

Colour Between the Folds

I stare at whiteness. A blank canvas is perfect, one that's large enough for me to stand within a couple of feet and allow it to consume my vision. I had one at home for a while, fixed to a wall in the lounge. I used to pull a stool from the kitchen, place it about two feet away and let my eyes sink into the blankness. It was soft, simple, and made no demand on my brain. I was immersed without having to make sense of what I saw. Now I don't have a canvas so I sometimes I use a sheet of white paper, as large as I can find and stuck to a wall with Blu-Tack, Sellotape or even of a piece of gnawed up chewing gum. I get in close, within six inches, and concentrate on a point beyond the tip of my nose so everything beyond the border is lost. But usually I make do with white walls, preferably those with a smooth surface, even though they often have a dirty mark or stain in sight. At worst it's whitewashed brick, with all those dimples and lumps that spoil the impression of something clean and smooth. Not good, but I have to take what I can find in this place.

It began when I had gone through a rough patch that was getting rougher. At work I took a couple of knives in the back and wound up jobless. The wife stopped pretending that she loved me and, as she paid the mortgage and could look after our boy, I was the one who had to move out. I got into a silly but heavy row with my best friend and threw a punch that stopped him from wanting to even speak to me again. Then my dad died. I cried for a while, and the weight nestled into the centre of my head and wouldn't go away. Dark thoughts crept into my mind, the type that could lead to an overdose or stepping in front of a bus. Then one day I was shopping in Lidl, struggling to concentrate on finding cheap meals when I came to the bargain rack and saw the canvas, one of those oddball short term offers that are there for a couple of weeks then disappear. My eyes drifted to its centre, I felt a mild sense of relief, and the next thing I knew half an hour had passed and one of the staff was asking if I was okay. I bought the canvas, and a few days later went to the art store where I found a larger one, hung it on the wall, and got into the habit of staring. At first it provided some solace from the mess in my head, but after a while it became an addiction, a larger problem than those I had wanted to escape. Half hours of contemplation turned into half days of mindless immersion. I stopped thinking about finding work, visiting my son, dealing with the divorce. Then I stopped thinking about

things like eating proper meals or changing my clothes. All I wanted was the white, and then I spent so long with it that my mum asked my brother to break down the door and they called an ambulance.

I've been here for eight months I think ... maybe nine. At first they kept me under close watch, fearing I could be a threat to myself or one of the other nutters. But after a few weeks of antidepressants and nurses ticking boxes they decided I could no harm and let me wander more freely. Not too freely, mostly around the association room and the hospital garden, but I didn't need a nurse or one of the assistants at my shoulder, and I was able to hold half arsed conversations with people whose sentences went sideways or contained at least three 'fucks'. Every other day I sat down with a doctor – not necessarily the same one – who picked, prodded and tried to reset my brain to face up to the real world. Sometimes I answered their questions properly, other times I wasn't in the mood, and underlying it has been the fact that I've felt relieved to be here. A half formed thought has enshrouded my head, that it's easier in here than outside; I don't have to deal with the all the shit that made me mad. And I get opportunities to stare at whiteness, those pieces of paper or stretches of wall. I don't want to do anything else other than eat, sleep and go to the toilet; the whiteness is enough for me. The nurses have noticed and occasionally they drag me away, but the fact is that I'm easier to handle if you just let me stand and stare, and my little addiction doesn't threaten anyone. There are people in here who want to smash up furniture, piss over the floor or bite whoever's sitting next to them, and the staff are generally happy to leave me to get on with it. Once, maybe twice a day, I hide myself in the white.

Today is different. There's a lot of fuss over something going in the gym – well, that room where they encourage us to kick a soft football or hit a shuttlecock when it's raining outside – and the nurses have announced that we're in for a special treat. About twenty of us are led into the room and asked to sit on chairs that have been placed in a semi-circle facing a white curtain hung on a portable rail. I sit at the front and look behind to see a projector of some sort placed on a table behind us, with chairs placed to form a gap for it to hit the screen. I don't care what it is, but feel vaguely annoyed that they've chosen a room where the walls are a dirty yellow, and focus on the curtain. It's the right colour, but it isn't right for me. Someone has tried to pull it straight to create a screen, but it isn't a clean job and has folds from end to end, creating little contours and shadows that disrupt the

bleakness that I want to find. I keep looking at it, trying to find the usual sense of comfort, but it doesn't come. Some of the other patients are playing up, whining, asking stupid questions or demanding to leave the room. The nurses give them a few minutes to settle, then someone turns out the light.

There are a few seconds of darkness, one man cries, a nurse coos at him not to worry, then there's a noise from the door behind us. Suddenly a big round light is thrown against the white curtain, footsteps waddle to either side of the chairs, and two characters with painted faces, tight clothes and silly smiles step in front of us. It's a fucking mime show!

We watch as they contort their bodies and pull silly faces, pretending to tie an imaginary rope, turn a hose on an imaginary fire, sink their teeth into an imaginary baguette and grapple with an imaginary snake. The nurses laugh, too loud to be genuine, and a couple of the patients follow their lead; but I sit there bored and wish I could be staring at a white wall. It goes on for maybe ten minutes when they stop, one of the mimes gawks towards the projector, and suddenly a bunch of coloured lights start spinning and they both start waving arms and legs and pretending that they're in danger of falling backwards. It gets a fresh laugh but I'm on the verge of standing up and declaring it's stupid, ready to run the risk of a finger wagging from one of the nurses. I look around and see the face of other orderly named Lance. He's clocked my expression, guesses what's in my mind, smiles and gives a little shake of the head. I look back to the mimes and wonder who thought this would be a good idea. Then there's a scream.

“Nooooo! The lights are doing my head in!”

One of the hard case patients, a guy name Ryan, is on his feet, kicking his chair backwards and pressing fists to his forehead. The mimes stop, the orderlies step towards Ryan, one gets a hand on his arm but he jerks clear and stumbles towards the projector. He thumps it hard on top then tries to push it to the floor but now two orderlies are on him, wrapping their hands around one arm each and pulling him backwards to clutter into a nurse and a young woman with blue and green hair. This makes her scream and one of the mimes utters his first words.

“Fuck me!”

Then more patients are on their feet and one of the orderlies shouts above the noise: “Show’s over!” Ryan is bundled out of the room. The hair woman has curled whimpering into her lap. One of the other patients is shouting at Ryan, a couple are complaining and a couple laughing out loud. I smile and like to think that whoever had arranged this is due for a bollocking for a rotten idea. The mimes try to argue with the head nurse – “We can carry on! We’re only halfway through!” – but it meets with one loud raspberry and an even louder “Fuck off!” The mimes move to the back and go into a confused huddle with a couple of the nurses, while the orderlies begin to hustle the patients out of the room, concentrating on those making more noise. One tries to get away and takes a few steps towards the white screen, claws at the fabric, disturbs the rings on the rail and is pulled away towards the door. I sit quietly, knowing it will give me the chance of a few minutes to enjoy the experience of one of the staff screwing up.

My eyes drift towards the white curtain. The fabric has been messed up, so the folds are deeper, but the shadow effect has gone. Instead the light from the projector has cast a big circle on its surface. I see that the coloured lights had stopped turning – Ryan whacking the machine must have caused it to freeze – and were throwing different colours onto the curtain. I feel mildly irritated – the little chance there had been to enjoy a spot of white bleakness has gone – but my eyes stay on the curtain for want anything better to look at. The room quietens down, the noisier patients have been taken outside, the mimes and nurses seem to have moved their mutterings into the corridor, and my attention becomes fixed. It must be a coincidence, just the angle of the lights when Ryan had struck the projector, but the strongest colours seem to be falling into the folds of the curtain. I let my gaze sink into the curtain, and catch the speckles of blue, red and yellow sliding into the crevices. Maybe a draft is causing a mild movement of the curtain, or maybe it’s my imagination, but the colours seem to have a sprinkling of life, dancing on the surface of the fabric then sinking into its perforations. Now I’m intrigued. I stay still but feel myself drifting into the vision, allowing the colours to absorb my attention. The speckles start expanding into light strokes, running along the lines of the folds with subtle variations of intensity. Colours are oozing, blending into each other to create new shades, showing greens, pinks, purples that slither than evaporate into new streaks of white. Now there are stripes, sliding gently, blurring and fading. Now tiny eruptions as one colour explodes from the depths

of another. The lights have transformed into little bursts of energy, and I'm engrossed by a sense of life emerging from between the curtain folds. I feel an urge to reach out and place my fingers into the folds, stir the energy to create new sensations for my gaze. Then there's a loud click, the colours disappear, and I'm staring at a mused up white curtain.

"All over! Sorry the show was spoiled."

Lance the orderly is behind me. I realise that I'm the last patient in the room as one of the mimes turns off the projector and growls at the damage. I look back at the curtain, feel disappointed that my treat was cut short, but realise something better has happened.

"Staring at white again?" Lance asks.

"No. I was enjoying the colours."

"That's a new one for you."

"I know. Maybe it was the right time for it."

"Sorry, you have to go back to the common room."

"That's alright." Then I think of a question. "Do you think I can get some paper, and some paints. You know, water colours."

"Colours? You mean all types of colours?"

"Well I'm not going to do much with just white."

He smiles at me, and I realise that I feel different, that I've had the first touch of something that I haven't felt for at least a couple of years. I want to do something with my imagination; bring something out of the folds.

Mark Say, March 2015