

Asylum

WE DO NOT have permission to approach the cabinet in which the syringes and surgical gloves are stored. We have been instructed to stand at least six feet from the wall on which the cabinet is located, behind a yellow half-moon painted on the floor, in serried ranks, breathing in unison like an enormous beast, an elephant perhaps. The room is hot with our closeness and foul, medicated breath and the windows vibrate to the tune of our despair. We are many, with the strength of few, and all too aware of our straitened circumstances – except, of course, for those who are not. The cabinet doors stand slightly, tantalisingly open, but all they reveal is a sliver of darkness. We can't see within, no matter how hard we crane our necks and how dangerously we lean over the yellow half-moon into the forbidden zone. Those in the second rank hook their fingers through the belt loops of those in the first to stop them toppling over. They say, 'What can you see? Tell us what you see.' Those ranked further back take up the refrain, somewhat plaintively, for their vantage is poor and they can have little idea of what's going on. Does the cabinet still contain what the worn labels say? The room is

hot and the windows run with condensation. We yearn for the gloves and syringes, but they will never be ours, no matter how long we wait. We yearn because yearning is one of the few things we can do, for which permission has been granted. In truth, however, we've waited so long it's hard to recall precisely what our expectations were, or why those syringes and gloves meant so much to us.



Instead of the moss-green carpet, worn through in places to reveal an underlay of scuffed, plum-coloured linoleum, we try to imagine what moorland would look like if it were brought indoors, particularly into the lounge where we spend most of our waking hours, confused and/or agitated, uncomfortable in our skin and invariably bored, desultorily watching TV programmes about the world outside, the world in which our family and absent friends live, so many of them and in so many different situations, and we try to imagine being with them, zig-zagging through the throngs of shoppers on Oxford Street, perhaps occupying a tiny patch of sun-baked shingle on an otherwise crowded beach near Brighton's Palace Pier, or, by way of contrast, encountering a solitary walker on an isolated stretch of the high Northumbrian moors and sharing pleasantries, a flask of brandy-laced coffee and a sandwich, before going our separate ways, stumbling lightheadedly

through the bracken while thick clouds descend and an icy rain starts to fall, which inevitably prompts us to imagine what it would be like if rain such as that fell indoors, on the bracken and our mossy carpet, on various weeds and half-smothered, ill-favoured saplings that surely won't survive the coming winter, even indoors, especially indoors, while we're desultorily watching TV, lying beneath bracken, almost completely hidden beneath a canopy of lacy fronds, wondering, as icy droplets fall at irregular intervals from the leaf tips onto our faces and roll down our necks, whether it's almost lunchtime, for flexing one's imagination is undeniably hungry work and if nothing else our basic needs must be met.



After the long-handled scalpel and the skull chisel have met on the mortuary slab and danced a stately pavanne with the toothed forceps, the rib cutters, the enterotome and the elderly bone saw's hyperactive grandchild, the Stryker saw, the next task is to wash and dress the corpse. On the windowsill: a hammer and a tin of nails. A coffin of raw pine stands in an alcove, propped against the wall. The previously autopsied residents gather round to assess the neatness of the job the pathologist has done, speaking so softly their voices barely ruffle the air. They inspect the Y-cut that begins at each shoulder and merges near the foot of the breastbone before travelling in a

straight line from sternum to pubis. One resident remarks on how gently the upper flap of the Y was draped over the corpse's face, approximating the veil in which she was born all those years ago, in another century. There's a general murmur of approval.

The pathologist and his assistant remove their spattered smocks, bin their surgical gloves, and rinse the gloves' powdery residue from their hands. Deep in conversation about golf handicaps and property values, they hear the murmur, if they hear it at all, as wind in the trees, or as the distant thrum of washing machines as someone opens and closes the laundry room door.

Jets of cold water will buffet every inch of the corpse, rinsing blood and other bodily fluids along the slab's porcelain runnels and into the drain. Towels will roughen the skin but raise no colour. In the absence of mourners the coffin will be sealed – so says the pathologist as he and his assistant walk down the corridor, their footfalls and voices fading to silence. The residents are relieved to hear that the funeral director's beautician and her box of clown cosmetics will not be required. Happy, they disperse until once again summoned. All that remains is to dress the corpse in surrogate skin – a dazzling white shift which, for the moment, is draped over the back of a hardwood chair.

So beautiful is this tableau of shift and chair, in such softly waning light, it would be a pity to let it go unremarked.

Daily, to kill time between breakfast and lunch, those of us who aren't sedated take a long but far from leisurely walk. We stride down corridors past a succession of rooms: auditorium, kitchen, hairdressing salon, dining room, sick bay and snooker room, as well as day rooms, toilets, bathrooms, dorms and bedrooms, all of which we are permitted to enter though only at certain times. The offices, staffrooms, laundry and mortuary are forbidden zones, strictly off-limits to residents, and there are huge storage cupboards everywhere, rooms in themselves, most of them padlocked though they contain nothing more dangerous than paper towels. We walk swiftly, furiously, teetering on the brink of a run though we aren't actually allowed to run. Those of us who are devout offer a prayer to Mary, patroness of our establishment, which helps to boost our spirits and kill time. 'Sit mens sana in corpore sano,' the general manager is fond of quoting to visiting relatives and officials alike. Though untrue, as well he knows, it validates our daily walk, a troublesome activity he would love to prohibit but cannot; in their wisdom the hospital inspectors have deemed it healthful, and the clinicians, with minor caveats, agree.

Arms linked, closely ranked and sometimes twenty strong, we stream down endless corridors, staring into the distance as if in pursuit of a mirage. Cleaners

swabbing the floor leap out of our way and press themselves against the walls, clutching their mops defensively. Their buckets of sudsy water we kick to one side. Gleefully flouting the general manager's ban, we race up several flights of stairs, panting in unison, and upon reaching the stairhead we dart like a school of fish to left or right. Whenever possible we act instinctively, without thought. This, too, kills time, bringing lunch ever nearer.

After maintaining this brisk pace for the best part of an hour, those who are less fit begin to ease themselves out of the pack. Without censure or regret we let them go. One by one they sink into armchairs in the lounge, gasping for breath, while a massive television set bathes their features in garish light. Now, with our forces depleted, we are vulnerable. The cleaners menace us in turn. Baring their teeth and making fierce, guttural sounds, they block our path, brandishing their mops like spears and swords. They charge, we flee, but try to make it seem less a rout, more a brilliantly staged strategic withdrawal. This happens every day and it fools no-one, not even fools. Abashed and weary, we meet for a debriefing in the studied calm of the snooker room. Beneath hot canopy lights, on a dazzle of green baize, coloured balls ricochet across the table and crash into each other, mimicking the early life of our solar system. No doubt there's a valuable lesson to be learned from all this. What is it?