



Source: Cara Buckley, 'Iraq's national museum remains shut—and counting its losses', *New York Times*, AFP in *The Age* online, 13/12/07.

Tags: [incarceration](#), [discomfort](#), [corporeality](#)  
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Now that she was thinner, she could almost roll over. She could lie three-quarters on her side, extending her length along the cold metal, and unravel her legs, almost straightening her knees, shifting from one ache to another, trying evenly to distribute the pain. Her knees were the least of it. It was the bones of her back, all popped through the grazed skin, scraping the rough ceiling as she turned and involuntarily stretched and banged a body so wracked and cramped she could no longer imagine in even the furthest reaches of her mind or sense, the comfort that a being might ordinarily inhabit, the ordinary occupation of space, an ordinary life.

At first she had kept account of the minutes, hours, days, marked by the rhythm of sleep and hunger, by bowel movements, by notches on the side walls, and then, as the time wore on, by menstrual cycles and by the breaks in her skin and her bones. That first menses—it had seemed so momentous! To have been in there for almost three weeks! Surely someone, her family, the lawyer, that nice sergeant, was working to get her out. They were not all bad people. They would see their mistake. Surely. While she waited she had kept account of these and a thousand other sundry things: the dates of the visits as best she could reckon them, their frequency and duration, the number on his uniform, his height and weight, the small mole on the side of his face, all the things she had been taught to observe, and then the other inevitable things: the faintly rancid smell of his hands, how it mixed with the smell of blood and soap, the fragrance of the soap when the bar was new, the mixture of tobacco and pork fat, and the proportions changing from session to session, the thick hairs sometimes protruding from his nostrils, and at others neatly clipped away, the absurdly white teeth, always, always white, his breath all peppermint and perfume, the youthfulness of his pale blue eyes, the woman who sometimes assisted—her visits were more debasing somehow, and she more contemptuous, the taste of the water filling her lungs, acrid, foul, her heaving body, the split ribs, the incomprehensible questions, the Orwellian logic (she had studied English Lit. in school), the slight variations in the slops they fed her to keep her just alive. One time she had laughed in his face at the sweet stench of his deodorant—Was he trying not to offend her? That session had been a difficult one, it had not ended well. But his paltry anger had inspired her and drawn up her courage, her contempt of the little ego so easily dislodged, the puny fellow who was her tormentor. She was fired up and hard and wild in his face. She had felt inviolate. In the respite between sessions she had kept working her mind, honing her determination, measuring space and time, duration, testing her body, sea-sawing her legs to stay strong. She had felt the courage of right on her side, determined, unbeatable. She knew that, outside, people

were looking for her; she knew that not all of the Americans were like this; she knew it was only a matter of time.

In time the dossier in her mind's eye began to fall apart and all the tallies, one by one, went haywire, blurring each into the other, a reddened, disordered mass like something out of a war game she'd seen on her cousin's computer. Then they petered out entirely. At that point she understood that she had been disappeared. But still she cared that in describing it to herself—there was no-one else to listen—by using the word 'disappeared' she was invoking another war, another time, another era, and in so doing, insisting on the continuities between current US policy and the death-squads of the counter-insurgencies in Vietnam, Guatemala, under Pinochet and on down the line to Iraq. If she was becoming a 'white hand', no more, a sign to others to back off, to comply, to submit, then so be it, but like Winston they would never have the two square inches of critical faculty inside her cranium. This they could not touch. And now, what was 'now' when even the sessions came less and less often? Now, her terror was that even her terrorists had abandoned her. He might have forgotten her, absent-mindedly relinquished her for some other plaything, some better prize than a minor functionary like herself. Now she didn't know what she felt or thought, her feelings and thoughts vast and empty in inverse proportion to the containment of the space in which she was locked. It was amazing to feel scars appear, skin, pustular but healing none the less—the absurd determination of a body to keep living! She could tell that she must have been there a long time. She had no sense what that might mean—how long had it been? She had never been starved before; she had never been disappeared before. It was strange: the less body mass she had, the more room to move but the less strength or will to do so.

Once upon a time she had known that she stank and had felt shame, and though she remembered having felt shame, she herself no longer smelled the fetid air. 'She, herself': absurd grammar under the circumstances. Had she any selfhood at all, she might have imagined she smelled the smell of death, her own, her body graduating to a festering corpse, alive and half-rotten, sinking, oozing into the oblivious floor, like the juice of berries in a pancake. To escape from insanity one must come to one's senses: locked in a bank vault, in the darkness and coldness of that small space, bigger than a coffin but no bigger than a coffer, there was no sense, only frayed ends and madness and then, nothing. She had ceased to understand: no one ever disappears twice.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Margaret Morgan.*