

Ruth Silcock

Mrs Carmichael: Ward H5

One day, when working in
a psychiatric
hospital ("bin"
the doctors said), I went
to find an old lady: sent
along brick corridors, up stone stairs,

to a stout wooden door
with two brass door knobs:
double knobs for
a puzzle, sufficient
to sort out staff from patient:
staff have steady hands, unclouded heads.

The ward was huge and high:
enormous windows
showed brilliant sky.
Some fields were far below:
football pitch, cabbages. No
voices, barking dogs, disturbed the ward

where, safe in every chair,
sat an old lady
penned, pinned in there
by rugs, trays, knitting, sleep.
Some smiled, nodded, wept. To keep
rules of courtesy, I smiled, nodded,

did not weep, looked for the
Ward Sister's office,
a snug room. She
was busy writing, glad
for company, quickly had
tea and toast brought for us. We chatted.

"Come and see my ward", said
the Sister, proudly,
took my hand, led
me, showed me everywhere,
sluice, kitchen, bathroom, and there
in a mist, a thick steam, old women

stood together, pink skin
glowing, white hair wet;
rosy, dressed in
towels, slippers; a cloud
from showers about them. Bowed
from baths, they clambered, sat on stools, dripped.

“Mrs Carmichael”, said
my guide, the Sister.
Naked, wet, red,
Mrs Carmichael came,
shook hands, agreed to her name,
discussed her prospects, her finances.

The interview over,
we left the bathroom,
its steam cover.
Entered the ward. Among
ladies, one stuck out her tongue
like a lollipop; one whinnied, waved.

J. C. Hall

Playback

I slip the *Fifth* from its case.
I thread the tape and press
And the spools begin to race.
Stand by for those famous chords!
Nothing. Then a click, and your voice,
Your faint hesitant words.

O sudden time-tempted one,
Here on the other track,
Uncatalogued, plagued by hum,
You grope for my heart across
Ten years or more. I'm back
In that room, just as it was,

The tea things pushed aside,
You with your hat still on,
Your bag of crocodile hide,
And me not patient enough
As you lean to the microphone
Your frail grey head, and cough.

“Speak up, speak up” I implore.
A car hoots, a telephone rings
And nobody answers, a door
Slams—a chance overlay
Of unerasable things.
I strain to catch what you say.

Dear ghost, you were never bold,
Yet how hauntingly threaded through
The years I have aged from you
These few shy words. I forgive
All the noise of the world
This moment, to hear you live.