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Arthur

The old asylum in Weyburn is almost empty now, except for offices and boxes of dry paper; records of various public transactions, bits of the history of a vast, flat place; Saskatchewan. Some of the people who lived and died there were also blown in, like leaves of paper in the drying winds of personal and national depression. The old asylum is empty now, yet I remember impatient dreams as we started construction, demolished roofs, added floors, new dimensions, further extensions, to the big old storage bin for bent and broken minds. I was so eager to learn, and to be sure that the builder did not cheat I counted everything in sight, and wrote it down;

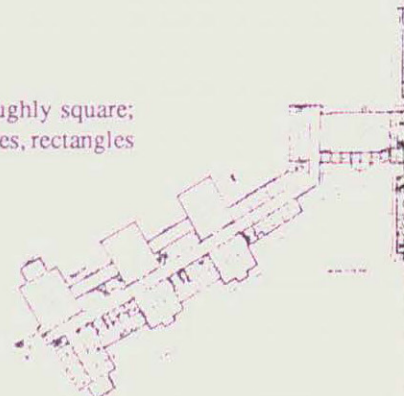
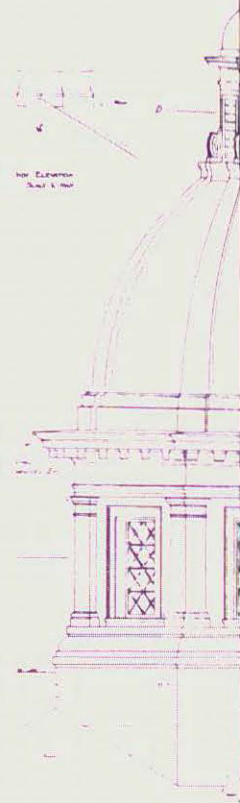
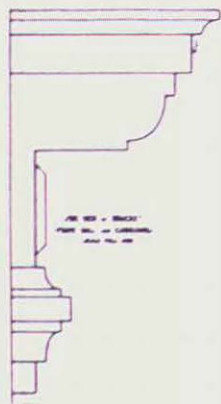
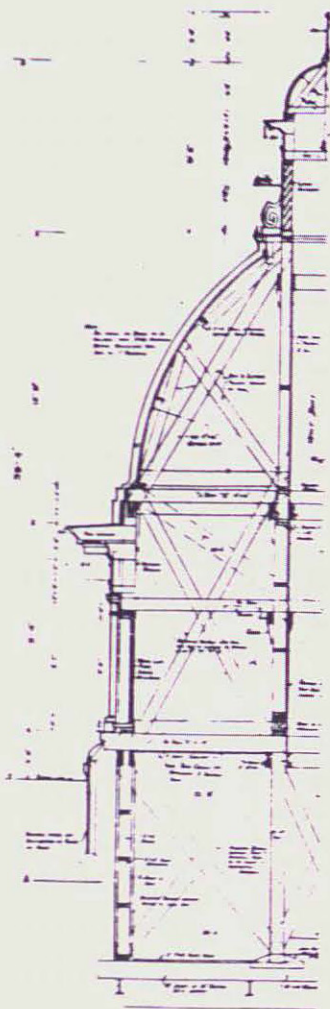
six carpenters driving nails,
three electricians pulling wires,
one jackhammer chattering
smashing concrete, cutting holes
for sewer piping.
five tar-black roofers, cleaning,
and leaving; the job was on time,
going like clockwork, minutes
counting for profit and the fun
of hurrying.

I finished inspecting the new work, including the roof, and counted: twisted studs, broken panes, damaged boards, cracked tiles, and shiny steel locks still in cartons. I listened to the sharp old inspector, and learned as much again from workmen. On my third solo trip I passed from the dust, the heat, and the noise, to the quiet of a small barren room. Used for decades, and scrubbed all its life with harsh cleansers, the room smelled of cleaning, as if all that rubbing would somehow vanquish madness.

In some spaces the old hospital had a gracious touch, but in the barren room the only curves in sight were:

four breasts, two of them young
six buttocks, four young, two mine,
two round handworn doorknobs,
two half-round transoms above
tall doors (nineteen twenty
pre-Post-Modern delights)
two vulgar, bulbous glass lamp
gloves on two round plates
on the ceiling,
and massive brass circles of
locks on the doors.

Everything else was rectangular, or square; the room roughly square;
twelve narrow beds in three rows of four; rectangles for aisles, rectangles



T I N G

Allen

for tiles, rectangles for doors, a square for a floor; many rectangles of glass behind smaller squares of steel barred windows; rectangular desk, and a square-cut chair; nice square panels on the solid old hospital doors.

As I entered the room near the windows, and inspected the ceiling, a lone young woman on a back corner bed was lightly clad in the heat. She was very excited to see me, slid quickly over one bed, made a bee-line track, jumped another; to meet me at the far door, for one split instant, I hoped to meet her and touch, then the nurse barred the way, no whip in her hand, the girl crouched, backed snarling, a lioness cub, a beauty still in training. I was twenty five when I left that room. What a hard way to learn about windows and doors; openings for sunlight and friends, but now always the soft parts of architecture.

The center window of the little ward looked out on an axis of symmetry that might have been imposing; a Renaissance garden for princes. Now it looked out on an endless plain, with no center; lost space for the least powerful of princesses. Her story? I never knew. I didn't know how to say hello, and walked straight on, counting!

I wonder if she noticed the axis of her room? Was her mind split by a center line like the buildings and grounds in which she moved? Did she pray in symmetrical poses?, dance in circles and squares?, play childlike games where lines on the floor become enormous barriers? I wonder if she ever knew, or knew too well, the private symmetries of love?

Did the magic forms, the geometries of formal architecture, have anything at all to do with her survival? Or is that all a dream of princes and their builders who once hoped that symmetrical gardens of paradise would somehow balance our minds?

Sometimes I think of her when I go to the city:

tall buildings, square towers,
rectangular doors, many square floors,
straight lines for streets,
square little parks,
millions of little pieces of glass,
most of them rectangular,
people moving everywhere,
all of them symmetrical.

Once I tried to sketch a woman, in a different bower. Her centerline of symmetry was easy, but I failed to draw curves using straight lines and squares. By that time I was forty five; was it then that I stopped counting?

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