

Psychiatry in pictures

CHOSEN BY ROBERT HOWARD

Do you have an image, preferably accompanied by 100 to 200 words of explanatory text, that you think would be suitable for Psychiatry in Pictures? Submissions are very welcome and should be sent direct to Professor Robert Howard, Box 070, Institute of Psychiatry, London SE5 8AF, UK.



William Kurelek (1927–1977), *The Nightmare* (detail), graphite on paper.

Kurelek, one of Canada's leading artists in the 1960s and 1970s, spent his most formative years on this side of the Atlantic. Scarred by an often harsh upbringing on a Canadian prairie farm, in 1951 he travelled to Europe, partly to further his art schooling and partly to seek psychiatric treatment which he felt he needed. On reaching London, Kurelek wandered into the Maudsley Hospital, which he had read about in a book in a Montreal library, and requested treatment. His prognosis was considered to be good, largely because of his art, which doctors considered 'would provide an avenue for self-respect, and an invaluable means of expression and communication' (Patricia Morley (1986) *Kurelek: A Biography*. Toronto: MacMillan). But the path to recovery proved a tortuous one, if drawings such as *The Nightmare*, executed during his time as a Maudsley in-patient, are any guide. 'The figure on the bed plagued by little monsters is a recurring nightmare I had for many years', Kurelek explained in notes he wrote at the time. 'The mouse running on the rim of the pot "caught between the frying pan and the fire" because he was hungry for what he thought was food on the pot represents the dilemma I eventually reach in all my friendships. I want to run away from greater intimacy but am trapped by fear of rejection'. Of *The Nightmare*, his biographer wrote: 'Its element of hope, of which Bill was probably unconscious, lies not only in that artistic competence of the whole, but in the drawing's grim humour, a survivor's humour which cuts through the self-pity . . .'. He was transferred from the Maudsley to Netherne Hospital in 1953, and was discharged convalescent some 12 months later. By then Kurelek had commenced an intellectual and spiritual journey which by 1957 had resulted in conversion to Christianity and reception into the Roman Catholic Church – a personal upheaval to which he later attributed his full recovery from psychiatric symptoms. Returning to Canada in 1959, he became through his art a celebrated observer of the natural landscapes of that country. He died of cancer in 1977, aged 50. An illustrated account of Kurelek's life was published to coincide with the 25th anniversary of his death (May Ebbitt Cutler (2002) *Breaking Free: The Story of William Kurelek*. Toronto: Tundra Books). With thanks to the Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum for permission to reproduce the picture and to Colin Gale, Archivist at Bethlem Hospital, Beckenham, Kent BR3 3BX, UK (tel: 020 8776 4053) for supplying information about Kurelek.