

NIGHT MERE

by Jim Bishop

Thirteen stairs –yes, it comes back now –the dark
landing where my mother or a woman in the form of
my mother would appear in my dreams, how on
each stair I'd dread what I knew lay waiting there,
this night-mother, emerging only after dark, just
the sight of her, looming at the head of the stairs,

could freeze me in my tracks.

And the upstairs rooms: a bathroom, just a flush,
no bath, no sink, two bedrooms, Daddy's, his door
forever shut, the other for the rest of us, no rest
in any room. How the house itself over time became
a closet in the basement of my mind, a place I could
stash a darkness beyond me and move on –what we do,

is it not? Move on.

I'm old now, older than you were, Daddy, when you died.
No doubt you still think of me as that boy in the ramshackle
house by the shore, a firetrap in winter, often flooded in
the spring, held together by a prayer. Yes, I still go there
in my dreams. Wake up shaken, even now, by the specters
that dwell there in your guise.

But please, Mother, Father, you who birthed me,

made me a home in a world not of your making, hear me now.
This is long past blame. I had to learn what it meant to take
the stairs on my own, to find you in your darkness and in mine.
What it meant to become your father and your son, what it meant
to know the ghosts that haunt us, too, are lost. How I mistook
your pleas those nights for scares. And how, at last, I've gained

the landing, a meeting place of sorts–

like those in myth, where the living are permitted congress with the dead–
to extend a blessing, long delayed, reflect on our days in the old house,
long since disappeared, and the nights when our wraiths broke in, possessed
our dreams. No need to speak, it's enough to have arrived, to be here in your
company. As when your French relatives would drive down from Grand-Sault,

sit in the living room, the river out the window, laugh together till you cried,
in that old cross-border way.