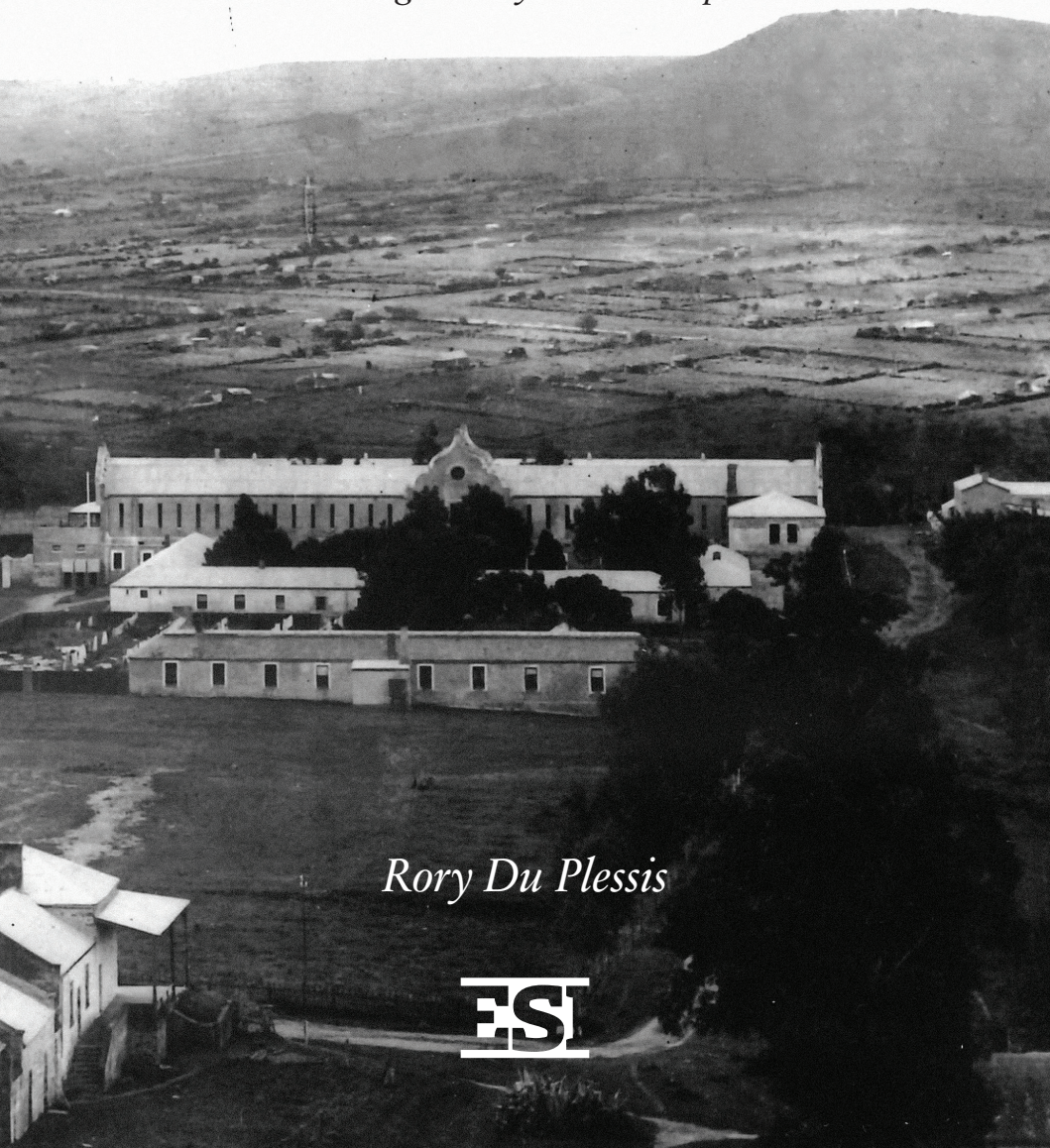
Automaton(tik):

In Remembrance of the Patients of the Fort England Psychiatric Hospital



Rory Du Plessis

ESI

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‘I have raised you to respect every human being as singular,
and you must extend that same respect into the past.’

Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) writing to his son

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Foreword

'No pay, no work.' This comment was made by James in 1909, a patient at the Fort England Psychiatric Hospital after asylum doctors asked him to resume his unpaid labour at the institution's print shop—he, however, refused to continue without pay. James's comment is one of the few direct quotes by a patient found by Professor Rory du Plessis in the 25 case files, from a collection of 200 files, that were recently located and preserved about long-term white male patients at this facility from the late 1800s to early-to-mid 1900s. James's terse response to those who recorded his words is all the more poignant for what it says about the absence of first-person accounts by psychiatric patients from documentary records. In his memorialisation of words left unrecorded, or unspoken, by people who were patients a century ago, Professor du Plessis evokes the atmosphere, interests, relationships and above all, humanity of psychiatric patients who were too often dehumanised in hospital records, particularly as they grew older, as having lives that were not worth living.

At a time when the 150th anniversary of this institution is being acknowledged, the author of the poetic tributes which follow, respectfully reflect on lives that have so often been unacknowledged in histories of psychiatric institutions: people deemed mad or mentally ill without whom this history would not exist. Far from being of no value, as the medical superintendent of the Fort England Psychiatric Hospital claimed in his writings, their contributions and abilities are artistically reflected upon in Professor du Plessis's skillful use of metaphor, allegory, nature, geography and personal histories of the people remembered here. Most importantly, he acknowledges each patient by name with a succinct account of what is known about these individual patients from the asylum records. This information is then related to imaginative poetic renderings of their travails, memories, dreams and everyday lives, whether based on glimpses of their personhood found in the files or

through fictional imaginings of what they thought and experienced. In doing so, the poems that are so thoughtfully crafted by Professor du Plessis through 'dreamwork' show that these people had a life worthy of living far beyond a static, clinical diagnosis. This is so, including when a person's tongue is 'manacled' as with Robert who thought up new words while confined at the Hospital. Or with Juan whose language was recorded as 'unknown' but who is poetically rendered as expressing 'melodies' for whoever might listen. People like Robert and Juan were not 'automaton[s]' as some medical writing implied. They were feeling, thinking, genuine people. By adding 'tik' to the title of his poetry collection, as in 'Automaton(tik)', Professor du Plessis hints at the agency, the activity or movement that a 'tik' suggests. All is not what it appears to be in the medical terminology that was imposed upon psychiatric patients recounted here.

As the author reminds us, collectively their experiences meld together in a way that helps one to understand this history through the humanity of psychiatric patients' past. Such a merging of varied experiences allows one to better interpret their and our own times when thinking of people deemed mad or mentally ill. Part of this humanity includes appreciation that psychiatric patients sought their own forms of healing, as with Albert Henry whose prayer meetings, while institutionalised, prompts a poetic reflection on 'how we will mend the world?' Reaching out to help other mad people as peers is not new, but an old tradition that these poems underline with their insight and compassion.

For another man named Albert, he quite literally sought to mend fellow-patients' sense of self-dignity through his unpaid tailor work, by repairing their clothes as conveyed by poet Du Plessis:

> You tended to their brokenness:
> you mended parts
> that had become
> weary and withered,
> threadbare and tarnished.

Still, for others like Marks, who was referred to as a 'quiet soul', he undertook self-care in a world of severely limited options by withdrawing. Perhaps Marks did this as a form of self-protection in a place where this non-English speaker found himself in a world where others made no attempt to understand the language in which he communicated. Professor du Plessis's poetic remembrance of Marks, thus, counters the official verdict which he poignantly describes:

> Confronted by their unknowing,
> the doctors sealed your paper tomb in 1930 with
> 'He was demented here and
> unable to give any account of himself'.

Similarly, when commemorating Benatoni, an Italian labourer whose life held little interest to asylum doctors after he stopped unpaid work, the poet raises the issue of respecting what is not known about him as part of what some people, like Benatoni, may have preferred while alive: 'to leave the sacred untouched by my pilgrimage'. In other words, perhaps we should leave well enough alone. For another person, this pilgrimage is encapsulated in one of Arthur's several escapes beyond the institution's walls, beautifully portrayed with the imagery of nature and freedom in a different kind of asylum:

> In the cover of darkness,
> the night bade you to lie
> and gaze upon its celestial splendour.
> With the moon planted at your feet,
> and the stars above your crown,
> the night was your asylum.

Agency of another kind from within the asylum is evoked by Professor du Plessis's poetic reflections on George, a blind and deaf man whose struggles with accommodations are unknown to us today, but who

accessed a world that medical recorders did not expect him to find on his own:

> Unaided you found your way around the hospital.
> Texture was your way finder –
> your pathways were lit
> by surface details
> invisible to sighted people.

When poetically reflecting upon the documentary fragments left about the life of Charles Overend, Professor du Plessis notes how Charles's mother provided money for asylum staff to buy him a birthday cake. This serves to remind us that, however modestly, 'we are celebrants in one another's lives'. This collection of verse is a humble, yet proudly celebratory way of remembering people through poetic tributes to those who deserve to be at the forefront of any such commemoration of the place in which they were confined for the last years of their lives. Charles is also remembered in a poem for savouring memories, savouring a moment worth enjoying:

> keep dreaming while
> trudging through the turmoil
> of today and tomorrow,
> may you never forget your moment.

May we also never forget their lives and what these people lived through, even if we know little, if anything, about them. In so doing, Professor du Plessis asks one to be humble in their reflections on this history, as when writing in the introductory poem:

> I welcome the fragments
> like a courtesy from a stranger,
> and cherish them as a fleeting reminiscence.

Don't rush to judgement, nor to label. Instead, pause to reflect in a respectful way. In doing so, remember our own place as interlopers in a world we cannot ever know. This collection of poems is a moving and thought-provoking way of commemorating those whom we will never know but should never forget: patients from the Fort England Psychiatric Hospital. We should remember them at all times whenever recounting the history of this institution, as we should remember all people who were confined in other such places around the world, past and present.

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Introduction and Historical Background

The Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum opened on 9 September 1875 in Grahamstown (renamed Makhanda in 2018) on the eastern reaches of the Cape Colony. Built on an abandoned fort, the asylum's grounds soon became home to picturesque lawns, sprawling recreational facilities, immaculate flower gardens, farms for cultivation and pasturage and fruit orchards that encircled buildings of architectural splendour. It is still in use today, but operating under the current name of the Fort England Psychiatric Hospital (the Hospital). In 2025, the Hospital will celebrate its 150th anniversary which establishes it as the oldest South African psychiatric facility that is still in use today. The anniversary prompts us to consider how the Hospital is remembered and memorialised (Wynter, Wallis and Ellis 2023). In the annual reports of the Hospital for the early twentieth century, the aspects of memorialisation focused on the tenure of the medical superintendent, Dr Thomas Duncan Greenlees (1890 to 1907), who was magnanimously praised for his 'whole-hearted enthusiasm and an untiring energy' in the leadership of the Hospital (quoted in Du Plessis 2015: 23). Articles in academic journals complement this commendation of Greenlees by saluting the 'spirit' with which he administered the Hospital (*The Fort England Mirror* 1893: 264). In later decades, the Hospital was remembered as the launching pad for the careers of many of the country's 'best-known' medical superintendents (Minde 1974: 2231). While academic and government publications have celebrated the contributions and achievements of the Hospital's superintendents, the grounds of the Hospital have preserved many of the original nineteenth-century buildings that now stand as prized historical landmarks. Consequently, the heritage of the site is linked to the memorialisation of the contributions made by the superintendents, as well as the preservation of nineteenth-century buildings, however, missing from the site's heritage are the 'experiences and memories' (Steele and Punzi 2024: 9) of the former patients.

As a gesture for us to remember the patients, I composed poems for 25 individuals who were institutionalised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These individuals were selected from a set of 200 patients, whose case files were recently discovered in one of the Hospital's cabinets and are now in the custody of the Cory Library, Rhodes University (Van Zyl 2018: 3). All the case files refer to white male patients, who were suffering from chronic mental illness and who remained institutionalised until their passing. While it remains a mystery why only these files were stored in the cabinet, and while we must be cognisant of the scope and limitations of research that pertains to such a small sample of patients from the Hospital's heterogeneous patient body, we must also signal the significance of the files in recording the entire period of the patients' institutionalisation: in some instances, spanning five decades. Prior to the discovery of the case files, we only had the Hospital's casebooks, housed at the Western Cape Archives and Records Service, which contained reports from 1890 to approximately 1918.

In investigating the case files, I opted not to follow my previous investigations into the discourses of masculinity and whiteness at the Hospital (Du Plessis 2019, 2024), but chose rather to focus on the lives and experiences of patients who were diagnosed with chronic mental illness. To substantiate my change in focus, while gender studies of madness have become an entrenched theme in historical scholarship (Milne-Smith 2022), there has been very little scholarly attention to chronic madness (Parr 2008). The importance of addressing this topic becomes crucial when we recognise that it featured in many of Greenlees's (1896, 1905, 1907) scientific publications, where he disseminated a dehumanised account of patients with chronic mental illness.

Greenlees delivered a diagnosis of dementia in patients suffering from chronic mental illness when they presented a loss of cognitive ability. In this sense, Greenlees deployed the diagnosis to refer to chronic psychosis in patients from any age group who showed cognitive difficulties (see also Hill and Laugharne 2003). In his publications, Greenlees (1907:

21) presented his patients with dementia as having an 'absence of mind' or to be subsiding into 'fatuous mental degeneration' (Greenlees 1907: 20). To this end, when illustrating cases of dementia to members of the medical fraternity, Greenlees (1896: 20) described the patient as having:

> a stupid, dazed expression, and his conduct is depraved. He will not speak, he seems deprived of feeling and intelligence; his movements become automatic, and he is generally found standing about with his head hanging down, staring vacantly, and perhaps with saliva dribbling away from his mouth. When questioned he will not answer; his memory seems destroyed; he cares for nothing; his best feelings and emotions are dulled or obliterated altogether.

Here, Greenlees (1896: 20) rendered the patients to have 'permanently deadened' mental faculties in order to underscore that they are unviable and undeserving candidates for therapy. Moreover, in characterising their emotions as wiped out or a 'complete blank', Greenlees (1896: 21) declared that 'external influences' would thus, 'fail to make any impression' on them. Consequently, Greenlees (1896: 21) avowed that the patients are unfit to receive amusements, recreations and entertainments, since it is 'impossible to arouse in these patients a feeling of interest … or pleasure'.

By presenting patients with dementia as 'hopeless incurables', who are incapable of benefitting from therapy and who cannot experience 'mental pleasure or enjoyment in this life', Greenlees (1907: 22) reasoned that their admittance was a 'burden' on the staff and resources of the Hospital, as well as a burden on the state, who pays for their maintenance. To be rid of this burden, Greenlees (1905: 222) advocated for their removal from the Hospital by sending them to a 'lethal chamber'.

Thus, in Greenlees's published work, we witness the representation of patients with dementia as 'hopelessly sick' (Greenlees 1907: 22) and therefore, they are depicted as dehumanised clinical cases, who neither had the capacity to enjoy life, nor was their life deemed worthy of protecting. An opportunity to counter Greenlees's generalisations and

portrayals of chronic illness is possible by investigating the case files to identify contradictory evidence (Du Plessis 2020), as well as to uncover information that is of value in recognising the patients as 'individual human beings who deserve to be understood on their own terms as *people*' (Reaume 2000: 5; original emphasis).

The case files were compiled by the Hospital's doctors and therefore, privileged information that was of use to them, namely charting disease progression, the dispensation of medicine as well as notes pertaining to the mental and physiological state of a patient. Once a patient was diagnosed with chronic mental illness, the doctors' reporting became sparse. They might simply state that there was 'no change' to a patient's mental state, or their reporting would present a spewing of degrading comments that outlined the patients to be 'useless', 'idle' and leading a 'vegetable existence'. To illustrate these features of the doctors' reporting, I turn to Juan's (PR 10360/38) case files:

23.07.09.	No change since 20.7.08.
20.10.09.	Smiling, demented creature – very little use.
20.2.10.	No change; health fair.
18.05.10.	Nothing to report.
22.08.10.	Demented and untidy. Will always be the same.
27.11.10.	In the same demented state – useless. Looks ill but seems healthy.
30.2.11.	Nothing to report.
20.11.11.	Just as he was three years ago – untidy but quiet dement.
20.6.12.	No change whatsoever in this patient. Keeps fairly good health.
5.4.13.	Says nothing and does practically nothing.
8.7.13.	Unchanged.
11.10.13.	Remains unchanging, year after year.
20.1.14.	Nothing to note – he remains useless, quiet and silent.
17.6.14.	No change.

These features of the doctors' reporting became even more pronounced when the men grew older and their health deteriorated. The doctors decried them as 'automatons' and as 'mentally dead' (PR 10360). For most of the men, at the time of their passing, the case files stripped their existence of any value and laid them to an undignified rest with words detailing their infirmity, illness, idleness and incoherence.

While the overwhelming majority of the case file entries dehumanise the patients, there are a handful of words and fragments of information that aid us in appreciating their individuality: their connections with family and friends; their leisure and vocational interests; and their personality and agency. By highlighting this evidence, we can refute Greenlees's (1907: 21) representation of the patients as showing 'an utter want of interest in everything that makes life interesting'. In this way, although these words and fragments offer neither an unmediated account of a patient's voice nor a biography of the patient, they do offer a means to humanise the men.

Apart from the words and fragments that bring into view the men's humanity, the case files identify multiple instances in which patients diagnosed with dementia did not remain in a state of mental incapacity. To enumerate, the men did not follow Greenlees's prognosis of being doomed to live in a perpetual and fixed state of mental vacuity and infirmity. Rather, their chronic condition was characterised by moments of improvement. To this end, I explored the case files for entries in which the men improved in their mental health and demonstrated mental acuity. In focusing on these demonstrations, I seek to reinscribe attributes that Greenlees stripped from their identities. Such a focus shifts our attention away from the 'negative lens' (Reaume 2024: 31) that the diagnosis and prognosis of chronic illness held, towards commemorating the men's lives as meaningful by elaborating on their enriching encounters, accomplishments and personal interests.

My research of the case files resulted in the identification of the fragments that help to restore the humanity of the patients. I used the fragments as source material for poems dedicated to each of the men.

These fragments took hold of my thoughts and imagination and led me in 'dreamwork' (Swartz 2018: 293) to contemplate the lives lived and the fullness of the experiences that the men encountered. Thus, while the fragments are historical fact, I embed them into larger fictional narratives that capture my imagined impressions of the men and that seeks to celebrate and keep 'alive … the humanity of the individuals' (Steele and Punzi 2024: 4).

I have grouped the poetry into two parts. Part I explores the case files for words and fragments that allows one to recognise and appreciate the individuality of the men: how they can be defined as 'distinct, unique individuals with particular and specific characteristics that set them apart from others' (Bogdan and Taylor 1989: 141). Aspects of an individual's personality are the inspiration for the poems of Marks and Timothy, where they rejected the enculturation of the Hospital's standards of conduct by holding onto expressions of behaviour that asserted their self-identity. Another aspect of individuality refers to the expression of likes and dislikes, tastes and preferences (Bogdan and Taylor 1989: 142). Some men would spend their leisure time pursuing their hobbies which included reading (see Joseph), gardening (see Eduardo) and coining new words (see Robert). For Gerhardus and Albert Henry, religious devotion was the cornerstone of their daily lives, while Frederick preferred to spend his time alone in his room. Feelings are the focus of three poems that address the ecstasy of friendship (see John), the frenzy, fear and freedom of an escape attempt (see Arthur) and living without the senses of sight and sound (see George Henry). For four men, the doctors identified them as lost, inaccessible or incomprehensible and thus, their case file entries are a deluge of scornful portrayals. I locate their humanity in their life history before institutionalisation: for Thomas, he was the owner of several books that may offer a glimpse into his interests; for Benatoni, I consider how to honour his birthplace in Italy; for Johannes, I conjure what it meant to live in Beaufort West and lastly, for Juan, I salute his tongue from Buenos Aires.

Part II explores how the men were integral members of the Hospital

or within their family unit (Bogdan and Taylor 1989: 145). For several men, a recurrent theme is how their relatives sought to include them—even though they were institutionalised at the Hospital—in the family unit's 'routines and rituals' (Bogdan and Taylor 1989: 145). Families would send cake to celebrate a loved one's birthday (see Charles Overend) while others would send care parcels when a family member was in ill health (see Franz). We also witness family members who eagerly arranged for a loved one's leave of absence from the Hospital so that they could stay with them for some time (see Ben and George Robertson). Even in the last stages of a loved one's life, we see that families were in contact with the Hospital (see Charles Edward) and in one case; a family erected a tombstone in remembrance of a loved one who passed away at the Hospital (see Norman).

For some men, their acts of industrious labour performed at the Hospital made them integral contributors to the optimal running of the institution. Although the Hospital took advantage of patients who could be used as an unpaid workforce, the labour performed by the men acts as a counternarrative to the case file entries where they were diagnosed by the doctors to be 'dements' and consequently believed to be incapable, unintelligible and uninterested (see Albert K., Charles James, Jeremiah). Of interest, in the case of James, we witness him seeking compensation for his labour at the Hospital and when it was denied to him, he went on strike and proclaimed that 'No pay, no work.'

For five of the men, I composed two poems for each of them. In doing so, I wish to remind the reader that the singularity of the individual is not to be regarded as synonymous with a singular narrative. A more substantial study of the case files will offer multiple humanising stories, narratives and sentiments for each of the men.

In loose folio sheets,
seldom tallying over a dozen,
an account was given of your life.
These sheets unmade you –
they tied your existence to a perdition of
inertia and catatonia,
anguish and abjection.
They are a death mask
that brazenly cast your life
as 'mentally dead.'

Amidst the lines of the folio
that lay waste to you,
like an army of ants stripping carrion,
lies a handful of words with
fragments of your story.
I welcome the fragments
like a courtesy from a stranger,
and cherish them as a fleeting reminiscence
of a time when my soul sang louder
than an orchard of chirping cicadas.

The fragments cause my head to rise up
like a trombone
from the folios of sorrow
to imagine the other wor(l)ds
that have gone untold:
The plenitude of dreams that
roamed on the plains of your slumbering eyelids;
The names of family
that you engraved into the palms of your hands;
Of dashed hopes
where tears carved deep furrows into your cheeks;

Maybe your family heirloom was a smile,
passed down from your forefathers,
that was greeted by onlookers
as rivulets of butterflies whirling in the wilderness.

Your life was a long journey
and while Lady Luck did not offer you milk and honey,
I do believe
that you witnessed an immensity of magic:
The friendship,
no matter how impossible,
between a cat and a fox;
The beauty,
lasting only for an instant,
of harlequin-scaled fish that *kafoefel* at your feet;
A stirring in your solar plexus,
that transformed your heart into a swallow
swooping and darting in acrobatic flight,
when your eyes
beheld your beloved
for the first time.

Not knowing the details of your life story,
I will not write you a eulogy.
But, with compassion,
I take the fragments,
and weave them as precious golden threads
into impressions of your spirit
to commemorate your life.

PART 1

Robert

Deeper you tunnelled;
ever inwards you probed
to prospect for a word
to match your inner world.
Yet, the depths of unearthing
did not untie your tongue.
You bartered its release by
bending and plying words,
but your tongue remained
manacled.

The crusade to unlocking your tongue
was sounded when you coined new words.
Your tongue's free rein
tapped a reef of words
with the soul of an
automaton(tik):
A 'shy fellow
who never pokes his nose
where not wanted.'

Admitted: 27 January 1907
Age: 34
Died: 2 April 1944

During his leisure time, Robert occupied himself with drawing, compiling homemade sketchbooks and coining new words such as *automaton(tik)*.

Eduardo

Creeping along the lattice,
bearing globes
of sunset shades,
hanging as festive ornaments,
they are cheered by passers-by,
and guarded as devotedly
as precious opal and jasper.

For you,
their sower,
the tomatoes,
were your rosary –
prayers of petition
to return to
your terra
in Tuscany.

Admitted: 29 July 1904
Age: 50
Died: 31 May 1922

Eduardo, an Italian, was lambasted in the case files for being unable to 'speak a word of English.' By 1914, he had learnt a few words of English, but not enough to provide the doctors with insights into his mental state. Eduardo was described as being 'very quiet as a rule,' however, he would become 'angry and excited if he thinks anyone is stealing the flowers' he planted. In the following year, Eduardo interested himself 'only with his tomato plant which he takes great pains with.'

Johannes

To be 'always smiling'
you may have drawn from a
well of words
that was dug
into your soul
by life in Beaufort West.
Here the
landscape of language
is contoured by
metaphor and myth.
Legends stand
as proud guardians of truth and virtue, and
storytellers are the town's key-bearers.
The tellers weave a
tapestry of tales from
generations of flame-to-ember pit gatherings.
Those at their feet
gulp up the stories as if they were
hounds at a watering hole after a herculean hunt.
The folk arise with lore spun over their tongues:
Parables of mermaids
in the desert
with Pegasus-soaring kudos, and
tales of praying mantises begetting the hump-backed moon,
make conversing a
mouthing of metaphors
that is as playful as a whirlwind
and as sharp as a prickly pear on the tongue.

Admitted: 13 April 1909
Age: 47
Died: 16 January 1930

In 1886, Johannes was admitted to the Old Somerset Hospital. By 1892, he was transferred to Robben Island Asylum and thereafter, in 1900 to the Port Alfred Asylum. In 1909, Johannes was transferred to Fort England Hospital. The doctors at the Hospital described him as 'demented' and 'irrecoverable'. Consequently, when it came to reporting on his mental condition, the doctors simply stated that he 'remains the same' or that there was 'no change whatsoever'. Woven between these hollow entries are a few instances in which the doctors mentioned that they found him to be 'always smiling' and when conversing, he would make many references to his hometown of Beaufort West.

Albert Henry

Outside in the dark,
alone
I
stand
like a mast
over a great plain,
to offer nightly prayers
under the baptism of the Milky Way.

I behold the empyrean orbs
that we have looked upon to
tell the stories of our gods,
a guide to our
futures,
and to tell of our
beginning and past.

But often we forget
that we dream under their watch.
I look up at them to ask,
'tell me about our dreaming.'
Are we
summoning wormwood,
or do our dreams contain
a faint glimmer
of how we will
mend the world?

Admitted: 12 July 1909
Age: 46
Died: 31 March 1929

Throughout his years at the Hospital, Albert suffered from severe epileptic seizures, averaging a dozen a month. In the periods between the seizures, Albert spent his day 'going about contentedly and absorbed in his Bible' and by night, he would hold prayer meetings.

Braying at the shutters,
gnawing at the door and
banging at the glass panes,
are winter's pangs
to run amok in the inn
and to vanquish the
flames of the fireplace.

Seated as keepers of the flame
are five men at a table.
Harnessed to each of their hands
is a deck
that may hold
a chance for them to revel in the
folly of a Joker,
to be jolly with a Jack,
or to titillate over a tryptic.

One fellow,
rubbing his hands together
as a ruminating cricket,
weighs up his hand.
In a stoic beat
to admit his defeat
he drums his fingers
and downs his hand.

At his left,
a stony-faced soul
keeps his secrets close to his chest.
His eyes are riveted to the
waterwheel of hands
flowing over the centre of the table.

With kneading-knees,
a third man
gulping in a breath of oomph,
whoops
out,
'I won.'

In gusto and holler,
the fourth man interjects to
dethrone the self-proclaimed victor.
Across the table
he spans out his hand,
as if it was Apollo's chariot
pulling the sun across the horizon,
and he is declared the champion.

The fifth,
bunkers into his chair
and bemoans
yet another round where he has lost.

I watch these men –
drenched in excitement –
and think of Albert
who delighted in playing cards.
I wonder if playing the rounds
made his cheeks ripe in rhapsody and
if his ears glowed in the table's
cheering for his win.

Albert kept himself entertained at the Hospital by playing card games.

Marks

The fields of your case file –
from your language
to the country of your birth –
are potholed by
blanks.
Confronted by their unknowing,
the doctors sealed your paper tomb in 1930 with
'He was demented here and
unable to give any account of himself.'
But,
rather than unable,
you were unwilling
to share your life story.

You, dear Sir –
were a quiet soul
who seldom spoke,
who may have lived in silence and solitude,
with memories of family and homeland to
gladden your every step,
to draw upon an inner heaven
that granted you solace and strength,
and to feed and sustain your heaven
from a ferris-wheel of
sweet reminiscences.

Admitted: 15 December 1900
Age: 27
Died: 26 June 1930

Marks, an immigrant whose knowledge of English was 'strictly limited', was admitted to the Hospital with only his age recorded in the case files. The rest of his biographical information was unknown. In later years, Marks was able to understand what was said to him, but when questioned on his life story and other personal matters, Marks would 'mumble away' in a foreign tongue or remain quiet. This aggrieved the doctors, as they deemed that he was 'apparently … endeavouring [not] to answer [their] questions'.

Benatoni

A sacred mountain in Valperga, Italy
cradled you at birth:
the Sacro Monte di Belmonte.
Your childhood bore witness to pilgrims
taking devotional steps
as they climbed the mountain like a steeple.

As a pilgrimage to your life,
I climb a sacred mountain in the Karoo.
It holds no promise of a pastoral pilgrimage,
no picturesque pastures,
no pockets of pastel posies,
no morning mist to invite mysticism,
no Edenic evangelism.

To journey in the Karoo is to be
bedfellows with death, drought and dust.
What can easily be mistaken for a
diorama of brimstone
is the Karoo's camouflage:
It conceals its beauty,
it denies the domestication of the sacred into
Genesis-gardens.

A Karoo pilgrim's journey begins
with a prayer to remove deathscape blinkers,
to begin to see nature's sanctuaries and shrines.

The footpath I travel on
is of eucalyptus bark,
resembling the hides of a springbok:

it is a loincloth that protects the soil's offspring.

A harmonica is played by the wind
as it breathes through hollow branches.
I sow my ears to the bush-harp
for my lips to sprout lyrics
and for my clavicle to rise with earth's rhythms.

The path is padded
by dream catchers
crafted by thorn trees
that shear the sheep when passing by.

Atop a rock
is a lamb
– only a fortnight old –
whose
bleating rings above the mountains,
and in summoning its mother,
consecrates an altar to altruism.

An agora of ancient tortoises is gathered here.
My approach stirs a hullabaloo of creeping and shuffling
before they transform into stone,
and thereby present me with a labyrinth to navigate.

Quills of onyx black
and alabaster white
lance the path.
They invite me to gaze upon the horizon and
witness the winged giants
that sway like church bells in the wind.

With the sun at my back,
my shadow walks ahead,
it shows me my movements,
it stands guard over me
and reminds me to leave
the sacred untouched
by my pilgrimage.

Admitted: 15 December 1900
Age: 39
Died: 1937

On admission to the Hospital, Benatoni was believed to be a 'Greek' who 'speaks a patois' that is 'impossible to decipher'. The doctors bemoaned that he has 'occasional outbursts of violence' and 'does not occupy himself'. Several months later, the doctors saluted Benatoni for showing 'considerable mental improvement', as he presented himself as a 'good worker and a quiet, well-behaved man'. By 1908, the doctors established that he was an Italian and he was praised as the 'best worker in the place'. Although he was identified as an Italian, there was very little interest in securing translators to conduct interviews to enquire about his life story and mental wellbeing. Rather, the doctors' interests were focused on reporting on Benatoni's industrious labour where he 'polishes everything that will polish and goes at it thoroughly from morning to night'. In 1909, he ceased working and subsequently received the doctors' scorn for being idle. Three years later, he was diagnosed to be 'demented' and this resulted in repetitive case file entries, from 1914 to 1919, where he was described to be 'idle and untidy'. On Benatoni's passing in 1937, the superintendent contacted the Italian Consulate to request assistance in tracing his birth records and relatives. The Consulate replied that Benatoni was born in Valperga.

Joseph

With your
fingers

trailing down the spines,
your eyes searched for an invitation
to live life anew,
discover new horizons,
and be granted sight from another's eyes.

On accepting the bid
from a lucky volume,
you would be bound together.
It would be your chapel for morning devotion,
you will cradle it before bed.
It will touch you,
your eyes will become porous to its expanses,
and in transforming you,
it will be the cartographer to map
your new-found self.

In turn
the inviter —
the book that called you —
will be released from its ribcage-shelves,
and the dust that took possession of its jacket
will be blown away by your breath.
The book will take root
over your heart like a breastbone,
its pages will once more look upon the sun,
and it will read the stories in your eyes.

Admitted: 9 August 1899
Age: 23
Died: 23 August 1929

Joseph spent his leisure time reading books.

Timothy

You were labelled
lazy and idle
for not offering your labour.
But, you, protesting,
withheld your hands for payment.
Vowing to remain unemployed at the hospital,
you ventured to earn a living by working for the railway.

You were
indifferent
to daily life at the hospital.
Nevertheless, you were heedful of the world at war.
In later years,
you were 'au fait with all current events.'

You were branded
unsociable
with your fellow patients.
Yet, you wrote letters to ask
what had become of your wife and children.

You wanted to live as a citizen
not a patient,
a decision that curtailed your encounters at the hospital,
But it was the life you once lived
and the hope to return to it,
that nourished your being.

Admitted: 25 June 1899
Age: 46
Died: 25 September 1926

In the early 1900s, Timothy was described to be 'enfeebled mentally' and 'demented.' However, in 1915, the declarations made by the doctors were no longer valid, since Timothy was correctly orientated with date and time, he also knew that 'there is a big war going on at present.' Shortly thereafter, he wrote to find out the whereabouts of his family. Although he was correctly orientated and coherent, Timothy refused to employ himself at the Hospital and remained 'unsociable and rather indifferent' to engaging in the activities of the Hospital. In 1919, he was commended for being 'correctly orientated, shows no defect in memory and can give a fairly clear account of himself. Has a fair knowledge of current events.' Along these lines, Timothy's case files demonstrate that while he was 'dull and apathetic' to life at the Hospital, his memory and interest in the outside world was 'well preserved.' Two years before his death, the doctors marvelled that for his age of 71, his 'memory and orientation' was 'fairly good.'

Arthur

Every inhale
bludgeoned
the solar plexus.
Every exhale
a corporeal prayer
you chanted
to forego the pain:
to be a runaway *veldfire*
over *koppies*,
across *kraals*
and along *kloofs*;

to dart among the aloes
and appeal to them
to make your pursuer's path
a noose of hadean pokers
and to ambush their hunt
with assegai-tipped thorns;

to sidle and sneak past the
banshee-shrieking *kiewiets*
and pray that they would not
sound a siren of your whereabouts;

to run to the shores
of the ocean
and ask the waves to whisper,
between their breaths of
bawling and bellowing,
where freedom resides;

to run until nightfall
enshrouds you in a silhouette.
In the cover of darkness,
the night bade you to lie
and gaze upon its celestial splendour.
With the moon planted at your feet,
and the stars above your crown,
the night was your asylum.

Admitted: 29 December 1904
Age: 28
Died: 24 March 1921

In 1906, a year after Arthur was described by the doctors to be 'fatuous … and incapable of any form of mental effort; movements slow and automatic', he successfully engineered and carried out an escape. Although Arthur was apprehended and brought back to the Hospital, for over a decade, he was 'always on the lookout for a chance to escape' and managed to do so on several occasions. In his escape attempt of 1907, he eluded the authorities for close to a week.

Frederick

Four corners,
for many,
would have been life in a prison cell:

a solitary sentence,
a dying sentence –
awaiting the final exhale of life.

Four corners,
for you,
became a universe of curiosities
and a hobby room of creativity.

Photos and postcards of places
where the chambers of your heart
split like a pomegranate
in passion and fervour.

A tent canvas, knapsack and haversack:
were they keepsakes
from
adolescent adrenalin-arousing-adventures?
Where
alone atop alpic-apexes,
flying ants worshipped your light
as their moon-god.

A shofar was your gramophone,
it announced your spirit's freedom
to voyage in distant lands,

for your ears to suckle on symphonies and a
babel of tongues to cradle you with their melodies.

What of the complete Highland costume in the cupboard?
Was it a portal to your clan?

Where a chosen few invited to view your universe,
or was it your holy of holies,
where your imagination dwelt?

Whether a showcase or sanctum,
you protected it from the profane:
three rat traps kept your belongings from ruin.

Admitted: 22 July 1901
Age: 51
Died: 14 January 1932

In 1912, Frederick was moved into a single room along with his library of over 330 books and numerous other belongings. His room became a 'collection of all sorts of things' and he would spend most of his time in his room occupied with reading, drawing, painting, doing arithmetic and writing. He was described to resent being interfered with, as he wished to 'live in his own sphere … undisturbed.'

Gerhardus

Head bowed,
eyes shut,
you delivered
daily prayers of grace.
They say that some were sung
as hymns and psalms,
but how might you
have delivered the rest?

Did the injustices of the hospital
become your pulpit to
speak out, as a prophet, against abuses?

Were you a poet who praised
the romance of the natural world?
Wonderstruck by the birds
that raced with the clouds;
bewitched by jackals, owls and bats
that made your nocturnal gazing
a gothic tale.
By lending your ear to the wind,
were you a scribe to its travels?

If Samaritan in spirit,
did you plead for the despairing to find hope,
the deserted to receive companionship,
the crestfallen to rise again?

Maybe your prayer was a silent petition
for sufficient grace
to accept the suffering of life,

and to never forget that life
has meaning.

Admitted: 9 July 1906
Age: 28
Died: 15 March 1949

Gerhardus spent his time in religious devotion. He would read the Bible, offer 'graces in hymn and psalm after each meal' and attend church services on Sundays. He confirmed to the doctors that he was 'perfectly satisfied living' at the Hospital, as long as he had 'his books on religion and is allowed to attend services and sing his grace aloud for ten minutes every day.'

John

Concaving, pulsing and quaking:
skin becoming seismic waves.

Levitating and whirling
in amorphous proportions:
one scarcely recognises the body caught in the vortex.

Silver fins hurtling across the sky,
making for goggle-eyed observers
and a mind harpooned by ecstasy.

The sea's creatures hiss shrilly
as Triton's army charges forth.

Otherworldly
it is to swim with a school of fish.

And otherworldly it is
to look into your eyes.
They offer me
seven seas of wonderment.

Admitted 25 March 1900
Age: 38
Died: 13 January 1930

John commenced his institutionalisation in 1887 when he was admitted to the Old Somerset Hospital. Thereafter, he was transferred to Robben Island Asylum in 1888, Valkenberg in 1891 and finally to the Hospital in 1900. In the case files of the Hospital, the doctors portray a dehumanised account of John where they describe him solely in terms of mental infirmity. The first and only instance in which the Hospital's case files present a glimpse into his personhood is when the doctors outline that he started a friendship with another patient. John and his friend would spend every day together. Once they were moved to different wards and thus, separated, John was likely very distraught and depressed, as he was described as walking about 'slipshod and slovenly with hands in pockets and quite unobservant.' In the years thereafter, the case files slanderously presented him to be 'speechless and useless' and a 'dement who works with less intelligence than an ox displays.'

George Henry

Stripped of sight and hearing,
the outside world
was not shut to you.
Through your sense of touch,
you unlocked the world
and communed with others.

Unaided, you found your way around the hospital.
Texture was your way finder –
your pathways were lit
by surface details
invisible to sighted people.

By the touch of others,
you received instructions.
Your hands transformed into a vocabulary –
its surface no longer a whole,
but transformed into quays
to receive words.

Touch as location,
touch as language,
this sensorial feat
was a miracle to behold.

Admitted: 17 September 1908
Age: 54
Died: 8 May 1934

On admission to the Hospital, being both blind and deaf, the doctors described George as a 'poor, demented creature' who is unable to do anything for himself. In the face of such deriding statements made by the doctors, they were astonished with the progress George made at the Hospital. In 1914, the doctors marvelled at how George found his way about the facility unaided, and in 1925, they were amazed that he was capable of 'understanding simple things required of him by touching him.' At the age of 78, George still managed to do 'everything for himself even finding his bed and lavatory unaided.'

Thomas

I explored the fields and forests of text
that you harvested for your thoughts.
Your imagination was Prometheus
by the pages of your storehouse;
its liver eaten every day,
regrowing every night.
Stories of great cities
propelled your curiosity.
Your library provided you with a house of friends
when there were none at your side.
It lets me glimpse the fancies of your mind's eye
and the architecture of your dreaming.

Admitted: 17 September 1908
Age: 61
Died: 30 June 1924

Thomas was described as jovial, cheerful and have a 'pleasant disposition', however, he was 'amnesiac' and thus, unable to give an account of himself. While we do not have an account of Thomas's life story, we do have an inventory of books that he previously had in his possession, which offers us a glimpse into his interests, fancies and curiosities. Amongst others, the inventory included: *A Crimson Crime* (Fenn 1899), *In the House of his Friends: A Novel* (Savage 1901), *The Raiders: Being Some Passages in the Life of John Faa, Lord and Earl of Little Egypt* (Crockett 1894), *The Book of Snobs* (Thackeray 1856), and *The Stolen White Elephant* (Twain 1882).

Juan

It yearned to find a suitor,
denying silent slumber,
rejecting the abstinence of mutism,
it mumbled and murmured,
it cried out for someone
to respond to its pleas.

Never did your
'unknown tongue'
cease wishing
to find an interlocutor
worthy of its melodies.

Admitted: 19 December 1900
Age: 25
Died: 23 August 1935

Juan, originally a cattleman from Buenos Aires, was 'inaccessible' to the doctors, as he spoke in an 'unknown tongue'. From his admission and throughout his entire institutionalisation, the doctors pronounced that Juan 'uttered no coherent word'; however, they did concede that 'it is possible that he understands no other language but his own'.

PART 2

Ben

Meet me in the frangipani alley
where the cascading petals
are a *rangoli* of
immaculate white
and specks of yellow
as jubilant as ghee.

Barefoot we dance
to bathe our soles in beauty.
We stomp,
we tread,
we press into the petals
as if we could imprint
the *rangoli* into our souls.

With pollen-sodden feet,
we step outside the *rangoli*.
Our spoors of glistening gold
bestow a midas touch upon the ground.

Our reunion
an alchemy in the sand
and my heart
a dervish dancer.

Admitted: 24 November 1917
Age: undocumented
Died: 17 June 1935

Ben expressed a 'longing for the outside world' and was able to stay with his family on several occasions. Ben's visit to his family in 1923 generated several letters of exchange between Ben's brother, JP, and the superintendent. In the first letter, JP asks the superintendent if 'it is possible to let my brother Ben come out to me on a visit'. JP wrote the letter with 'anticipation' and expectation that the superintendent would agree to his request. The superintendent granted Ben's leave into the care of JP. In the second letter, JP reported to the superintendent that Ben was 'doing very well on the farm, being always busy doing something' and had visited his other brothers. On Ben's return to the Hospital after six months away, the doctors reported that he was restless, as he wished to return home.

George Robertson

We seldom wish
for the day to come
when our tomorrow
will not be.

Lucky are those who
find an ennobled passing at home
where our sighs are met by a
hosanna of hands,
a kiss
anoints our forehead,
and the rickety masts of our palms
find anchor
in the embrace of our beloveds.

Our last sight
is of those who are
entrusted to inter
our body and
lustrate our name.

Our last thought
is to know
we will be missed.

The final crescendo of our heart –
a maestro
to an ensemble of
weeping witnesses.

Admitted: 3 July 1909
Age: 38
Died: 4 June 1937

During his discharge on a six-month leave of absence to his sister, George passed away. He was 66 years old.

Some are born with rhythm in their bodies –
they dance by following the beat of music.

Some are born with dancing in their souls –
they dare to dance with no music.
A stroll becomes a swirling-serpentine-sway,
a staircase beckons a time to tap dance,
a dinner party is an occasion to
perform a cabaret of movements,
and when I am greeted by such a person,
their grin sweeps across their body in
jiggles and gyrations,
their hand echoes around my body
and I am cajoled into
performing a duo-pirouette.
I too, feel my soul is dancing.

Despite his 'shy and retiring disposition', George delighted in attending the dances held at the Hospital.

Charles Overend

Your passage around the sun
was not forgotten by your kin.
They sent you
a birthday cake
dressed in white icing,
it doubled as a christening garment –
a reminder that your soul is named and
known by heaven and earth.

In lighting your candles,
the nurses were enkindled
to become merrymakers
who transformed the wards
into a carnival of bunting colour,
decked the table
with a purple parade of agapanthus
and sang a chorus of joyful tunes.

The cake,
the humble token,
the embroiderer of hearts
reminding us that we are celebrants
in one another's lives.

Admitted: 2 November 1904
Age: 36
Died: 4 August 1935

For several years, Charles's mother would send money for the superintendent to purchase an iced cake for his birthday. The superintendent fulfilled her wishes and reported to her that Charles 'enjoyed the cake very much.'

Tell me about that moment,
the one that sustains you
when you are confronted by hardship,
the one that reminds you of your grit,
the one where you summited your mountain.
Yes, it is the moment
that you attained your goal.
Yes, this is the treasure
that reigns in the kingdom of your life story.

I beg of you,
please,
in earnest interest
for your steadfast endurance to
keep dreaming while
trudging through the turmoil
of today and tomorrow,
may you never forget your moment.
Tend to its memory,
share it as a personal parable,
write it upon your eyes to see with grace,
and may it transform your
eyelashes into gills
to breathe in a life
of joy and wonder.

The doctors praised Charles as a model patient: 'Quiet and well behaved. A fairly good worker. Eats and sleeps well.' While they praised his identity and behaviour as a patient, they were indifferent to conversations with him, as he never tired of sharing with them his accomplishments on the cricket field.

Charles Edward

…'it is feared he will not recover.'
On reading this in the letter,
were you shot by arrows of agony?

Were there
wailers to offer you an embrace of beatitudes?
Neighbours to catch your tears as precious pearls?
Family members to bathe your throat in *bossie* brews
to wash away the gruff and grating of grief?
A young child,
innocent of death,
with the smile of a cherub
to be the doorkeeper?

When the mourners departed,
a candle joined you in a private vigil.
With every flicker,
you recalled a memory of Charles
that you would rear and cherish
in your storytelling of his life.

As the night grew longer,
with the aid of the coruscating light,
you searched for the flotsam of Charles's dreams
and promised to fulfil them.

Admitted: 18 April 1896
Age: 49
Died: 18 July 1925

In the early 1900s, Charles was permitted to visit his family twice a month. By the 1920s when his ill health prevented him from leaving the Hospital, the superintendent's letters to his sister kept the family updated as to his health and wellbeing. In July 1925, after more than a year of suffering from renal and cardiac disease, Charles's health rapidly deteriorated. On 17 July, the superintendent wrote to inform the family that he collapsed the previous evening and that 'it is feared he will not recover'. The next day, Charles passed away.

Charles James

Seated at your chair,
with avian arched necks
and chins pointing to the sky,
they exposed their jugulars
to your blade.

They trusted you with their lives
while you shaved their chins,
sculpted their whiskers
and groomed their moustaches,
so that they –
like kingly strelitzias –
could hold their heads high
as crowned gentleman.

They arose from your chair
with lumps in their throats,
for you roused them to see
the dignity of their being.

Admitted: 31 August 1908
Age: 30
Died: 27 July 1954

In 1909, the doctors pronounced that Charles was evidently 'drifting into dementia,' as he was in a lethargic state, 'interests himself in nothing' and 'careless of his personal appearance.' However, this was no longer the case in the 1920s when Charles worked as the Hospital's barber for the patients. He took 'pride in his work' and was 'tidy and neat in his personal attire.'

Franz

A parcel arrived for you.
Its contents,
sent in the hope
it would give you
'a little pleasure.'

Such mystery contents,
with promises of pleasure,
incited a razzmatazz in the hospital.
Whispers crept along the wards
and scuttlebutts sprinted in the passageways
with tales of the contents being
potent potions.

The parcel came with
instructions for its contents
to be given to you in
'regular amounts.'
It was your daily communion,
and each taking
transformed your mouth into an
enchanted cardamom pod:

a finch –
flinging
flirting
flashing
about –
is the tongue
when frolicking with sweets,

with crumble and buttery dissolve
biscuits behave like quicksand,

by strokes of chocolate
the palate is painted
as a temple's cupola.

One bite
was the offering;
but it gifted you a moment
where you welcomed pleasure
as a seraph's visitation.

Admitted: 25 May 1900
Age: 29
Died: 24 May 1952

In October 1947, the superintendent notified Franz's niece that Franz had sustained a serious injury. She thanked the superintendent for informing her and proceeded to enquire about Franz's health, as well as if 'there is any little comfort he is able to enjoy … and I will do my best for him'. The superintendent replied that Franz 'would be able to enjoy eatables such as biscuits'. The niece heeded the superintendent's recommendations and sent Franz a parcel containing:

> 2 packets of biscuits, 3 slabs of chocolate (different sizes) and some other sweets … I shall be very grateful if you will kindly see that these are given out … in regular amounts. I shall endeavour to send a parcel now and then, and hope they will give him a little pleasure.

James

The words of the hospital took flight.
Your work at the printing press
gifted them wings.

Some,
were oil lamps
that lit the nurses' path
in caring for your bedridden brethren.

Some,
clasped by the patients as precious scrolls,
promised an evening line-up
of spellbinding entertainment.

Others,
migrated into public homes,
carrying appeals
to support the Christmas cheer
of the children
who knew the hospital
as their only home.

Admitted: 21 July 1905
Age: 47
Died: 31 October 1924

Shortly after James was admitted to the Hospital, he started working in the printing room. The Hospital's press was responsible for printing the nursing guidelines, the programmes for the entertainment evenings and the *Fort England Mirror*—the in-house periodical that informed the

public of the Hospital's activities, as well as soliciting public philanthropy to support the pauper patients.

James did all the Hospital's printing 'without any help', as he was 'very reserved and resents the presence of others' in the printing room. By 1907, James no longer offered his labour for free, as he was fond of receiving a 'beer for any work he does'. A year later, he ceased working in the printing room, saying that he 'won't work for nothing'. In 1909, the doctors requested him to return to his work in the printing room but he rejected their offer, stating 'No pay, no work.'

Jeremiah

During your reign,
did you instate a regiment
that optimised service with military precision?

What o'clock
were you called into service?

Serving hundreds of diners thrice daily
required you to wade
through a sea of tables
and keep the turmoil of the kitchen
from surging into the dining hall.

In the hours before the doors opened,
the hall was your meditative space:
Laying the tablecloths
was to cast a net out into the sea
to capture a haul of dreams
to live the day by.

Admitted: 30 January 1896
Age: 24
Died: 16 June 1941

In his first few years of institutionalisation, Jeremiah was decried as taking 'no interest in anything' and showing signs of 'mental enfeeblement'. However, in 1905, once he started to work in the dining hall, he was described as industrious and very useful. Jeremiah continued to work in the dining hall until 1915.

Albert K.

They came to you
dressed in old wineskins.
You tended to their brokenness:
you mended parts
that had become
weary and withered,
threadbare and tarnished.

Through your tailoring,
they shed their downcast eyes
and forlorn faces
and no longer
did they suffer
the indignity of
garments in tatters.

Admitted: 10 November 1907
Age: 45
Died: 24 November 1921

Albert offered to mend, patch and tailor the other patients' clothes.

Under the branches of the sacred Ash tree,
I watch its leaves fall and
I begin to wonder
if this is what it looks like when
angels drop a feather –
auburn and amber sails that
glimmer in the air
until they offer up their
glory to the ground.

Alighted upon the Ash's balding branches
is a monastery of chanting
black birds and sparrows.
Truly, their chanting must praise the
garten's gospels
for this is their graceland
in the ides of winter –
they reside
here,
they do not migrate.

Wagging tails –
as if they are water-hounds –
is a waddling of ducks who
forage among the leaves for acorns.
At their jabbering, I giggle,
at their bold attempts to
hold themselves in stature,
like the classical statues
that are mounted in the *garten*,
I can only chuckle.
But, when they take flight,
with the finesse of a soprano's voice

rising in a *sanctus*,
it is their chance to quack a ruckus of
tee-hee-hees at me.

And,
when the sky offers
down-like snowflakes,
we all look up to
receive their kisses on our cheeks.

Never is one to hurry-along
through the *gartens* of Germany,
for how could one pass-by
on the chance to be awe-struck?

Maybe Albert, too,
took up the invitation
to stream along the *gartens*
of his homeland
to drink up astonishment.
Maybe he too learnt to
kneel before the Ash,
bow his head
at the chanting of the birds,
and in gladness smile at the
jibber-jabber of the ducks.

Around 1904, Albert arrived in the Cape as a merchant from Germany.

Norman

Generations of stray dogs
nurse their pups
in the shade you provide.

Between reaping the fields
for critters and grains,
birds rest their wings
on the perch you offer.

The seedlings,
planted near your lot
have grown into colossal centenarians
and with their branches
your sky is adorned.

Pansies fluttering in the wind
are the tails of rabbits
as they flirt
like coy lovers
on the grounds of your eternal erf.

Autumn offers you wreaths
and blankets your hallowed ground.

Spring presents you with
boutonnières of wildflowers
rooted in earthy ballads.

Winter's moonlight dresses your stone in
jasmine-white shrouds.

The zephyr of summer
coos and chimes
for you as it
capers along the crypts.

In the recesses of your inscribed epitaph,
lichens paint like abstract expressionists.

Every sunset –
a blazing pyre to your life.

When your family
stopped visiting your headstone,
it was nature's turn to enshrine you.

Admitted: 12 February 1894
Age: 26
Died: 16 January 1923

After sending a telegram informing Mr O. that his brother, Norman, had passed away, the superintendent sent a follow-up letter. In the letter, the superintendent stated that he had arranged with a local undertaker to give Norman a 'reasonable private funeral', as he did not think that Mr O. would want Norman to be 'buried as a pauper'. In Mr O.'s reply, he was pleased that Norman received a private funeral. Sometime later, Mr O. wrote to the superintendent asking to be 'put … into communication with a monumental mason', as he was 'anxious' to erect 'a headstone to [his] brother's memory'. The superintendent obliged by recommending a mason 'of repute' who could meet his 'wishes in every way'.

The muse lives within us.
It gifts us the meditation of a poet
and an Ariadne thread to craft
otherworldly and
whimsical fantasias.
It washes over our mind
to become a floodplain
for the never ceasing creation
of untraveled lands.
Our dreaming may be as
bold and exuberant as a Baroque opera, or
a lattice of tender words
that is laced upon our hearts.

When we awake,
is it not a pure delight
to share this transfiguration of the
heart and mind to dreaming?

The doctors believed that Norman was on a 'downward course' both mentally and physically. Yet, while they were reporting on his 'deterioration', they also noted that he made himself 'useful' in the wards and was an 'expert' at playing billiards. While the doctors appreciated Norman's labour at the Hospital, they were rather irritated by him running 'about telling everyone of a wonderful dream which amused him highly.'

Glossary

Bossie:	bush (Afrikaans)
Boutonnières:	buttonhole (French)
Gartens:	gardens (German)
Kafoefel:	playful cuddling and kissing (Afrikaans)
Kiewiets:	crowned lapwing or crowned plover, a common bird in South Africa (Afrikaans)
Kloofs:	passes between mountains (Afrikaans)
Koppies:	small hills (Afrikaans)
Kraals:	enclosures for cattle or sheep (Afrikaans)
Rangoli:	Art form in the Indian subcontinent where patterns are created on the floor using flowers
Veldfire:	wildfire (Afrikaans)

Case file references at the Cory Library, Rhodes University

Albert Henry	PR 10360/189
Albert K.	PR 10360/111
Arthur	PR 10360/73
Ben	PR 10360/10
Benatoni	PR 10360/35
Charles Edward	PR 10360/15
Charles James	PR 10360/121
Charles Overend	PR 10360/71
Eduardo	PR 10360/68
Franz	PR 10360/29
Frederick	PR 10360/45
George Henry	PR 10360/126
George Robertson	PR 10360/187
Gerhardus	PR 10360/90
James	PR 10360/82
Jeremiah	PR 10360/13
Johannes	PR 10360/168
John	PR 10360/25
Joseph	PR 10360/21
Juan	PR 10360/38
Marks	PR 10360/37
Norman	PR 10360/9
Robert	PR 10360/92
Thomas	PR 10360/147

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In 2025, the Fort England Psychiatric Hospital will celebrate its 150th anniversary. This milestone marks the Hospital as the oldest South African psychiatric facility that is still in use today. To help us remember the patients, I composed poems for 25 individuals who were institutionalised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The 25 individuals form part of a larger set of 200 patients whose case files were recently discovered in one of the Hospital's cabinets and are now in the custody of the Cory Library, Rhodes University. All the case files pertain to white male patients who were suffering from chronic mental illness and who remained institutionalised until their passing. In investigating the case files, I discerned that as the men grew older and their health deteriorated, the doctors' reporting declared them to be 'mentally dead'. At the time of their passing, the case files stripped the men's existence of any value and laid them to an undignified rest with words detailing their infirmity, illness, idleness and incoherence.

To restore the humanity of the men, as well as to memorialise their lives, I investigated their case files to find fragments of information that aid us in appreciating their individuality: their connections with family and friends; their leisure and vocational interests; and their personality and agency. I used these fragments as inspiration for writing my poems. Thus, while the fragments are a historical fact, I embedded them into a larger fictional narrative that captures my imagined impressions of each individual.

POETRY

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