



# *I See You*

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A Photo Album  
of People with  
Intellectual  
Disability

**RORY DU PLESSIS**



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with Intellectual Disability*

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*I See You: A Photo Album of People with Intellectual Disability*

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## INTRODUCTION

Between the early 1890s to 1907, Dr Thomas Duncan Greenlees conducted South Africa's first extensive investigation into people with intellectual disability (PWID). Greenlees based his investigations on those PWID who were under his care at three healthcare facilities in Makhanda (Grahamstown), the Institute for Imbecile Children, the Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum, and the Chronic Sick Hospital. In the resulting publications, Greenlees did not advocate for their needs or promote their humanness (Greenlees 1894, 1897, 1899, 1903, 1905, 1907; Greenlees and Purvis 1901). Rather, as a zealous eugenic campaigner, Greenlees propagated a dehumanised account of PWID. He described them as an 'awful curse' (Greenlees 1899: 36), as an 'army of deformed creatures' (Greenlees 1899: 40), and as the 'most hopeless and helpless of stray waifs of humanity' (G21-1899). He presented them to live an unfulfilled existence fraught with incessant suffering and day-to-day struggles. Ultimately, Greenlees (1907: 21) motioned for the government to sanction their extermination and sterilisation to prevent them from populating the 'world with monstrosities'. Although the government did not implement Greenlees's motions, his discourses had a profound influence on the eugenic research published in the early twentieth century of the *South African Medical Journal* (Klausen 1997: 38).

For over 130 years Greenlees's dehumanised account of his patients remained the only narrative we had for the Asylum and Institute's PWID. I aim to provide a counter-narrative by exploring the casebooks of the Asylum and the Institute to reclaim the names and life stories of the PWID (Du Plessis 2020b, 2021, 2023a, 2023c, 2024). Despite the predominance of a clinical gaze deployed by the doctors when completing the casebooks, there are slivers of information that describe a patient's life story, their engagements at an institution, and their interpersonal relations. Although these statements do not capture the

patient's own voice, they do provide us with 'humanizing sentiments' (Bogdan and Taylor 1989: 145), and they do show us how PWID ought to be remembered as 'a presence in this world that should be expressed in positive terms' (Kittay 2019: 6).

The publication of my research meant that my work was shared with academic audiences, but I also desired for it to be accessible to public audiences and for them to engage with me on the topic. I decided that a suitable public engagement for this research was to curate the country's first exhibition of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century photographs of PWID who were institutionalised at the Asylum and the Institute. I titled the exhibition, *To Be(Hold) in Revere*, which was held in October 2022 at the Link Gallery, University of Pretoria (Du Plessis 2023b). The exhibition displayed affirmative photographs and stories of PWID obtained from the casebooks of the Asylum and the Institute.

The scholarly works by Barbara Brookes and Caroline Bressey informed both the exhibition's curatorial focus on the exploration of the photographs, as well as the stories obtained from the casebooks. Although doctors 'may have photographed patients in an attempt to create typologies of mental illness', Brookes (2011: 55) maintains that contemporary audiences should regard them as a resource to 'resurrect individuals in all their particularity'. Brookes (2011: 50) argues that casebook photographs can be released from their clinical context to 'show us the humanity of people who perhaps did not usually get to pose for a camera'. Casebook photographs are 'compelling' sources as they are likely the only surviving visual record of a person (Brookes 2011: 53). In interpreting such photographs, Brooks implores us to appreciate the 'individuality' (Brookes 2011: 50) and 'humanity' (Brookes 2011: 55) of the sitters rather than to 'see' a record of a clinical case. For Bressey (2011) in her study of the City of London Asylum, the casebooks proved to be a valuable resource for containing a visible record of individuals who are underrepresented in the archives, and also for providing 'biographies' that 'would otherwise be very difficult, if not impossible, to trace'. The casebooks contain fragments of an individual's life story that 'have an

important role to play in developing our understandings of the lives of others in the long nineteenth century’ (Bressey 2011: 13).

Given the findings presented by Brookes and Bressey, I endeavoured for the exhibition to explore the casebook photographs as a visual representation of the sitter’s individuality, and this was complemented by an exploration of the casebook content for stories that shone a light on the biography of the sitter. In pursuing this exploration, I discarded the clinical context and content of the casebooks to discover textual fragments that humanise the subjects.

In focusing on humanising textual fragments, I consciously avoided narrating stories of abuse, suffering, and cruelty. Therefore, the stories that were presented in the exhibition were neither ‘damage-centered narratives of the harm done’ to PWID (Guenther 2022: 1), nor depicting them as victims of suffering (Sontag 1990). Rather, the stories were a sensitive and reverent telling of their humanity: they presented the rich and complex lives of the PWID, their acts of agency, and bonds of friendship, and restored their humanity to the history of intellectual disability in South Africa. Significantly, these stories of the PWID served as an aid in prompting ‘ethically responsible viewing’ (Gagen 2021: 44) in the audience where their interpretation of the photographs was anchored to appreciating the agency and personhood of PWID.

The exhibition succeeded in calling upon the audience to witness the personhood of the PWID, but what was missing was an opportunity for me to share how I was affected by the photographs (Du Plessis 2022). In *I See You*, I share how encountering each of the photographs entailed an ‘ensemble of seeing, feeling, being affected, contacted, and moved’ (Campt 2017: 42). The encounter with each photograph resulted in a personal testimony of how I hold the ‘individual in personhood’ (Nelson 2002: 30). The encounter was neither concerned with humanising the suffering of the patients by my expression of grief, compassion, empathy and mourning, nor by a desire to distance myself from them by looking upon them as others (Sontag 1990: 34). Underlying my encounter was engaging PWID as human subjects with a desire to ‘reckon with their

humanity' (Nicholas 2014: 153), and to acknowledge their personhood 'with [my] own' (Nelson 2002: 32).

Although I recognise each PWID as a 'particular person in a particular time and place and with a particular history' (Logan 2008), the focus in *I See You* is how an element in an individual's life story, an aspect of their photograph, or my admiration of one of their 'acts, experiences, characteristics, roles, relationships, and commitments' (Nelson 2002: 30) gave rise to a personal recognition of their personhood. Rather than providing a full-length account of their life stories, I composed poems on the one aspect that affected me and that inspired me to appreciate their personhood.

In broad outline, the poems can be grouped into four aspects that affected me. I was interested in how certain lines in the casebooks provided evidence of a patient's personhood: 'having the capacity to be in certain relationships with other persons, to sustain contact with other persons, to shape one's own world and the world of others' (Kittay 2001: 568). A number of my poems feature how the PWID embody personhood by their responsiveness and reciprocation to others, and in the way that they exerted some bearing over their lives and the lives of those around them. A second aspect that intrigued me was how the patients' lives at the Asylum and the Institute were punctuated by meaningful work experiences, nurturing relationships with the staff and patients, as well as connections with their families.

Third, when the casebooks called attention to how the doctors perceived the patients in terms of faults and failings, in terms of their deficiencies and disabilities, as well as when the patients were criticised and condemned by the doctors according to the prevailing race and gender norms (Du Plessis 2020a), I turned to exploring the photographs of the PWID as a resource to recognise and appreciate the 'singularity of another being' (Stevenson 2020: 8). In studying their photographs, I became acutely aware that each sitter lived a distinct life that was composed of various forms and degrees of agency, that they witnessed distinctive experiences and extensive encounters—albeit unrecorded in

the casebook—that set them apart from any other human who lived or will ever live. Finally, a few of my poems meditate on how my everyday habits and interpersonal relations can provide a means to ‘remember and honor’ (Nielson 2018: 16) the humanity of the PWID.

The book’s title stems from the Zulu greeting, *sawubona*. To greet someone with *sawubona* means “I see you” and carries with it the declaration that the addressee is recognised and valued by the addresser. It is an affirmation that the addresser cherishes the dignity and worth of another person. I hope that the book will provide a ‘sacred or meditative space’ (Sontag 2003: 119) to encourage readers to proclaim the dignity of the photographed PWID by addressing them with the *sawubona* greeting, and to develop their own personal connection for acknowledging their personhood.

---





## POEMS



Fragile are the pages of your casebook.  
Each turning of a page  
is to partake in the gradual erosion of your record.  
No matter how gentle  
I seek to gesture my fingers over your pages,  
they are minesweepers that detonate a  
mushroom cloud of mote.  
By my Vesuvius hand,  
the corpus of your records are now paper ash.  
I rue that I have no urn  
to collect the pieces of you.

3

The light writing medium has betrayed you.  
Your image  
is no longer preserved in the casebook photographs.  
The embalming on paper has failed.  
You are waning away,  
falling out of focus,  
becoming an ethereal apparition.

I enter into a covenant with you.  
To bestow you with new pages,  
to bind you together in a Book of Remembrance.

# James



4

Admitted: 13 April 1909 (Age: 37)

---

James worked with the Asylum's mason. When James completed a project, he would leave markers, such as a 'bit of wire twisted around a post', or a 'few stones and buttons balanced on a stick'. His markers can be regarded as an act of agency by which he sought to proclaim his role in giving shape to the Asylum.

I raise a cairn in your name.  
With every pebble stacked,  
I proclaim your name over the stones you moved at the Asylum.

The cairn spirals upwards,  
but my clumsiness soon leads to the crashing of the memorial.  
From the ruins,  
I pick up one pebble.  
It becomes a devotional relic.  
Placed in the palm of my hand,  
I trace your name with my index finger.

I hold onto the relic when I write the life stories of your kin.  
I hold onto it in the hope that I can honour your lives.

# Ella



6

Admitted: 20 July 1895 (Age: 26)

---

Ella was dedicated to her work in the sewing room. Although Ella performed an essential service by mending the patients' garments, the doctors derided her as 'demented and silly'.

Transferred to the Port Alfred Asylum on 19 September 1899

A cacophony of clinical content is strewn across the pages –  
they are a contagion of abscesses  
that desecrate the patients' identities.

To clothe the patients in dignity,

I sew together salvageable snippets of their life stories.

The pattern I follow recognises each of them as a unique being  
of distinctive worth.

7

The garment I fashion pales in comparison to the scope of their lived lives.  
But it does unfasten them from clinical content  
that reduces them to  
mannequins bedizened in pathology.

# Frederick



8

Admitted: 23 May 1907 (Age: 23)

---

Frederick's casebook is a deluge of the doctors' disparaging remarks and derogatory assessments.

Died on 22 March 1916



Seizures  
Suffering  
Sickness  
Stupor

are incessantly repeated in your casebook.

They take the form of a linguistic firing squad whose objective is to  
obliterate your personhood.

I scrutinise the casebook for a nugget by which to resurrect your agency  
(akin to a textual panning for gold).

The nugget I find is modest but worth its weight in gold.

They identified you as:

‘stronger again and able to be up and about’.

On that day, and on many others,  
you stood up to seize the day.

I salute your conviction to resuscitate your body,  
to renew your mind,  
to incant new life into your soul.

# Marthinus



10

Admitted: 28 October 1905 (Age: 18)

---

Numerous epileptic seizures, being 'much enfeebled' by these seizures, as well as being in 'poor bodily health' are the tropes that dominate the casebook entries for Marthinus. The casebook does not contain a single affirmative statement on his character.

Your casebook is an empty tomb.

The absence of your life story in the casebook  
draws me to the depth of your eyes.

They embody tales of your existence,  
they are a repository of your book of life.

Though your eyes will not enable me to tell your life story,  
they entreat me to encounter you as an individual.  
They call upon me to marvel at the mysteries of your being.

There is magic in meeting your eyes to see your singularity.

# Ada



12

Admitted: 31 July 1903 (Age: 25)

---

Ada was devoutly religious and was frequently permitted to visit the local convent.

The noon sun shines through a chapel's stained glass windows.  
The light is transformed into a kaleidoscope of holy hues.  
Seated in solitude amongst a mass of pews,  
I gaze upon the saints that festoon the walls like frescoes.

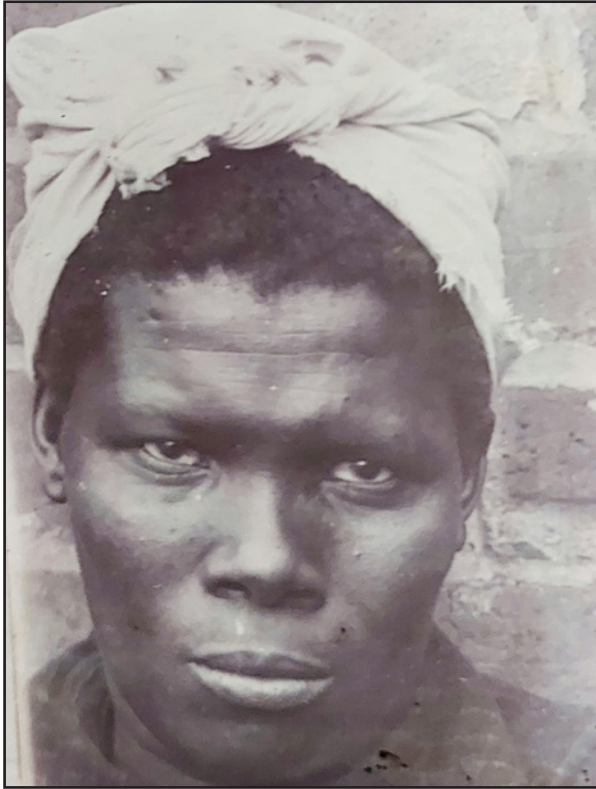
The gratitude bestowed upon St Therese enchants me.  
The Saint is praised for sending roses from heaven.  
As manna from the abode of God,  
surely this means the roses are holy.

If roses are gifted to others in the name of St Therese,  
does the act acknowledge the giftee as worthy of receiving holiness?  
Are we consecrating a soul as sacred by gifting roses?

13

Ada,  
May St Therese be your patron Saint,  
so I can adorn an altar of roses for you,  
to address you as cherished,  
to adulate you.  
Ada, *Adoro*, Amen.

# Nogale



14

Admitted: 4 November 1902 (Age: 24)

---

In Nogale's casebook, the doctors concentrated their attention on providing a clinical account of her epileptic seizures, as well as charting her performance of industrious labour at the Asylum. Consequently, she is depicted as a depersonalised clinical case and as an anonymised labourer.

Transferred to the Fort Beaufort Asylum on 24 Oct 1904

The Asylum sought to denounce your self-expression  
by tethering you to their standard-issue dress.  
They branded you as their inmate,  
marked you as a clinical case.

But, you, resisting,  
crowned yourself with a *kopdoek*.  
And so asserted your self-identity.  
Fashioning your headdress became a mantra  
to preserve yourself.

# Gladys



16

Admitted: 7 March 1903 (Age: 10)

---

On admission, Gladys could not stand or walk without the support of a walking frame. Owing to the occupational therapy Gladys received at the Institute, she managed to walk by holding onto a staff member's finger.

Discharged 01 April 1905



By the 'simple aid of holding a finger'  
you were supported to travel on foot.

This gesture granted you motion.  
It was an umbilical cord that sustained your mobility;  
It reassured you over hulking hurdles;  
It encouraged you to increase your repertoire  
to graceful glissades and stomping yomps.

This gesture was your succour,  
but did the gesturer reflect  
on the dignity you deserve?

# Willie



18

Admitted: 8 August 1902 (Age: 18)

---

The doctors remarked that Willie 'is happy at gardening' and for a long time he was solely responsible for the tending of one of the Asylum's gardens.

Discharged on 12 May 1904

'Happy at gardening' are people who sow  
a medley of flowers for butterflies to frolic in.  
They revel in the roister of birds that use it  
to broadcast their celebration of a new day.  
They seed a cabinet of curiosities in the soil  
and watch it sprout a spectacle of splendour.

19

When I garden,  
I imagine how Willie took delight in engendering his version of earth,  
of curating his cultivation,  
and exhibiting his act of genesis.

# John



20

Admitted: 21 June 1910 (Age: 16)

---

The doctor remarked that John suffers from severe epileptic seizures, is unable to speak, and 'almost helpless'. John required 'constant attention' to ensure that his health and well-being were cared for. Such a level of attention by the staff was highly unlikely, as their priority was to attend to the patients who were suffering from curable mental illnesses. Despite the limited attention the staff could offer him, John thrived at the Asylum, as he was 'well looked after by a patient ... who has taken an interest in him'.

The hands of the Asylum derided you as vacuous.  
They denied the worth of your existence and relegated your care.  
To your aid,  
a fellow patient volunteered a helping hand.  
By his acts of caring,  
your life was ordained as sacred.  
You were anointed with a nimbus.

# George



22

Admitted: 7 April 1902 (Age: 7)

---

George was described as a 'happy laughing little fellow'.

A 'happy laughing little fellow' characterised 10-year-old George.  
The verse reverberates when I watch my nephew launch into a skylarking blitz.  
He transforms the room into a Guy Fawkes of guffaw.  
He bestows offerings of gaiety, ebullience, and mirth.  
We watch him through the eyes of our 10-year-old self  
    whose belly was a riot of ha-ha,  
    and with a soul where merrymaking once dwelled.

# George



24

Age: 21

---

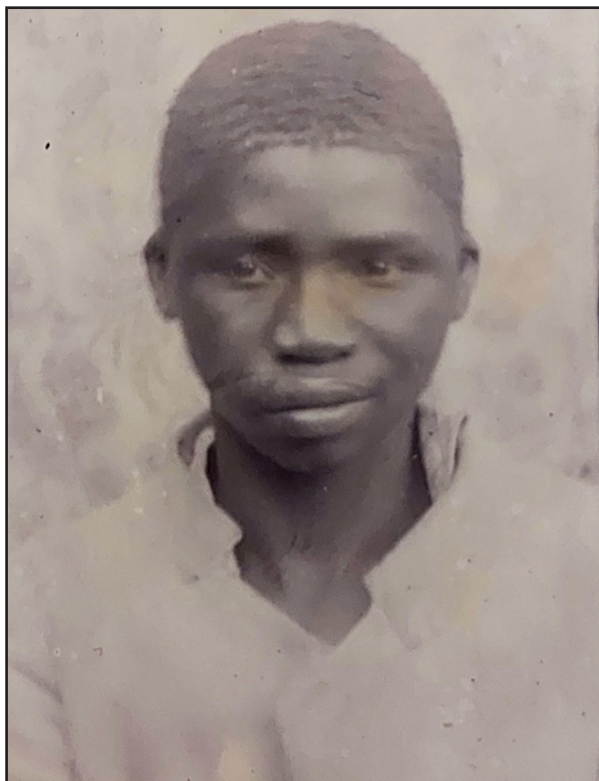
From the age of 15 he was regarded to be 'very useful' in the care of the younger children. George's caregiving role was so valuable to the Institute that they only initiated his transfer once he turned 21.

Transferred to Valkenberg Asylum on 23 May 1916



At 21, you were transferred to another asylum.  
A new set of hands would be responsible for your care.  
The old set did not send you off with applause for the care you offered to the  
younger children.  
For those who you cared for,  
I believe they bid farewell to you with a welling of tears.  
Their weeping presented you with a guard of honour.  
For 11 years, they were your kin and a vigil was formed to keep watch  
over one another.

# Sipongo



26

Admitted: 31 December 1904 (Age: 17)

---

A youth came to the attention of the police for appearing to be quite lost. On questioning by the police, the youth was unable to provide them with his name, the name of a relative, or even 'where he had come from'. The youth was eventually examined by two doctors who certified him. He was admitted to the Asylum with his name unknown.

Discharged on 24 January 1907

Interned without a name or identity,  
The Asylum impudently named you 'Unknown'.  
Scarce were the words you uttered:  
those that you did speak did not mouth your name.  
For two years your identity lay buried under the baptism of 'Unknown'.  
Finally your whereabouts were discovered by your mother.  
She enunciated Sipongo as your name  
and took you home.

# Rosa



28

Admitted: 23 June 1895 (Age: 17)

---

Soon after her admittance to the Asylum, Rosa was on her 'best behaviour' and was admired by the doctors for being 'good natured'. She was rewarded for her upright behaviour by being permitted to leave the Asylum to visit her parents. Shortly thereafter, Rosa was discharged.

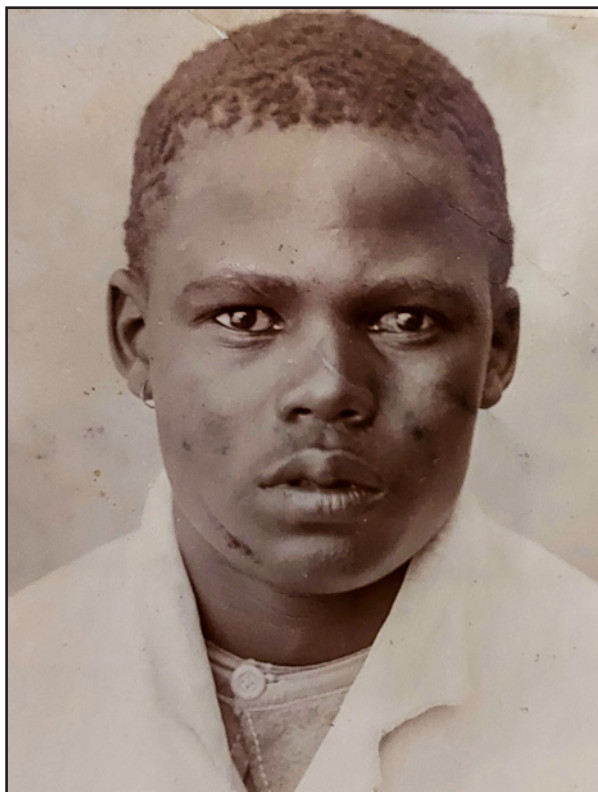
Discharged on 21 April 1896

Your graceful composure  
    attracted the admiration of the onlookers.  
The enamoured revered your image and cropped it into a leaf –  
    the undulating contours of the form  
    gilded your serene countenance.

29

I am enraptured by the botanical motif,  
reminiscent of the goddess Flora's garland of blossoms.  
Your visage is imbued with the aura of a Renaissance painting  
    where the qualities of the Charites are deified.

# Piet



30

Admitted: 23 February 1900 (Age: 18)

---

The casebook chronicles Piet's epileptic seizures but carries no mention of his life story.

Transferred to the Port Alfred Asylum on 22 December 1900

There is revelry in your jewellery.  
It is a reliquary of your world.

The earring was perchance gifted by a loved one  
who sealed it with a sworn oath of devotion.

The piercing may have commemorated a rite of passage,  
or asserted your right to self-styling.

It was your compass  
to help you find your bearings  
when the regimen of the Asylum became overbearing.

# Liza



32

Admitted: 15 October 1898 (Age: 28)

---

No information pertaining to Liza's character, her life history or to the context of her committal was recorded in the casebook.

Transferred to the Fort Beaufort Asylum on 3 October 1899



The stars shine like a searchlight through a window.  
I dream, lit by celestial luminescence.

I wonder how Liza slept under the stars.  
Did they cradle her hopes for a better tomorrow?  
They may have nursed her dreams to return home.  
Maybe they sang a lucent lullaby that kept caliginous clouds of  
    melancholy at bay.  
Did she look upon them as a *kaross* knitted by her ancestors that  
    granted her belonging,  
    a past,  
    and an assured place in the stars?

# Nomtefo



34

Admitted: 15 February 1899 (Age: 27)

---

During Nomtefo's institutionalisation, the doctors' penned only one affirmative entry for her character by stating that she has a 'cheerful disposition'.

Transferred to the Port Alfred Asylum on 10 March 1900

With your smile as broad as a horizon,  
I am pulled into your orbit.  
It is an incantation for me to smile.  
It is an effervescent elixir of ebbing giddiness  
that is emblazoned onto my countenance.

# David



36

Admitted: 5 September 1890 (Age: 26)

---

David was allowed to visit his mother on Sundays.

It is marked in your diary.  
You commence an advent calendar countdown.

On the eve of the event,  
you find a gift to bestow on them.

With zing and zap,  
you awake on the day of visiting your loved ones.

Visiting them reaps optimism to replenish your resilience.  
It is a moment to breathe deep enough to hearten your soul.

# Lena



38

Admitted: 11 October 1900 (Age: 29)

---

Lena was 'anxious to leave' the Asylum, as she was 'always wanting home'.

Transferred to the Port Alfred Asylum on 18 March 1902

To be 'always wanting home'  
is to be captured by inconsolable inquietude.  
No embankment of dolosse would be able to hold back the  
dolorous tide and tale of homesickness.  
Yet no trickery from the spirit of Dolus  
could make you believe that your home  
could be any other place.

# Emily



40

Admitted: 22 July 1901 (Age: 18)

---

Emily would often complain to the doctors of suffering from an assortment of pains. The doctors soon came to recognise that she was labouring under 'imaginary ills and ails'. Nevertheless, through her acts, Emily received the attention of the doctors. The doctors would often have to humour her complaints, submit her to fictitious medical examinations, as well as dispense her with placebo pills in the form of saccharine that offered her an immediate 'cure'.

Died on 23 May 1915



In the wards where their eyes looked past you,  
    where their care favoured the curable and corrigible,  
You courted their attention  
    by staging imaginary illnesses.  
The performance paraded your perspicacity to procure a little piece  
    of sweetness.  
Haply, your performance may have persuaded them to see the  
    sweetness in you.

# Rosetta



42

Admitted: 17 September 1884 (Age: 28)  
(Approximately 48-years-old in the photograph)

---

During Rosetta's thirty-one years of institutionalisation, she had sporadic 'short-lived attacks of excitement' but taken as a whole, she was 'civil in her conversation and manner' and unwaveringly self-possessed.

Died on 13 March 1915

Defamed as a 'firebrand' is emblazoned across your casebook.  
They claimed you inflamed the wards with gushes of gall.  
Ill-famed, you were lambasted  
as the 'most troublesome' patient.

Turn over the page,  
and a new narrative dawns.

They applauded you as civil in 'conversation and manner'.  
Over three decades of reporting,  
their applause of your good nature  
extinguished the firebrand evocation.  
It now stands as an unjust sentence,  
an indictment of the Asylum's delivering rash judgements.

43

Your casebook calls upon me to practice forbearance.  
Before I seek to cast the first stone,  
restraint must be rehearsed.  
I beseech my eyes to see the person and not the flare-up,  
I untether my hand from writing into stone my momentary misgivings.

# Hendrik



44

Admitted: 18 October 1875 (Age: 36)  
(Approximately 50-years-old in the photograph)

---

Hendrik was assigned to care for the Asylum's herd of cows. He would take the cows out to the grazing fields early in the morning and return to the Asylum in the evening when he brought them back to the cowshed. In many ways, this labour can be regarded as a form of parole, as he spent the day unsupervised outside of the Asylum's grounds. It appears that Hendrik enjoyed the solitary time that the cowherding afforded, as he disliked being spoken to.

Transferred to the Fort Beaufort Asylum on 7 October 1898

Awaking before the sun,  
Setting out on foot  
    before the morning star  
    bids adieu to its reign over the sky,  
I seat myself in a verdant valley to bathe my toes in dew.

I am transfixed by the terrestrial.  
The billowing welkin has welcomed me into wonderment.  
I am hoisted like a dandelion into enchantment.

45

Your herding duties granted you a monastery  
    in the meadows.  
It was your prayer closet,  
    and in it,  
    you witnessed creation singing praises to the heavens.

# Joseph



46

Admitted: 17 September 1908 (Age: 31)

---

Despite being in poor physical health and suffering from debilitating epileptic seizures, Joseph's mother regarded him as her 'darling'. She would frequently visit him, and was steadfast in her faith that he would recover and return home.

Died on 16 June 1916

When I see the *Madonna della Pietà*,  
I am enthralled by how she cradles her son's body.  
    His body appears weightless.  
    His placement reminds me  
    of when, as an infant and child, he had a place  
    to lay his head.

I look upon the *Pietà* as a cherished symbol  
    of the love bestowed by a mother on a child;  
that swathes the child in voluminous vats  
    of unconditional acceptance and belonging.

I behold this love in the care bestowed by Joseph's mother.  
She upheld him as her 'darling.'  
Never did she renounce that he belonged to her.

# Robertson



48

Admitted: 3 July 1909 (Age: 38)

---

Robertson would welcome the doctors onto the ward with salutations and salutes.



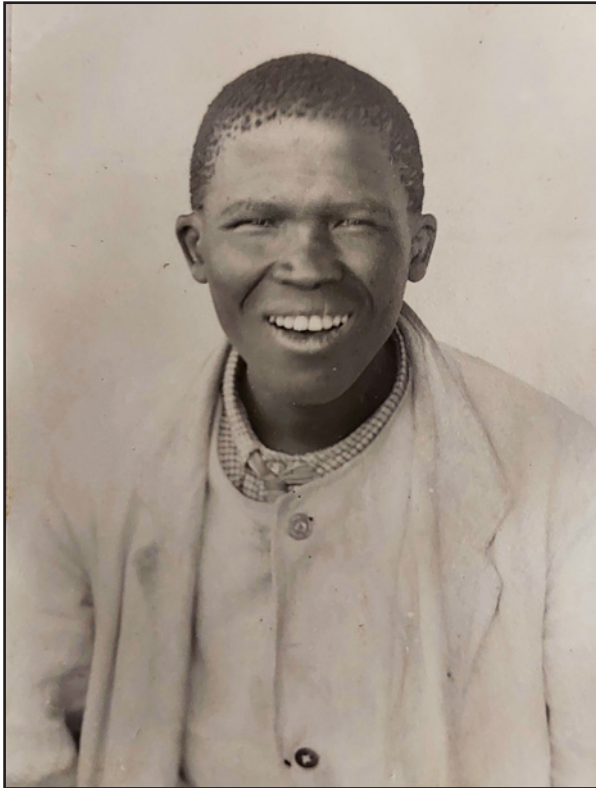
Rather than simply expressing politeness or formality,  
greeting someone summons into existence a conversation.

It is a ritual to court communication:

A way to look for an eligible suitor to romance into  
making worlds with you.

The wooing might also be accompanied by a silent petition for angels  
to carry the words we share on their wings.

# Kleinveldt



50

Admitted: 16 June 1894 (Age: 22)

---

In his first few months at the Asylum, Kleinveldt struggled to speak coherently, but by February 1895 he was much admired for talking 'rationally in Dutch', and for starting to learn to speak English. Several weeks later, the doctor concluded that he is 'intelligent in conversation'.

Discharged on 30 April 1895

Foul-sounding are my vowels.  
I croak over the consonants:  
    I falter,  
        I splutter.

My tongue produces a bedlam of brouhaha and hubbub  
It curses me with a plague of garbling  
It seeks to mock me  
It tortures me by discharging a stramash of sounds  
It performs a charivari  
        that rivals any attack I have ever received from a foe.

My tongue cannot be tamed to learn a new language.

# Patrick



52

Admitted: 11 February 1910 (Age: 17)

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'Always smiling' and enjoying dancing is how Patrick spent his days at the Asylum. These are the only affirmative entries for Patrick's character.

Dancing is a corporeal prayer.  
May my torso undulate like an accordion.  
May my arms turn into the bow of a violin to pierce the sky.  
I seek the metamorphosing of my feet into castanets  
to root rhythmic ripples in my body.

# Jacobus



54

Admitted: 22 February 1913 (Age: 36)

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Jacobus was praised for having 'better manners than a good many people of more intelligence'.

We have blazoned a death knell to antiquated manners.  
Many manners now lie as cadavers of bygone civility and chivalry.

Yet, one body of manners must always continue  
to breathe life into our social body –  
they are the corpus that prioritises  
the interests of another person above our own.  
They are our liturgy of tolerance.

# Bertram



56

Admitted: 13 February 1895 (Age: 20)

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The doctors described Bertram as a 'capital workman'. One of the duties he zealously performed was in the dining hall, where he would lay the tables with detailed care.



Meal service was a dashed affair.  
Never more than a fork and plate was my table setting.  
The décor was paper serviettes from the festive season  
    lined across the table like the rows of a Rubik's Cube.

An intervention was served by my Beloved.  
To lay a table for someone is not an unnecessary chore,  
    or an unmerited labour.  
Rather, it is a time to mark their seat in your life as of  
    solemn significance.  
Equally, it is an instant to stir awe into their lives.

I now set the table as an *amuse-bouche* to the guests:  
I amuse their senses,  
I honour them as muses in my life.



Your stories are a wind  
that possesses my diaphragm –  
making me breathe  
in ebbs of contemplation,  
and flows of reverence.

The stories sow in me a new sight –  
to see with *sawubona* eyes.  
My eyelids now nurse  
a nebula of meditations  
on being human.

I honour your lives  
by greeting all people  
as sacred souls.

## IMAGE CREDITS AND SOURCES

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Ada (HGM 21: 101)  
Bertram (HGM 4: 31)  
David (HGM 2: 193)  
Ella (HGM 17: 102)  
Emily (HGM 21: 55)  
Frederick (HGM 9: 183)  
George (HGM 24: 48, 117)  
Gladys (HGM 24: 53)  
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Rosa (HGM 17: 97)  
Sipongo (HGM 15: 56)  
Willie (HGM 24: 52)

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## *About the author*

Rory du Plessis is a Senior Lecturer in Visual Studies at the School of the Arts, University of Pretoria. He is a NRF-rated scholar, the co-editor of the academic journal, *Image & Text*, and author of *Pathways of Patients at the Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum, 1890 to 1907* (Pretoria University Law Press 2020).

The casebook for the Institute for Imbecile Children, and the casebooks of the Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum constitutes one of South Africa's largest archived records for people with intellectual disability (PWID) who were institutionalised from 1890 to 1920. In *I See You* I testify how the viewing of the casebooks' content and photographs gave rise to a personal recognition of the personhood of the PWID. My testimony takes the form of poetry that is composed to honour and memorialise each individual person who is included in this album.

POETRY

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