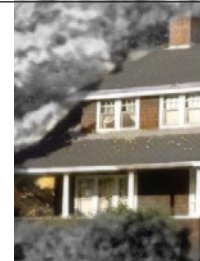
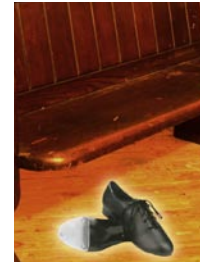


2 stories



Home



Rhythm

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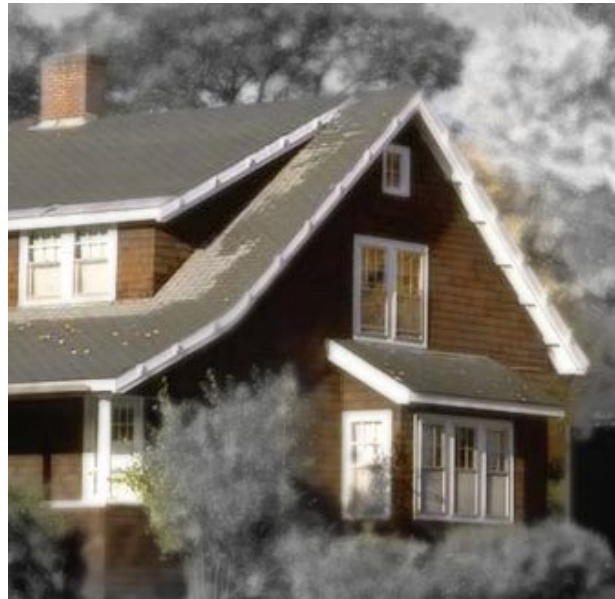


Home

In my dreams there are always houses filled with rooms. Some are dark castles with foot-thick walls and terrible stairways. Some are holiday houses, airy and full of light.

My home is built from strands of memory and chunks of time, held together with a mortar distilled and mixed in places where only I can go. It is a ribbon of memory that weaves its way through dreams and ripples through the rooms. It is built on generations of blood and bone.

I pass through a room bright with crayons on a sun-flooded floor, where children cup their chins in their hands, determining the proper colour for ducks and rabbits. His room smells new, like babies. Powder and milk. In another room, Gigli sings Cielo e Mar. My father is in the big green armchair. His eyes are closed, the fingertips of one hand just touching the other,



making a little tent that he can crawl into, the way people do when they pray. He does not hear me as I tiptoe past. He is suspended, out of time, the music winding round and round him.

The walls of this room are lined with sagging bookshelves, built from salvaged wood, like our playhouse in the basement. The titles of the books were branded on my memory long before I could read. Sometimes I would pick them up and run my hands over the covers. When I opened them, the bus transfers slipped between the pages (my father's bookmarks) fluttered to the floor. The words were an array of tiny ciphers, arranged in code. My mother's favourite books are in a line on the shelf in the headboard of my parents' bed.

She uses real bookmarks, the kind that stay where they are put. Some have quotations on them. Some were picked up during a holiday or gallery visit. She likes to read each night before sleep. Like my father, I tear through books. I find it



hard to put them down when it is polite or practical. I notice that my books are stuffed with bus transfers too, and now I too slide into the steam of a Sunday morning bath, enfolded by Gigli's voice.

My home is painted with stories that change with each telling. The floors are the green of an Irish meadow, the walls the grey of London's wartime streets, the ceiling the turquoise of a tropical sky. As a child, I imagined myself rolling down an emerald hill, or lining up for food, holding a ration card, or lying, malarial, soaked in sweat in a Burmese jungle. Years later, drifting in and out of a coma in hospital in Taoyuan, I am floating in a Canadian lake, willing my spirit out of sweat-drenched sheets. In fevered dreams, my mother's face is impossibly soft. I ache to be home.

And now my home sings with Gardel, Troilo, Piazzolla. El tango. We dance too early in the kitchen, like the old men in Buenos Aires. I imagine Mercedes showing my English grandmother how to drink mate. The air is redolent with the fragrance of jacaranda and malvón, red geraniums hung in summer patios.

It has a life of its own, my home.



Rhythm

The boy's toes tapped against the stone floor under the wooden bench whenever the choir sang loud enough to mask the sound. If he timed it right, he could get in at least ten satisfying taps between the last *Agnus Dei* and *dona nobis pacem*. From the knees up he was solemn, but under the pew he was dancing, tapping out a beat. *Sanctus*, two, three. *Sanctus*, five, six. *Saa-nctuuuus*, eleven, twelve. One tap for each of the apostles. His favourite seat was in the back of the church under the Sixth Station of the Cross, where Veronica was wiping Jesus' face. It was right below Mrs. Armbruster's place in the choir loft. When she intoned the *Gloria*, he could tap dance through all of it without anyone knowing. Her voice was the loudest in the congregation, even if she did miss a few notes. He needed her volume. No one else liked to sit there. It was dark and didn't provide a very good view of the people filing into the pews. His mother liked to look at the ladies' new hats. He also liked that seat because back there he could avoid getting stuck next to Margie Taylor, who would tell her mother, who would tell his mother that he had not been singing the hymns with the rest of them. It wasn't that he didn't like singing. It was just that he hadn't mastered singing and dancing at the same time, especially since the rhythm driving his feet was very different from the one coming from the organ up in the choir loft.

He remembered the Sunday mornings before he started dancing in church. His mother would shake him out of a warm dream and drill instructions into him. "Wash-your-face-Daniel-McMahon-and-brush-your-teeth-and-put-on-your-Sunday-trousers-and-hurry-up-about-it-too!" On winter mornings, his toes quivered as he lowered them out of bed, and the cold shot through the soles of his feet when they touched the linoleum. His Sunday trousers were always ready for him on the chair by the window in his bedroom. Outside, it was still dark. His stomach demanded breakfast, but it would have to wait until after church. He would sit in a stupor through those Sunday morning services, nodding off as Father Mann droned *Dominus vobiscum*, snoozing through the *Sanctus*. Once he had embarrassed his mother by snoring at a critical moment in the sermon. Jabbed awake by her elbow in his shoulder, Danny was not sure how he would be able to endure the five hundred and twenty seven more Sundays of sacred boredom until his eighteenth birthday, after which he would be able to decide for himself whether to go to church with his mother or to the pub with his father and brother Gerry instead.

"At least by then I'll know I've done my duty. No amount of my dragging him to church on Sundays will do any more good," his mother always said. Then Dad would wink at Gerry. "We have our own service in there, Mother, singing and everything. It's



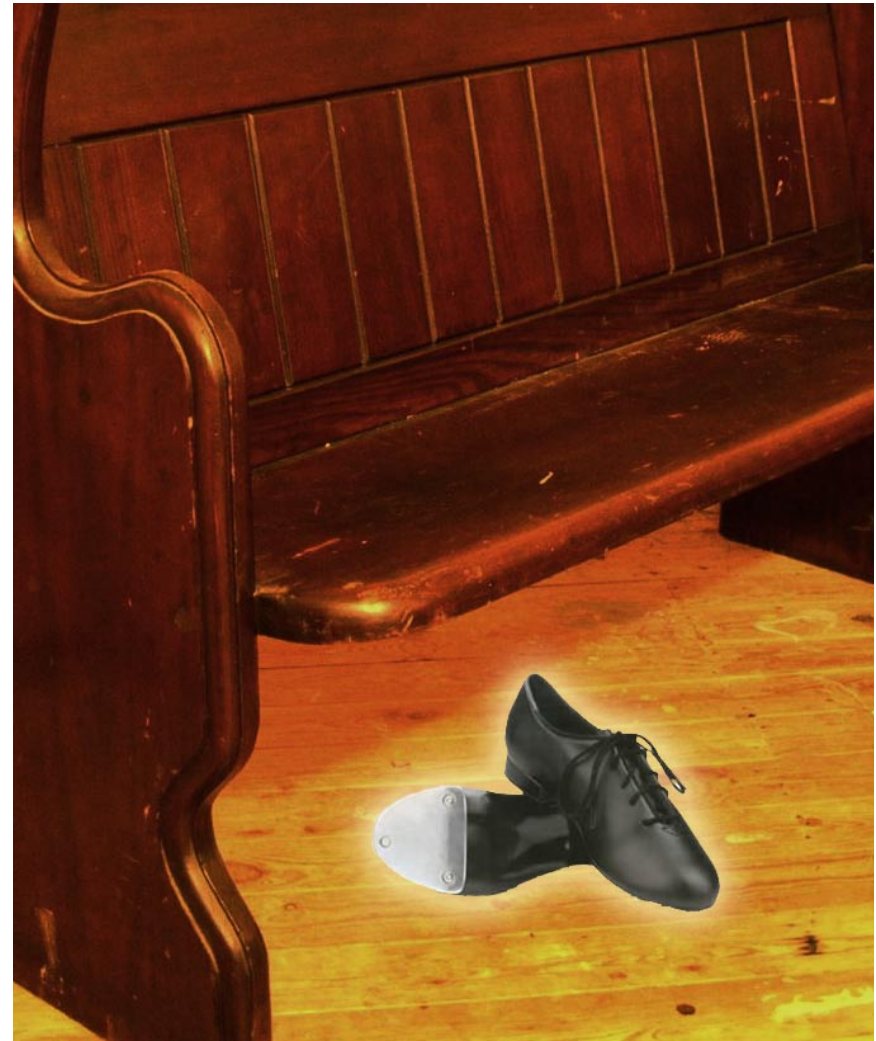
our way of praying.” Danny thought that they always looked a lot happier coming out of their service than the people filing out of the church, who had to kiss Mrs. Armbruster and shake hands with Father Mann. His friend, Jimmy Nash, told him that he had heard his father say that they even danced in there sometimes.

Danny’s life had changed when he saw that film on his grandmother’s television last Pancake Tuesday. A man (Nana said his name was Fred) was dancing with a mop. Nana said he was famous for his dancing. He was flinging that mop around so it looked as if it were dancing too, and the strings on the end of it looked like hair flying in all directions. Fred was smiling and singing and dancing all at the same time. It made Danny want to pull Nana up out of her armchair and spin her around like that.

“Oh Danny, my love, with my arthritis I have to struggle to make a cup of tea these days never mind dance!” But she laughed and clapped when Danny got her broom from the cupboard and danced it around and she said, “If you keep practicing, you’ll soon be as good as Fred Astaire!”

And today, as on every Sunday after that, his face the picture of piety, under the wooden bench, just below the hems of his

Sunday trousers, his feet tapped out a beat. He was practicing his own rhythm, getting ready for the day, in just four hundred and twelve more Sundays, when he would go with Dad and Gerry to the pub.



About North Wind Press

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