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Stairs

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AMY LEACH

Stairs

A long time ago I saw the tops of the tallest trees from a window. The little octagonal windows here are set high, three feet above eye level, so that you can look up at birds and snowfall but not down on grass or ice floes or bonfires. But I have not seen a bird for many days; it is just blue out. Stars are my bonfires, blue is my diaphanous land.

How nice it would be to see proof of wind out the windows—a dust devil, or some fluffs of cottonwood blowing. The stars are too firm for wind. Sometimes I pull out a strand of hair and blow it around the stairwell; I catch it and watch it drift. I miss the exquisite manifestations of air and gravity, even if I do not miss being subject to them. Sometimes I think that, to see a waterfall, I would fall, like Alice; I would dive backwards and twist down all those stairs, except that my ascent has acquired the helpless nature of a descent: I am Alice ascending.

Gravity has started to lose much of its irresistibility. People who are afraid of heights would do well to remember that if you just climb high *enough*, you can reach a point where you are no longer in danger of falling. If I tried a swan dive now, I would only make a dawdling arc backwards and lightly land on my hands, two steps down. It is like living on a very small planet, which has just enough mass to keep its inhabitants on the ground, but only if they want. Very small planets are sweetly resistible.

This planet is neither resistible nor sweet. In fact it held me flat to it all my life before I started up the stairs. I was pale thin waterweed, stuck to a massy planet.

So when I discovered the tower with the small gold plaque reading “UP” in the woods behind our house, I said, “This is for me.” Inside the tower, the stairs are covered with a thick crimson carpet and there is gold wallpaper patterned with soft ivory fleurs-de-lis. The banisters are dark and gleaming in the light of the oil lamps set in the walls. It smells hushed and musty, and every few hours I come to a landing with an imperious-looking chair with carved

lion's paws for feet. At first I stopped every seven or eight steps; now I hardly stop for the chairs.

And very soon I will be able to float up to a window, and then I will be able to look down at the waxy blue earth with its waxy white clouds, and then I will be able to rise the effortless rest of the way to the top of the stairwell. I will miss the freshness of grass crushed under my feet, I will miss the wasp-sting, I will miss seeing the pale green praying mantis sway and hesitate and look around before jumping into the air and flying away. But who...*who*...does not miss everything?