

River of Metal

by Aisling Kearney

The space elevator towers up, and up, up to the sky. A needle waiting for a thread. A dark cut in the horizon that will never heal. It stands tall, unmoving, unshifting, in defiance of the wind.

Jack's fingers cling to any edge they can find, be it the lining of a window, a worn away ladder, the joining of one section with the next.

Keep moving, he thinks. It can't be much longer now.

If he stops, his fingers will freeze to the metal, but he needs to stop, press his ear close, because over the shrieks of the wind whipping into the tower, the sounds of his climbing might be heard.

The air is thin up here. An oxygen mask dangles from his backpack. He can't put it on yet. It's the only one left and he can't risk using it up too soon. All he can do is climb. Climb up the segments of history, the years written on each section of the tower; here, 1968, there 1995, here 2037, there 2063.

Up and up and up.

He knows the inside of the pods intimately. To pass the time, he imagines what it's like inside. Home. The five-tiered bunk beds, the bustling canteen, always bustling, even when there was no food. The smell of sweat and bodies when the water pipes stopped working. The rattling air vents which he hid playing hide-and-seek, laughing, echoes shooting through all the rooms. The garden, with its tomatoes, and potatoes, and onions. The fish, glistening in large tanks, swimming over each other, on top of each other, a seething mass of scales. No space in the water just for them. Everything is to be shared. Space is a valuable commodity in the tower. Space is rare. And now, on the other side of its metal walls, he finds he doesn't like it.

How open it is.

Jack pauses for breaks, catching his breath, gnawing at the insides of his cheeks so he doesn't slip into sleep. Glances down at the patchwork fields, the yellow fog hugging the hills, the landscape below. He's only seen it from the small, dirty communal window in his section, the lowest in the tower. The same window he'd climbed through when the yellow gas finally permeated up from the section below, and he'd grabbed three oxygen masks, and kicked away the others behind him as he clambered through. If it was his sister, he doesn't know. He can't think about that right now, but what else is there to think? He's been climbing for two days, the fear no less sharp. He is in this moment. This and this and this. It is happening, now. The only way to escape is up.

When the wind lulls, catches breath in between its screams, he marvels at the quietness.

Remembers.

Finally, we have a quiet moment together!

And she'd laughed.

Jack, we can still hear the people in the pod above us working. And the humming. That bloody humming. All these years I can't sleep with the humming of the walls.

He expected there to be flies, swarms of them buzzing, a claustrophobic beating wings, insectile bodies, splattering against the tower. He'd been looking forward to it, seeing and hearing the flies.

"How to describe dragonflies?" she'd said.

When he was a baby, they lived in a small house in something called a town, with a stretch of garden outback lined by red stones. She'd tried to sketch dragonfly wings in the dregs of her soup, their delicate pattern. Swishing her spoon around the watery leftovers. Her work destroyed as the gravy washed away the details, and she'd tried her best not to cry, whispering; *I think it was like this?*

Jack asked her what it sounded like, the wings, and she'd tried to find the words with her hands.

A strong gust of wind throws him to the side of the tower. He waits for it pass, not wasting precious energy lifting his cheek away from cool metal. His cheek will freeze to its surface, but it's better than yanking himself away too hard and falling.

Jack cackles. All these years he'd dreamed of the other side of the metal walls. How simple it is. Absurd. So close, the other side. His world, four-walled, inverted. A shadow. Or, at least, what his sister would've called a shadow. Jack doesn't appreciate the full meaning of the word. He knows shadow is the absence of light, but he has lived and slept and worked under efficiently placed fluorescent lights for as long as he remembers.

To settle himself, he takes the oxygen mask off, just for a moment. Presses his nose to the metal, to the hard, real smell of steel and aluminium. Inhales. And laughter rocks his body, and he doesn't care if the people inside the pods can hear him. Let them know something new.

When the laughter leaves him, Jack straps on his oxygen mask and assesses how much further he has to climb. Distance is difficult for him to gauge. He knows how far it is from his bed to the nearest toilet. Twenty-one meters. With that knowledge, looking down, he can make his best guess at how high up he is. Five thousand trips to the toilet. When he looks up, he can't make out how much farther he has to climb. The tower disappears from his gaze, two lines running into one point.

The tower flows upwards, a river of metal, towards glittering pinpricks of faraway light. Stars. He knows they're there, but all he knows is the murky fog, grey, sometimes green when the sun is shining through. He wonders what it's like up there, past the fog. Where his sister always talked about going. Somewhere there is clean air. Somewhere there is space for them all.