

**JEFFREY THOMSON**

**Led Zeppelin Debuts “Stairway to Heaven,”  
the Ulster Hall, March 5, 1971**

*Around 900 were killed that night and half the homes in Belfast  
destroyed.*

—BBC

The crowd waits, ready to burst into anything but this  
slow-motion wreck of an intro

they’ve never heard before with its swaying guitar  
and that recorder floating out of the dark

like Irish pipes, and now some jostle to the bar in the back,  
talking over the top of this strange lady

*who’s sure all that glitters is gold* and into the white faces  
on the tops of their pints, while one girl—

spattered with paisley and red beads like stopped droplets  
of blood—sways before the stage

(the tempo and reefer in perfect harmony now) and no longer  
wonders about this man with blunt hands

and manners short as his hair, this man she recently started thinking of  
as her love, no longer wonders when he will return

to put his arms around her in the clumsy way she finds endearing  
but suspects that—if it lasts—she will come to loathe,

and then the lights drop and Plant sweeps the blitz of his hair  
across his eyes in echo of the gold leaf sparkling

across the ceiling like the small and distant fires of homes burning  
in the hills all around him

as if it’s Easter Tuesday 1941 again and the American soldiers  
whose children will gather like druids

around any turntable playing this song are covered by a blackout  
in that theater as air-raid sirens squeal up into the distant hills,

the city unprepared (no searchlights accusing the cloud-speckled sky,  
no chuff of anti-aircraft),

and because there is nothing to be done and nowhere to go,  
Delia Murphy, on stage in chiffon and lace

as bombs begin their soft percussion in the distance, says,  
“We’re not going anywhere,”

and drops into “Bye Bye Blackbird” as one soldier gathers  
the small bouquet of an Irish girl in his arms

and swings her onto the bare runway of the dance floor—  
this floor that will collapse twice in years to come

beneath dancers pounding their lives into it with all the rhythm  
the small hammers of their feet can manage,

but not this night, no, not tonight—and now other soldiers  
drop their need, their dread urgency

to do *something*, and follow his lead, gathering their own girls  
from the garden of faces along the wall,

and soon the floor is swirling and Murphy is singing,  
*Make my bed and light the light, I’ll arrive late tonight,*

bombs dropping across the city from a flotilla of diesel and gear,  
dropping down alleyways carved into the air,

and they dance on into the night, hour after hour  
as clouds and blaze swirl up throughout the city

like flirtatious color gels spinning paisley and psychedelia  
across the scene, Plant picking up the tempo now,

buckets of drumbeats dropped at his feet, Page’s guitar  
rising on the upbeats, and the lights pound

and the sound rises and the crowd finally engages,  
boys returning from the bar in waves like aircraft

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coasting above a defenseless, darkened city, and  
    when he does return and slides his arms around her,  
  
his hands hefty as peat, she will smile and think him  
    wonderful, aware only of his hands  
  
and the music and the ripe crush of the crescendo  
    as it breaks across them both,  
  
together there on that fragile floor, not knowing, of course,  
    that he will die in McGurk's  
  
in December of that very year, die beneath a wall brought down  
    by another bomb, brought down  
  
out of some terrible and ongoing heaven.