

POEM

A visit to Brookwood Asylum in the 19th century

During a visit to Surrey History museum, I reviewed a number of archived patient notes from the old Brookwood Asylum. Patient notes dating back to the late 19th century. Reading through these prompted considerable sadness as it became clear many patients were incarcerated for several years without contact from the outside world. Often these were patients who had nowhere else to go. One patient in particular stood out. A young boy admitted in his late teens, described as uncontrollable in behaviour, spent his life in the asylum. From reading the notes, he is likely to have had an intellectual disability and his parents were simply unable to cope or receive any support to help care for him, resulting in incarceration. The numbers of diagnoses were limited in the late 19th century and many were simply diagnosed with 'mania' or 'lunacy'. As a result, he spent his life living in isolation, behind the asylum walls. The patient notes outline his death a few years later, while still living at the asylum. This sad story, prompted me to reflect on his short and lonely life, writing the poem below. It is a conceptual poem, theorising how this patient might feel about his entrapment inside the asylum, with no family or friends, or the possibility of ever leaving.

Between these four walls I exist
Alone silence echoes
Yet I hear despite this
Fear pounding through the walls,
So loudly, it bellows

Between the throbbing I decay
Delayed I pause, patient
Expecting to leave soon, afraid
That day will never come
I wait, waste, mind vacant

Between the dark some clarity
Explaining why Im here
Lunacy apparently
Justifies this treatment?
To me this is un- clear

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Acknowledgements I would like to thank the Surrey History Museum for access to their archived notes.

Competing interests None declared.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

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To cite Cliffe C. *Med Humanit* Published Online First: [please include Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/medhum-2017-011316

Med Humanit 2017;0:1. doi:10.1136/medhum-2017-011316



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Med Humanities published online September 7, 2017

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