
Willa Schneberg, *The Naked Room*, Broadstone Books, www.broadstonebooks.com, 2023, 94 pages, \$24

Imagine you are standing before a wall of copper containers. You can't tell how high the wall is from the perspective of the photograph that shows this wall, but you can see that you are outdoors as there an overexposure that suggests trees, buildings in the distance, and the more obvious fact that many of the containers are being tainted green by the weather. It is a compelling picture (taken by the poet) but what is it of, exactly? As in what is in these cylinders, if anything, and what does it mean? The copyright page answers the immediate question of what the wall is, "*Cremains Memorial, Oregon State Hospital.*" The immediate question is answered but what of the central mystery, what does it all mean, is what the poems are for.

The Naked Room is divided into seven distinct, but closely related, sections. In order to suggest their relationship, I will list them all: Asylum, Case History, Straightjacket, Fifty Minute Hour, reality testing and Termination. Stepping inside the asylum, we are immediately drawn into the human interest, the ghost of the past, the mentally infirm, diseased, distraught, on the fringes of mental health, were confined. Each poem takes us further inside. We see what a straightjacket is for in practice, visit the so-called cures for mental illness that involved extreme forms of torture disguised as therapy. We can hear the voices of the lost in the quiet of the hallways of the no longer active institution. We learn the history of Rosemary Kennedy, she who was lobotomized because she was a threat to her brothers' political ambitions. We hear stories that move the reader to high degree of compassion and sadness for all the lost lives mistreated in the name of science.

I was particularly moved by the Kennedy story having recently viewed *An Angel at My Table*, a series of memories made into a movie about New Zealand author Janet Frame. Frame, whose shyness, introversion and melancholy were deemed incurable was a few days short of lobotomy when her book of short stories won a major book prize. She went on to have along productive career as a writer and is still revered as one of the all-time greats of New Zealand literary icons. And yet. She was a couple days from being lobotomized for being melancholic. What about all those unfortunates, certainly legions of them who weren't saved at the last minute? What of them? They probably end up at a place like the Oregon State Hospital with a life sentence worse than death than can never be undone.

More personally, I have been in a place like Oregon State Hospital, three thousand miles away but virtually the same place. I visited one, biweekly for

the better part of a year as a child. My mother was confined there and being there was like living in a child's worst nightmare, one where no explanations were offered as to why these people were there, or what was wrong with them, but even a child could easily recognize, they weren't right. And never would be. More memorably, twenty years later, when she was involuntarily confined for grievous bodily harm to her mother, I walked the hospital reliving that nightmare as she pled her case for me to take her home. That's what reading *The Naked Room* was like for me. But that is extraneous to the quality of the work that is *The Naked Room*. I only mention my experience to illustrate how authentic Schneberg poems are.

In addition to her award-winning, often deeply personal work, Willa is an artist and psychotherapist. Her compassion, expertise, and above all, empathy for her subjects are clearly evident in all these poems

Alan Catlin, *Misfit Magazine*

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