

WHAT HAS BEEN REMOVED

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

I'm still friends with the same old friends from back then. Before we had parking permits and sticky children and smart phones, we had stretched-out time, and an underdeveloped frontal lobe that loved the sweet tang of risk. We had finished with the tragedies last week, and that morning's lecture had been on haibuns – the poetic prose followed by a haiku. We'd sat in our usual row of five on a bench made for much narrower Victorian backsides. The benches were stacked so steep in the lecture theatre, one behind the other, you felt like if you leaned too far forward, you might just tip, roll over the other students, and belly flop at the lecturer's feet.

I had written about x and the four boys had written about y, we had shared our first drafts and critical eyes. Afterwards, the sun shone and sang, unplanned, and goaded the childhood us, the ones it remembered from a few summers ago, outside for adventure.

Along the canal path and across a quiet road, the old maternity hospital was disappointingly easy to get into. We squeezed thin bodies between fence edges that scratched at my arm and left blood-beaded marks like a bed bug rash. Our knees and elbows pushed through brambles and bracken. If there was CCTV, we never saw each other. Our cheap trainers scuffed loose brick dust over hard concrete, like bone to saw. Our voices, mine higher, theirs lower, bounced back off the tight red bricks, sirens layering over each other. It felt like we were on the way to a Friday night out, but without the drinking – something more wholesome, perhaps, where we listened to each other instead of just waiting for our turn to talk.

A central bell tower dominated the space, with its open wound where the heavy bell once hung. The tower had no shadow; the sun watched from directly above, as if the tower planned to

pierce it, syringe-like. Maybe, when we weren't looking, blobs of lava would ooze out and coagulate down the sides.

There were blocky buildings around us forming a square, like a toy village. We went through an EXIT, and trailed along a darkened no-colour corridor together. The air still stung clinical, under the years of mouldy neglect. I suppose those chemicals last longer than we'd like to think, after all. Looking through the first doorway, we saw a desk and chair, placed exactly in the middle of the room, huddled as far from each yellow-papered wall as possible. One of the boys pushed another in first, I saw the jostle from behind, paint scraps fluttering off the doorframe. The rest of us followed, footsteps eaten up by the silence. But there wasn't much else to see, so much had been removed — and we walked on.

We passed windows with shards of broken teeth; crunchy confetti under my feet. We did not split up, knowing the tropes of teen horror films we'd rented on VHS. In a ward, erased of nurses and nursing, one of the boys found a cabinet, fully equipped with metal twists and bowls.

“Leave it, it's not meant for you,” I said - but only to myself, as he scraped back the door, shoved himself in, and clacked speculums between his fingers like Edward Scissor Hands. The boys laughed and made a joke I didn't catch. Further into the body of the ward, the still-white beds were lined-up like ribs, mattresses stripped of sheets. I lightly touched the beds of birth and death. There were no more stories here.

The bell tower called us back, and we walked in single file: the tallest boy in front, as a scout; me, an afterthought at the end. The ropes in the tower still hung, like guts. They seemed to swing looped mantra words, without a breeze to push them.

The bell tower seemed taller, matronly shoulders broader. I watched the boys climb the bell tower stairs, a flash of limbs through gaps in the walls, their soles hovering over holes, my small feet held flat on the brick dust.

I could hear their laughter ascend and encourage each other further on, further on. I stood alone in the weatherless afternoon, with its body temperature air that felt like nothing. There was no wind to lean into, nothing to push back on, to brace against. There were no birds in this empty place. The boys stopped, and I felt a sickness silence -

- then the bell tower contracted and pushed the boys down and out, popped out one by one like gumballs from a machine. They rushed forwards, waxy skinned, and surrounded me, continuing away from the hospital, like a ten-legged beastie. Nearing the ground's perimeter, they held back the jagged fence, so that I would not be hurt.

We all slept in one bedroom that night, in childish sleeping bags on the floor, bundled like newborn rodents under the lullaby moon, breathing together.

visiting hours
are over now, gentlemen
the ladies have left

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