

The Quarter Floors

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Article abstract

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The Quarter Floors

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ABSTRACT

A piece of short fiction, loosely based on the author's own ten years of working in libraries.

Keywords: *fiction · short fiction*

RÉSUMÉ

Une courte fiction, vaguement basée sur les dix années de travail de l'auteur dans les bibliothèques.

Mots-clés: *courte fiction · fiction*

“I’m researching the *salii*,” the woman says. She reaches across the reference desk to hand me the stacks request slip. “The leaping priests of ancient Rome.” She has brown hair with a little grey, wears a rumpled grey pantsuit with a faded ketchup stain on the jacket’s right lapel. I nod assent and she walks away without another word, a regular user who knows how the system works. I see that she is shoeless again today, bright yellow socks flitting colourfully below the grey hem of her pants.

I put out the sign at the desk: *For service please await the return of the Special Collections librarian*. I slip into the back room, past a page cutting more stacks request slips from a freshly printed pile. Thanks to recent work from the process improvement committee, four slips are now cut from each printed page, a 100% increase from our previous template.

The request slip is scribbled with the researcher’s own notes in the margins, though I take in only their presence and not their meaning. The call number is all I need to do my job.

Past our small lunchroom, I take a left. At the end of the corridor I open the grey-painted metal door and crouch to pass through. I am uncomfortably tall for the quarter floors but every other librarian in Special Collections allowed to enter and



retrieve books is on their late December vacation. It is a quiet time here, but also a time when I, the tallest staff member, have no choice but to enter the quarter floors.

The great downtown library's quarter floors are 1.25 metres high. Just over four feet in imperial units. The standard public floor size is 6 metres. Just under twenty feet, by old measures. I am about 1.85 metres tall. Around six feet, in common conversation. (A management consultant in a recent training session advised us to assemble small spreadsheets of comparison inside the mind to acclimatize ourselves to data-driven decision making.)

I go through the quarter floors in narrow passages between the books; I follow typewritten signage never intended for public use, some in shorthand whose full meaning is lost even to those of us in the department. The storage shelves rise right to the top of the pockmarked off-white drop ceiling, stuffed tight with books for an illusion of walls. Short centimetres above my bowed head, fluorescent lights hum in rhythm with the whine of the ventilation system. In the quarter floors you are always cold.

The *salii*. The leaping priests. What did I remember of them, from my truncated attempt at a Classics minor? By Ovid's time, the words of their archaic songs were unclear to the Romans even as the names of new emperors were added. The shoeless woman was an independent scholar, one subclass of the tenacious justifiers for the great downtown library's existence outside the bounds of the city's universities. Matters like archaic and cryptic religious practice were often such a scholar's focus, perhaps laying the foundations for compiling speculative or conspiratorial histories, or for writing meaning-making fictions, or sometimes for grasping revelations unachievable in the academy.

There is a round metal stool on three efficient wheeled legs, to be used when retrieving books. I am too tall to sit upright on the stool, and it needs maintenance—one wheel catches, two wheels squeal. So I crouch, though it hurts my knees, and drag the stool with me, since I won't crawl (at least not in my good work pants). I recollect that the dozen *salii* had borne shields, one a sacred artifact believed to have fallen from the heavens, and eleven copies to fool thieves. I wondered if they'd known who carried which.

When I started in the department of Special Collections, I'd asked: Why not full floors, ceiling-height shelves, with moving ladders? Efficiency and safety, said my manager, repeating with conviction what she'd been told by her own manager, and perhaps her own manager by the manager before them. She'd not said to whom or to what the efficiency and safety applied, or how to resolve any disjunction between the competing values.

In my foolish youth, I'd gone on: But why not half floors, like the other closed stacks? Such lesser closed stacks are unsuitable for the volumes of Special Collections, she'd said, with an air to indicate the questioning was presumptuous from a new professional. The climate control system had requirements. In the quarter floors you will perceive your breath as you go up and down the little ladders.

Later on in my career, the eldest page of the department had told me: These old books move less when the ceilings are low, when it's kept cold, when you exhale the heat of your body into a fog around you, when you must take care to direct your breathing that it not condense upon the delicate book-skin. In our latest collective agreement, they had removed a clause allowing pages of certain seniority access to the quarter floors to perform certain work, after the eldest page had passed away. Now, only qualified librarians could enter the quarter floors, the old way of doing things losing out to a ratification of hierarchy that emphasized not just the trainable mechanics of proper physical handling of delicate materials, but also the correct mindset and values that only the ALA-accredited master's degree could supply.

I go on, still pulling the stool behind me; it is as old as the construction of the quarter floors, heavy like only an old thing of metal can be heavy. I go on, in my crabbing crouch that will never become a leap. At a juncture between history and religion the call numbers run dry. There is no wheel to turn to crank the stacks apart and reveal a new path, as you sometimes find in the quarter floors.

Above me a dying fluorescent tube buzzes and flicks shadows around the slip's edges, and I realize I've missed a key annotation beside the call number, one obscured by the sea of marginalia. *Forth with the cuckoo, though the woodpecker is sacred? 1/8th*. She had circled and double underlined the 1/8th, but this attempt to draw my attention had failed.

I sigh. I might weep, except I am a professional. I leave the stool behind as worse than useless, and approach the tiny door in the wall where the stacks terminate. It is 0.61 metres high, the hand-printed signage above it yellowed and curling. Thin red lights outline the door, to help pick its outline from the surrounding grey of shelves and walls. 0.61 metres, 1.25 metres, 1.85 metres; the spreadsheet in my mind expands. I was shown this door during my staff orientation, but have never had to open it. I suppose I'd allowed myself to forget.

Almost discernable words swim out from the school of shorthand on the signage: *Entr 1/8th Flrs Crfuly Flw Dep Proc for Sfty & Effcy*. I steel myself. I am trained and educated for this, I am a professional, I am a librarian of the department of Special Collections. I put my belly to the cracked linoleum, take a breath, and reach for the

little handle of the door into those more sacred and reduced stacks. Snake-like, I begin my descent.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Harnum is a software developer, a former public librarian, and an intermittent writer of fiction and poetry, some (like this story) with libraries as the subject matter. He is currently a design researcher and software developer at OCAD University's Inclusive Design Research Centre. More of his work can be found on his website at <https://www.alanharnum.ca/writing/>.