

# Soulful Songs and Stories

**With a song and your stories, we co-create a soft place for hard conversations and a brave space for personal and spiritual growth.**



**Hi Soulful Song Lovers and Story Tellers,**

**Songs and Stories** about awareness, otherness, and truth-telling.

*In denying our own otherness, we deny our uniqueness; seeing people not like us as “other” denies our shared humanity and commonality.*

*“One of the hallmarks of the Secular Franciscan Order that can be claimed and practiced by anyone is a genuine sense of minority.”*

*—from the formation manual For Up To Now, ch 7, p. 11, 2011*

**Let us not look back in anger, nor forward in fear, but around in awareness. —James Thurber**

**“Magnolia Suite: Part II, No. 4, Mammy,” R. Nathaniel Dett/  
Denver Oldham, piano <https://youtu.be/rmmYKV4aO74> 3:18**

**“Town of Stairs,” Rosalie Ryan**

**The Baffler, No. 56, Mar 2021, 1400 words**

*Rosalie Ryan brings us a story of what happens when the unyielding rhythm of commerce is disrupted, its irrefutable logic disputed. A parable about going from cluelessness to awareness.*

**Read the full piece (below) or**

**Read it online: <https://thebaffler.com/stories/town-of-stairs-ryan>**

**“Get up, Get Up, You Sleepyhead,” Jimmy Breedlove, Joan  
White/LaVern Baker <https://youtu.be/BaiBKMagvEk> 2:21**

**We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring /  
Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.**

**—T.S. Eliot, “The Little Gidding,” the last of Four Quartets**



**If you think adventure is dangerous, try routine. It is lethal.**

—**Paulo Coelho**

*Routine and ritual are comforting, familiar, mind-freeing. Sometimes that's a good thing. When it makes us mindless instead of mindful, when dwelling on the past thwarts our engagement with the present, when mental masturbation replaces action, not so much.*

**“Don't Get Trouble in Your Mind,” Carolina Chocolate Drops**

<https://youtu.be/bu5qG5By6kA> 2:36

**“Check One, Check Other,” Ginny & Georgia, Episode Eight, Netflix**

[<https://www.netflix.com/watch/81071203> @31:41]

*Ginny has to write an essay for an AP English contest about “where we feel we most belong” and she wants to write about Wellsbury, the town she recently moved to. Her dad takes her to a poetry slam, and tells her a story works when you “Speak from the heart; if anyone else can speak your truth, it's not your truth. You gotta tell your own story.” She changes the subject of her essay.*

**Watch the clip with closed captions (attached)**

**Watch on YouTube without CC:** <https://youtu.be/3PidWcr6xiY> 2:36

**“Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”  
Liz Mitchell and The Les Humphries Singers**

<https://youtu.be/ZIBa-Og-VJE> 2:26

**Your own Self-Realization is the greatest service you can render the world.** —**Ramana Maharshi**

**Earth's crammed with heaven, but only those who see take off their shoes.** —**Elizabeth Barrett Browning**, “Aurora Leigh”

**“Dave,” Orrin Evans Quartet, featuring Immanuel Wilkins on sax** <https://livesessions.npr.org/videos/orrin-evans-dave> 8:56

**The really important kind of freedom involves attention,** and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day.

—**David Foster Wallace**, “This is Water,” commencement speech at Kenyon College, 2005

**Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another.** —**Toni Morrison**, *Beloved*



**“C Jam Blues,” Duke Ellington/Oscar Peterson, piano; Ray Brown, bass; Ed Thigpen, drums** <https://youtu.be/NTJhHn-TuDY?t=13> 8:53

**“Shake Sugaree,” Elizabeth Cotten** *Everything I got is done and pawned*  
**Elizabeth Cotten and Brenda Evans** <https://youtu.be/gOZZreSkf6g> 5:02  
**Rhiannon Giddens, Commentary** <https://youtu.be/HERa6IfBD2s> 0:48

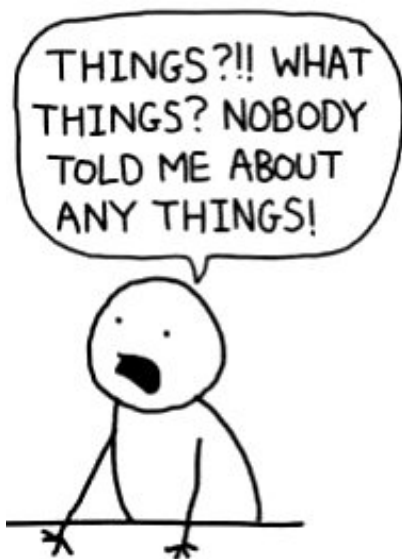
**“There is More Love Somewhere”**  
**Bernice Johnson Reagon** <https://youtu.be/ET0ZoveL8c8> 2:18

**“The Entertainer,” Scott Joplin/Joshua Rifkin**

[https://youtu.be/3HpIY8R\\_dCw](https://youtu.be/3HpIY8R_dCw) 5:04

*[In his lifetime, Joplin was adamant about not playing his work fast.]*

**“Just A Closer Walk With Thee” (Traditional)**  
**the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra** <https://youtu.be/q5krFNUMQHI> 12:33  
**Doreen Ketchens, Royal Street, NOLA** <https://youtu.be/Thr2HZbqANk> 8:25





# TOWN OF STAIRS

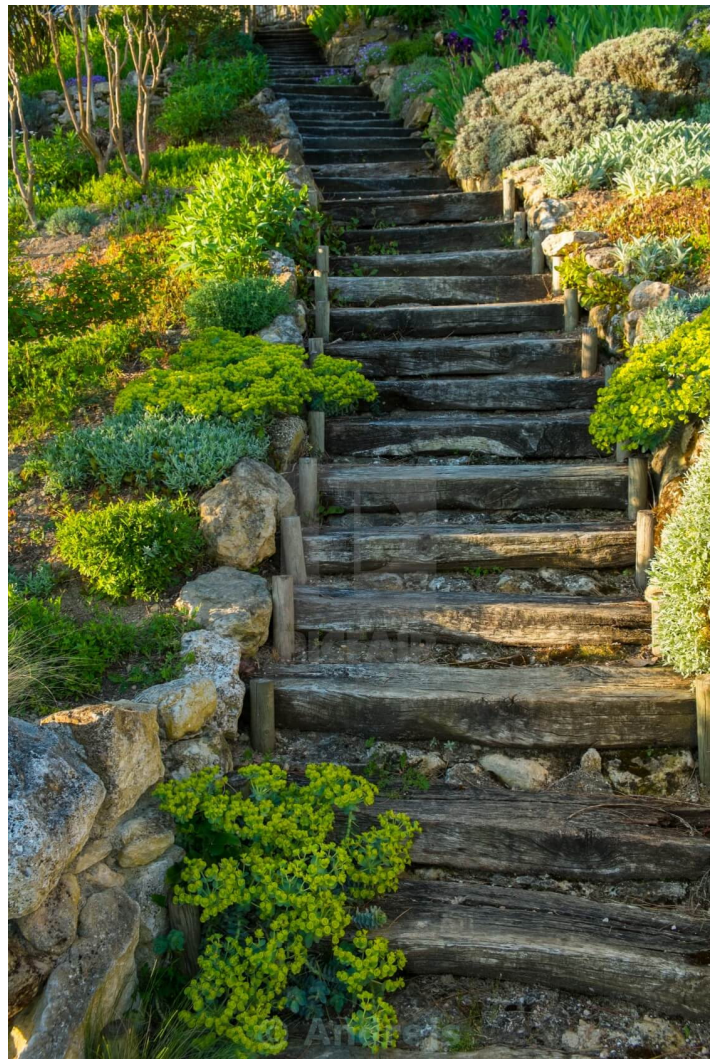
Rosalie Ryan, *The Baffler*, No. 56, March 2021  
<https://thebaffler.com/stories/town-of-stairs-ryan>

The town of stairs was built around a square at the bottom of a deep canyon. The town of stairs kept people in little pods, which branched off from the square, at the top of the canyon. Everyone lived alone in their little pods, and walking up someone else's staircase was a waste of energy, so no one ever visited with anyone else. Individuals traveled their one path, to and from their pods. The pods up top were modest in decoration—bringing decorations up the stairs was yet another waste of energy. They owned only the bare minimum. For example, it was too hard to bring books up and down the stairs, so they didn't, and it was impossible to set up a TV, so they didn't. Sewage traveled down tubes to the center of the canyon. People had to bring everything they needed up to their pods themselves.

In the town of stairs there were no cars to bring people places faster. Everything they did was meant to conserve energy in order to walk their long staircases. They walked down to the square only for their general needs: food, water, buying and selling, working for money, or spending said money. The food was for energy to get them up the stairs and for the next day to produce energy again to bring them back down the stairs. The water functioned more or less in the same way. The buying, well, was buying food, and the selling was in order to get money to buy the food. Working was in commerce of some kind, but everyone also had the same work of walking up and down the stairs.

The market in the square didn't bustle. People moved slowly and sat for a break whenever they felt the need. They spoke briefly regarding purchases or sales. None of them had anything else to say. They all retreated to their pods at night and had no thought of imagining what the other people in the town of stairs were doing. They often had little thought of anything else at all.

One man would occupy his mind by counting the steps down from his apartment every morning, and he would count them again on the way home in the evening. Two-hundred and eleven. Every time he reached



the end he felt a sense of comfort in those four words and three numbers. In total it was odd. He had tried to divide it many times. That was how he spent his days walking around the market and his nights in his apartment. He had made every attempt at dividing it into a round number, but it always ended up with some kind of fraction or decimal left over. When, as would happen on some days, he found he got frustrated and was saddened by this impossibility, he would simply add all the numbers together and divide them by two and get two. That would ease his mind.

One day he reached the bottom and found that the number hadn't moved past the even to the odd and remained at two hundred and ten. He turned to look up the stairs as if he could count them again from where he stood. He knew that he couldn't see his doorframe but gave it a try anyway. He felt a deep sense of disquiet under his skin, foreboding. Instead of dwelling on it, he told himself he miscounted—even though that had never happened before—and went about his day.



When, as would happen on some days, he found he got frustrated and was saddened by this impossibility, he would simply add all the numbers together and divide them by two and get two. That would ease his mind.

But, because of this change, his day became unlike any other. For the first time the man became aware of the people in the market. He thought that they might also be thinking as well, and if that were true, he wondered what they could be thinking.

He noticed for the first time that it was a lady who sold him his vegetables—he'd known it was female before, but this time he noticed she wore her hair in one long braid and wore a printed dress under her vender's smock.

He continued through the market. There was a man who sold water, he was the only vendor who sold water, and man number one had been going to him every three days to buy his five-gallon jug, but today was the first day that he noticed the vendor had brown hair and blue eyes.

He felt vulnerable around all these new people who had always been there, and he found himself, for the first time, making eye contact and then quickly pulling his eyes away. Or rubbing up against someone and flinching throughout his body. It was as if some protective bubble had burst, and he now felt the people that surrounded him. It disoriented him.

On that day, when he got to the bottom of his stairs after making his purchases in the market, he made sure to pay close attention as he counted each and every step on the way up. He applied his concentration to the task in a new way—focusing on every number. Two-hundred and eight, two-hundred and nine, two-hundred and ten, two-hundred and ten. He looked back down the staircase, and for the first time he looked to his left and then his right. Around him, on either side, he could see the other staircases. He could swear that before there had been tall walls on either side of his staircase, but now, it appeared that those walls were trees, and through the trees he could now make out the neighboring staircases, just barely. He could even see the bodies of his neighbors trudging up those staircases, heads down.

He went into his pod and sat in his chair for some hours, thinking. It hurt. His brain, his mind hurt in his

head. He wasn't doing math equations, he wasn't adding or subtracting, multiplying or dividing. He was just thinking.

He could feel the weight of his own brain at the top of his skinny neck. His staircase had obviously broken, or if it wasn't his staircase, it must be his mind, his memory. If his memory of that number were wrong, though, it meant that his life up to that point—the point at which he sat in his chair in his pod at the top of his stairs—could be wrong. Broken. It made his head feel heavier and heavier. His neck would break and his head would float away and he'd have no market, no stairs, no food or water or need for energy, no people who sold or bought. Just a loose capsule—a floating head.

Slowly he found himself thinking about the other people in the square and the number of stairs they walked up every day, and he wondered about their experience of walking up and down and around the square and existing in their homes. After a few hours of this, he set to cooking and resolved to fall asleep as normal and count the stairs again in the morning. He couldn't trust two times over the hundreds of times that had come before. He would see in the morning.

The next morning he arrived at the bottom and, with a heavy heart, found that the number was still two-hundred and ten.

He walked to town vibrating.

At the vegetable stand the woman was there again.

He struggled to find the words to say. It was terrifying to try and guess what her face held behind it or if his words would be comprehended at all. She looked at him wide-eyed, and for his part it was the first time he had ever tried to look for anything in another person's blank face. Her eyes were a piercing blue, and her skin a warm olive. She had heavy brown eyebrows, and small thin lips. As he looked closer, he saw there were creases in the corners of her lips, and there were little lines coming from the outside edges of her eyes. He didn't understand exactly, but there was something about those lines that made him feel warm. He was able to relax. He could speak.

"Have you ever counted the stairs to your house?"

"Yes."

"And . . ." He paused. It seemed impossible.

