

Story for performance #589
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Tags: [workplace](#)

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I had lived the whole of that month in a long house with a single corridor running past every room. While the corridor had no windows, the rooms looked out on to a harbour lively with heat and warships. Some rooms were dilapidated, with holes in the floors, collapsed ceilings and an air of abandonment. Others were occupied by people like me who had never stayed in one place long enough to learn to look after themselves. Yet others were really good rooms, cool, intact, full of contemporary sound equipment, interesting steamed plywood furniture and themes from Western lifestyle magazines. Tired of my original quarters, I was looking for somewhere quiet and without distractions. I had work that needed to be done: even more, perhaps, it needed to be organised.

It was impossible to calculate how many rooms there were in the long house. This information was known only to the figures of authority who often squatted in a line along one side of the corridor eating a vegetarian meal. I soon found an unoccupied room, characterised by a large table full of neglected plants in pots and some veinous diagrams at different heights on the walls. Someone had built a shelter out of flattened cardboard boxes in one corner. The floor was littered with stuff like dirty flex, yellow cardboard boxes of nails, bags of chemicals that had burst in the heat, and the plastic toys you buy for hamsters. There was some sense that this was the detritus of not one but several previous attempts to inhabit the room.

I had to pick up that mess before I could start. But this is how puzzling the whole experience became: as I got rid of things, new things would appear. Someone's laundry, rammed into three or four binbags. Personal objects, such as: a broken Breitling chronometer, a framed picture of an elephant, bedlinen. Confectionary. I would pack this stuff into other binbags and throw them into the corridor, then go back along the corridor for some things of my own. Each time I returned, there was more stuff. It was always different.

At lunchtime I hadn't done any work. I hadn't even taken my Mac out of its bag, that's how bad things were. I ate lunch with an old friend, who was anxious to be certain nothing of hers was among the belongings I had moved out of my original room. She was leaving later that day by air.

'These people,' she said, 'don't want help. They're cocking a snook at everything we think worthwhile.'

'Cocking a snook', I repeated. 'You don't often hear that.'

'It was what my father used to say.'

We smiled at one another. Then she took my wrist in one of her hands in a way she had and said, 'I want to be sure you'll be all right.' I would be fine I said, I would be all right. But when I got back from lunch I surprised another man in the room. He was stuffing my things into carrier bags and stacking them in the corridor. He was a local, younger than me, a bit scruffy, a bit ordinary. He wore

cheap, ordinary clothes and even his stubble was worn-looking, as if he worked hard at some ordinary job. He had a radio playing the local music. He thought the room was his.

'It has always been mine,' he said. 'It was always my room from when I came here.'

At first, I felt aggrieved. My work needed to be done. It needed, more than anything else, organising. Yet I was quickly convinced by the sincerity of this man's belief that it had been his room before I tried to occupy it. It had never been 'spare', or mine to organise. I went round picking up my remaining things, while he sat on the windowsill and watched me with a calm expression. Behind him the warships flickered in the heat haze in the harbour.

'If you had nowhere else to go,' he said, 'you could use this room. But you would have to share it with me.'

'No, no,' I said.

I was anxious to explain. I could easily go somewhere else, I was just looking for somewhere quiet to work. I was a writer. I was writing about the big changes that were going to happen here.

'They are bigger changes than you think,' he said.

I left him there, his head turned so that he could look out of the window while the radio filled the air with music, and went back down the long corridor, peeping into all the really good rooms, full of expensive old furniture or looking like the lobbies of comfortable hotels, thinking that I would never have a room like that, and rather dreading going back to the quarters I had come from, which would be unwelcoming, disordered, full of flies.

But when I got there I found that the figures of authority had inspected it while I was away. It was now the gateway to a rolling endless landscape of tall grass, under a lighting effect from the cover of a commercial fantasy novel. In the foreground, lying on the grass in front of a bench, was something which looked partly like a woman and partly like an oriental cat a kind of ivory white colour, which though it first seemed immobile, was slowly writhing and moving, struggling not to become one thing or the other but to remain both things at the same time. Something else was happening, too, maybe some people grouped in the foreground, I can't remember. I was struck by the potential of this landscape, rolling away under its alien light. I heard a voice say, 'You need never leave here.' A beautiful tranquility came over me, along with a sense of my own possibilities.

After a moment or two, the young man whose room I had tried to occupy came up behind me. He touched my shoulder.

'This room also belongs to me,' he said.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by M John Harrison.