

The Stairs Project

The most vivid memory of my childhood is climbing the stairs in my grandparents' home. I was probably 8. I know I was in second grade. My grandmother was watching me; her husband was at work. I had off from school. Catholic school always had odd days off. This one was for an in-service and since my mother was a teacher at the school I attended, she had to work, even though there was no class. My grandmother hadn't been feeling well, but to save her daughter the trouble of finding a babysitter on a weekday, she agreed to take care of me.

It was the morning. I was watching TV. *Different Strokes*. My grandmother had gone to shower. I heard a sound. The water was running. But. The sound. A collapse. My grandmother, from downstairs, I could hear her breathing, shallow breaths, labored breaths. I remember being frozen to the seat in front of the TV. I told myself she was enjoying the warm water. That's what I told myself. But I knew. Eventually I climbed the stairs. I found her naked on the floor. Next, I was running outside, banging on neighbors' doors. I was wearing my PJs, the kind with booties built in for your feet, banging on doors, asking for help. At the hospital, they determined she had a brain aneurism. After it was clear that she was never going to function again as a human, after living with that reality for what seemed weeks, my mother and her father decided to shut off the machine that was breathing for her. Since my mother was raised devoutly Catholic, I imagine this was an especially difficult choice. I don't know; we've never really spoken about it. But I remember those stairs. The walk up those stairs, taking maybe a minute, yet feeling like ages. It is a memory that haunts me.

This summer, I am embarking on a sound project to create a musical piece about this memory. I am soliciting sounds from people to help create the piece. I am interested in taking assorted sounds – sounds that don't come from me – sounds that I have no knowledge of – sounds I have no relationship with – and using these sounds to create a music that is intensely personal, relating to this memory. I ask that you look through your collection of music, sound files, home recordings and send me material. It does not need to be complete songs or even necessarily musical. The quality does not need to be of a certain caliber; damaged is fine. It can be recorded off of old records you bought in thrift stores, cassette demos from that speed metal band you formed in junior high, or a boom box recording of the ambient sounds from your window. Anything. I just ask that it be something that you do not think I have any knowledge of or relationship with. I also ask that you do not communicate with me about the sounds, explaining them or telling me where they come from. The sounds can be sent as a CD-R, MD, or cassette (even microcassette). All of the sounds will be transferred to my computer or my Casio SK-1 sampler where they will be treated as raw material for the piece.

Please send the material to my home address. You can also email me if this is more convenient. The final result will be sent to you as a CD-R in the fall when the piece is complete. Thank you.

Ken Urban
2005