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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.

*

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.

*

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.

*

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 gidget 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.

*

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.