like some great  
bad movie, some  
changeling's breathless launch.

I turned to my friend—do you see that stairway?—  
who grinned at her friend: *Gerard*,  
*she sees the stairway*.  
Such racket parties make—in every other room, laughter,  
bodies slow and quick with each other,  
and that god-awful music.

Is it fair to say now I dreamt this  
years ago, woke up  
still twenty, amazed at the nonchalance  
of certain mysteries: my roommate sleeping, the curtains  
stunned with light. And in this quiet, half  
a lifetime now. That dream  
is twenty.

Outside it's early, and into  
a final decade. It's summer, too warm  
for morning, the air like something  
someone already breathed in.

I breathe it in, who knows whose spirit.

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If I could dream again like that, turn it over  
like we used to hold  
an ailing bird in one hand, an eyedropper  
careful in the other,  
would the dead begin to speak?  
Its tiny mouth opens exactly  
like a hinge, like each same chamber  
of the heart unlocks, unlocks.  
Even of things we love, what remains?  
Of summer, say, one image maybe—a car,  
a gravel road  
too little for the map, how  
one of us stopped arguing, violent at the gears  
backed up to see that deer alone  
and slow, right  
at us in that field, chewing the soybean's  
ordinary leaf.

All pause is ancient though minutes  
speed like light. Forget *coming from*  
or *going to*, a story  
breaks to threads, worn down by details  
until the last detail floats  
like a stick in water, two sticks.  
That deer we save  
for when the room gets dark, his curious look, or how young  
he was, stupid, an easy shot  
in growth that low, or the wide-brimmed leaf

— this stays — oh, each  
bigger than his tongue.  
The field shrinks then billows up.  
One's lithe  
and seasick with it.

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Not that we could go there. Not that we could  
leave this body like a thing  
hanging on a hook, and enter like an angel.  
Far easier to say  
what is beautiful to say, that fields release  
their silence like a scent, that any pasture  
fenced and distant, haunts  
like some pure creature out of Euclid.  
The horizon's drugged by that. And years,  
his book of perfect shapes, it's open  
on a desk until  
the cool-tipped pointer in our teacher's hand  
glints again like something  
launched through air, and shatters.  
Dearest ones, she says  
not sweetly, is it this? or this?

One makes *story* from what broken bits  
one has. Of course the nun was old,  
past 80, those lines and angles hers completely.  
Give them back! We did,  
good repentant thieves, tongue-tied  
with guessing. Every hallway darkens then dimly  
lights itself.  
I ached like that — to mess things up  
and be sincere. Once after class  
I seized the chalk, pressed  
my oddball squares  
and squiggles. Can we prove these, Sister?

Maybe universal laws for these?  
Those, she said, they're nothing. Get them off the board.  
My nothings, off—off! — my next-  
to-nothings. But their manic outlines stayed  
next morning, faint map  
to shame and joy, two tiny kingdoms linked  
by the narrow bridge I stood on.  
I still vote  
from that bridge; a sometime worthy citizen, I guard it  
with my ferocious shrug.

But this dream of strangeness  
has a slower scarecrow life. Now I hear it  
another way: kids this morning flood the porch, they're true  
and funny both. I want their wires, their  
flashing discontent with stillness.  
They fight to be the dead guy in the play  
until the winner throws her body on the porchswing.  
No way, they cry. You can't laugh.  
You're dead. You can't.

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We hug that fact as though the dead  
were always in lament. It makes us the only ones  
to be so happy. Don't swear to it.

This first: you have an uncle,  
disappeared for years who dies  
an old man but you dream him  
young that week, bathrobe-young, the thing  
slipping off his shoulder.  
He's too radiant to care.

Second, I'll take him back — no pretense —  
*my* uncle then, and I tell him outright in the dream  
how good he was, a good uncle.

*But I haven't seen you in 20 years*, he almost sings.  
So what, I say. It was the idea  
of you—the opera you loved, the novel you wrote,  
and burned when you came back from war.  
*Oh, that.* He's laughing, so graceful  
in the blousy bathrobe, flushed  
with sudden circumstance. Will you come  
to visit us? I say. I know it's far, this house  
in Maine. *Maine?* he says. *Maine?*  
—arms sweeping toward the loosest heaven—  
*My dear, I can do anything*—jubilant, triumphant—*I'm dead!*

Whitman, ghost-to-be  
when he wrote his glad insistence  
on any beauty, that “to die  
is different from what any one supposed,  
and luckier”—as if such luck  
could free a life  
from its saddest nowhere, as if one's crystal ball  
looked back.

My dream believes him though, an old man new,  
and raised, and roaring, still  
one of us. Uncle, after years  
I'm dizzy with it, getting up again  
in that day's cold light, in that house  
we've sold and left, not sure  
what besides your happiness  
is waking. Just *one of us, one of us*—weird  
lovely warp passing  
through the stubborn body to its darkest pinpoint:  
Tod Browning's film—remember?—six  
decades old, *Freaks*, that  
little jewel  
caught sideways in the throat. It's hard  
to breathe.

But in college—forgive me—all my housemates  
rushed to be disfigured  
and demented, the mutilated, the misjudged,  
the film's poor lyric folk  
outside the building on the quad where  
someone kept it showing. Extra credit for Psychology?  
Practical Endocrinology? For Entomology? Really, we looked  
a child's idea of insects, shadowed  
in the bushes against the show's finale  
to leap into spring's sweet dark  
and chant the famous chant: *we accept you, google gobble,*  
*one of us, one of us*, bearing down  
on those little gadget moviegoers our screwed-up  
homemade masks, our all-embracing arms, so many, like some  
awful Shakti.

Who were we in those twilight seconds?—ancient something  
hissing in the moonlit inner ear.

And of the stairway dream? Some dreams are our reward  
for cowardice or secrets, the way  
we fly, or love completely. But none of us rose  
to walk those steps.  
Dear Uncle, not one of us, one of us  
that luminous or brave.

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So every night we walk real stairs, my son  
once so carefully  
chanting the litany of the netherworld—his *bad dreams?*  
to my *no, good ones*. His *bad dreams? bad?*  
to my cheerful hopeless *good* and *good* and *good*.  
Safe to sleep then. Safe.  
And the room is any room, all gauzy streetlight shape  
taking its ruin  
calmly, willfully to dawn.

Of course birds again. And we, forgetting who  
or what they are—old dinosaurs shrunk down  
centuries of morning  
to whatever bearable size.