

Marianne Boruch

an excerpt of

Is and Was

Memory then. But of course such a thing exists, and *is* the linchpin of poetry. Everything we are is beholden to it. It's built right into language, past tense and all the deliberate ways to score that, to break that open and split hairs—past perfect and present perfect, pluperfect and so on. The older we get, the more memory clouds or clears what we see. We don't merely imagine its pressure, don't always let it slide into an overwhelming terrible weight or pure squish, though both are dangers. How it works in poems: the *how* is crucial. Because memory's ache is enormous, and greedy.

Only stillness lasts. Is that true? Is there a template here? Some lesson? A fact or just a time-bound quirk of nineteenth-century optics and light? I like this story, the brimming street forever stripped to an unsettling quiet. But do we remember that way or mainly that way? Are we constructing our own so-called Memory Theaters, the prized and elaborate art of that before things could be easily written down and printed, remembering as the Greeks did, and so many others on through the Middle Ages, way into the Renaissance at work on their same real imaginary places—theaters certainly, but forums too, and abbeys and gardens and cathedrals. Vast rooms and tiny spaces they built so keenly into mind, each to hold a memory, each in its place. One could walk there, fully in one's head—open a door, a box, or a drawer—and see, carefully stored, whatever image vivid and intact, whatever thought or argument desired. Could it be something like that, how we keep memory?

... I began bothering people, as if I carried a battered clipboard, standing there full of my never-to-be scientist self. "Just how do you recall the past?" I

asked family, friends, even strangers. I mean, your grandparents for years on their porch, are they a matter of stills, stop-action shots? Is your cousin back there basically a *movie* of your cousin—his bike heading straight toward the rosebush? And what about that news your sister turned toward the window to tell you? Is she a blur or slowed to exact gesture, her *not* looking at you? And is *self* in there too—or not the self, really, since we only see *from* there, the self as site, this whatever-we-are impossible to picture clearly as separate, as apart from our looking. Memory straight: that's everything around us, isn't it? Then inside us, how such things made us *come to* and connect, or disconnect. And our refiguring again and again after the fact how any of it happened.

In what way *does* memory work? At its core, maybe it is a frozen fossil record, the upturned wing darkened and pinned as if in flight, that stone lasting thousands of years. Or it might be closer to Eudora Welty's idea that though the world's claim on us, how we learn it, is "made up of moments," it's "not steady. It's a pulse." However it comes, memory is mostly a matter of image, I assume, and probably very present-seeming images; I agree with Augustine on that. Of course, the results of my poll were multiple: both. We remember both action and stop-action, people said. Okay, so the jury's out. But I loved their faces as they argued this, each one of them half-dreaming back—where? to picture what?—just to double-check their method. And—full disclosure—I see *that* in stills.