

Fifth-Floor Walkup

When we first came to the city we found
A French studio on the Upper East Side:
Fifth-floor walkup—a single room, glass doors
In the middle—that was, I was told,
As high as the law allows a building to grow
Without an elevator.

We grew accustomed to the stairs, passing them by
Quickly, as increased quadriceps sped us upward,
The stained white tile flowing past. A cultural imperative
Puts one in a New York hurry. Hence, it seems,
You cannot take the time to plod, to ponder
Each step—where you have been or might yet be going.

I wonder now how the stairs to heaven appear, and when
Built. Those are not steps to replicate by man.
Did that infamous tower, marvel of its day, not reach higher than my
Fifth-floor walkup before it crumbled with the advent of
Language? How far did the last step, arching into the void,
Reach? And did some accursed Babylonian, robbed of his tongue,
Sit silent to admire the view?

Jacob, knowing this history, still dreamt of steps to heaven. Was this because
Vitruvius had not yet built the lift? Or was there some goodness in
Babel's quest to raise itself that modern readers fail to grasp?
God gave us language. A gift, though curse, allowing man at times
To touch the sky. Have we, still dull, not comprehended
What he wrought that day? Do our tongues, do our feet, still pin
Us to the ground? Do we always fail to look up just to not
Misstep? Do I write these words, climb these stairs, simply because

I have refused to learn to fly?

—Randy Astle