

THE METHOD

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

“It’s very simple,” he assured me. “Promise you’ll give it a go next time you can’t sleep—tonight even—and you’ll see how effective it is. Close your eyes, empty your mind, leave it white. Not cream or beige, but properly white. Then, bit by bit, recreate, in chronological order, every staircase of your life, remembering even the smallest details. Once it’s there in your mind, your job is to climb it. If you’re still awake when you reach the top, repeat the process with the next staircase, and so on.”

As if it were that easy. Still, I decided to try it that night.

I’m not proud to admit how badly I sleep. Like every night, the very idea of lying down sparks a fight between my restless mind and the weight of the day pulling on my eyelids. The ritual is always the same: pyjamas, teeth, face, hair, lavender spray, chamomile tea—the same tea that wakes me hours later to use the toilet...

But not tonight. Tonight there’ll be no struggle. No campaign to win, no REM kingdom to invade. Tonight, I’ll let the staircase carry me into sleep.

Where to begin? Stairs... Not steps, and definitely not ladders. They need to be real staircases, personal ones, drawn from memory, even if those memories are half-invented. Ironically, I’ll start with the ones I wasn’t allowed to climb.

I must have been five, maybe six. Grandma Juana used to hang laundry on a rooftop platform Grandpa had built. It jutted from the house like an arm. The stairs leading to it were steep, crude, and patched with mismatched tiles that crumbled over time to reveal bare concrete.

I'd watch her go up, a basket of wet clothes under one arm, the other gripping the railing Grandpa installed after she'd nearly fallen. Once she reached the top, she'd vanish left. I never moved. Sometimes, the corner of a towel or a sheet would flutter over the roof, and I'd imagine the house was waving at me with a white handkerchief.

How I longed to help her—pass her pegs, match socks, anything. But I wasn't allowed.

One day, the air was thick and heavy, the stairs warping in the heat, and I gave in to temptation. Grandma had left me to watch my baby sister while she made lunch. My sister was six months old. I left her in the pram and headed for the stairs.

I was cautious in my own way. I put her hat on and rubbed sunscreen on her arms, like I did with my dolls. At the top of the stairs was a gate—more of a metal barrier—that opened with a loud, rusty scrape. I had a plan: make the baby cry just enough to drown out the noise. Then quickly quiet her with the dummy I'd stashed in my pocket. That would buy me time to climb.

But childish plans don't account for panic or balance.

I wasn't climbing. I was scrambling, racing upward in a kind of frenzied determination. I wanted to be tall enough, brave enough, old enough to reach the top. But I wasn't careful.

I tripped.

My foot caught a jagged edge, and I fell sideways. The concrete hit my ribs. I tumbled like a sack of potatoes—neck, arms, legs, forehead, everything bumping down those cruel stairs.

When I reached the bottom, I lay still for a moment. My sister, half-asleep, gurgled quietly. No one had seen. Grandma was still peeling potatoes. I stood up, hurting in a dozen places, but mostly embarrassed. I didn't try again.

Until tonight.

I pull the duvet to my chin and close my eyes. Everything is the same in my memory: the stairs, the heat, my dozing sister, Grandma's wilting violas, the faint sound of her singing in the kitchen. The light is flat, the colours washed out. The air smells of dust and dry cement.

I'm back at the bottom.

I approach the gate and open it without fear. It creaks, but no one stops me. My sister watches, silent and curious. I begin to climb. This time, slowly. One, two, three, four. I'm dragging something behind me, gently, making sure it doesn't catch. Halfway up, I pause. My heart pounds, but not with fear. This time, it's anticipation.

Just a few more steps.

This is the closest I've ever been to the sun. I stop to take in the view: my sister is a tiny orange dot in a sea of flawless blue. Poor thing, I think, she's never seen the rain. The flowerpots beside her are burnt and brittle. All but the aloe are dead.

I reach the top.

The washing lines are right in front of me, trembling in a breeze that never seems to reach the ground. Each garment is a memory: my little knickers, Grandpa's handkerchiefs, Grandma's faded dressing gown. They stand like flags in the wind—silent, waving, waiting.

Then, I lift the hose.

I let the water fly in circles above my head, into the sun. And it rains. Blue, indigo, yellow, violet, orange...

The drops fall on my sister, and she blinks, unsure whether to laugh or cry. The water hits her face and splits into the colours of the rainbow. Below us, the plants stir. Grandma's violas bloom again.

Careful not to splash the laundry, I keep watering everything I love. The soil darkens. The courtyard breathes. The house seems to sigh.

Grandma stops singing.

She comes out slowly, wiping her hands on her apron. We see each other. Me, tall and soaked, triumphant. Her, puzzled. I don't know if she's surprised to see me up here at last, or if it's because it's raining in the middle of a cloudless day.

And then, slowly, everything turns white. Properly white. Like the inside of a pillow.

Nazaret Ranea is a poet from Málaga, Spain, and a former Poet in Residence at StAnza. Her work explores nostalgia, memory, and the idea of home. She has been featured on BBC Radio Scotland and at events like the Edinburgh International Book Festival. Her debut collection, Nettle, is forthcoming.