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Flights in B.

By Tessa Erskine

I knock on the bathroom door in the basement of B. Tower on campus. A voice trembles, "Occupied," punctuated by a release of his undigested lunch. The elevator is at the tenth floor. Not wanting "Occupied" to discover who had interrupted his excretions, I open the door to the stairwell and slip inside.

I am enclosed in a concrete DNA spiral that snakes up the center of B. Tower, a building that once received awards for its architectural charm and functionality. Nowadays, those characteristics seem drab. The office spaces are cramped with little natural light and the rooms sit atop each other like the bricks that fashion the outside. Nonetheless, B. makes up for its inhibiting feel with a top floor view from a long spread of windows. The panorama offers a beautiful view of our city; it has an openness that clashes with the rest of the building.

I stare at the staircase and think about how babies learn to climb. First, they practice by crawling up one stair... then a few... from carpeted stairs to deck stairs and spiral staircases. As the toddler years stretch out, they erect themselves with the proper posterity: a perfect ninety-degree angle that defies the weight of gravity. Mastering the movement requires practice and determination.

Here I am as an adult, ascending for lack of a better place to go. My labored breathing reminds me that I am a smoker, but a short rest will invigorate me.

(Fifth floor). I pause and look up, then down. The thrum of the furnace breathes into the rooms where professors encourage students to enrich society with their publications. The chambers are adorned with books, flyers, paintings, souvenirs and photos. These are rooms whose walls drip with knowledge.

(Sixth floor). I listen to a toilet flush swirl down and a tunnel of wind whistle back up. I continue striding against the force of gravity.

(Seventh floor) The stairs are less worn than they were on the first few levels. I haven't seen anyone yet, but I hear activity.

(Eighth floor). B. Tower offers space for intellectual nourishment. Each day, students enter the front door and command the elevator. It guides them to a floor where their professors wait. The protégés are enlightened throughout the process of intellectual decomposition and reconstruction. It is during office hours that conversations swing to quotidian topics and where a class' thematic nuclei are digested. In turn, the monotones of academia are roiled into meaningful connections.

(Ninth floor). I imagine that I am navigating the viscera where institutional anthropophagy takes place. Professors are actors in the digestive process, like swirls of bacteria that churn the bolus and produce nutritious fodder for coprophagous species. *After my doctorate degree, I will become the fertilizer that sustains the cycle*; it's a liberating thought.

(Tenth floor). I grasp the handle, eager to take in the panorama, but the door is locked.

I feel defeated, as if my ascent were for nothing. The elevator is inside the door and my lungs continue to stifle me. I have no choice but to start descending on my shaky legs. After a few flights, I find that sprinting helps the pain.

I glide down the staircase as the numbered doors blur by. This is a descent into a pool of juxtaposition, like Don Draper in the opening credits to *Madmen*. I pass one story... another...

Students are littered on the knoll outside of the tower. I lay on a bed of grass and feel my muscles contract and expand, almost dissolve. B. peers over me and I smile back: *I'm ready to enrich*.

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