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poem

Claybury

Nick MacKinnon

Before the lunatics could find asylum
there had to be this chess piece water tower,
in Victorian high-gothic: five flights
up to a gabled tank kept out of sight
behind a frieze of blind lancet windows.

Clocklessly it supervised the regime
of cleanliness, its daily shadow sweep –
male chronic, male acute, male epileptic,
female epileptic, female acute, female chronic –
solstice to solstice as a century passed.

It drove the Roding Valley aquifer
along the branching copper axons,
down to the vast pressure cookers,
around the laundry's steam mangle,
inside laboratory condenser jackets,

through asbestos-lagged service tunnels,
out of the delouser's scalding nozzle,
into strapped baths for hydropathy,
enamel basins in the nurses' quarters,
patented cisterns and the chapel font.

It stood complicit in the autoclave's
preparation of stainless lobotomies;
knew the drip of insulin coma therapy;
kept silent while the beige Psychotron
washed a sad brain with threshold current.

And when the cold war tablets came –
Largactil, Acuphase, Seroquel –
it drained itself, glass by glass,
down the salt-glazed Doulton sewer pipes
into the Roding's sluggish sanity.

Selected by Femi Oyeboade.

Published in *The Hippocrates Prize Anthology*, Hippocrates Press, 2012. Nick MacKinnon spent 3 years as a psychogeriatric nurse and is now a schoolmaster. 'Claybury' won the 2012 Hippocrates Prize (NHS section). 'The Metric System' won the 2013 Forward Prize for Best Single Poem.

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