



## Asylum Piece

*Anna Kavan*

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This collection of stories, mostly interlinked and largely autobiographical, chart the descent of the narrator from the onset of neurosis to final incarceration in a Swiss clinic. The sense of paranoia, of persecution by a foe or force that is never given a name, evokes *The Trial* by Kafka, a writer with whom Kavan is often compared, although her deeply personal, restrained, and almost foreign —accented style has no true model. The same characters who recur throughout—the protagonist's unhelpful "adviser," the friend and lover who abandons her at the clinic, and an assortment of deluded companions—are sketched without a trace of the rage, self-pity, or sentiment that have marked more recent accounts of mental instability.

## Asylum Piece Details

Date : Published September 1st 2001 by Peter Owen Publishers (first published 1940)

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Author : Anna Kavan

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## From Reader Review Asylum Piece for online ebook

### Odile says

'Asylum Piece', the debut collection of connected stories by Anna Kavan, was the first book by her that I've read. Originally looking for a nice edition of 'Ice', I managed to find this first, and decided to pick it up anyway.

A great decision, afterwards, as this modest volume contains a darkly dazzling collection of moody imaginative stories. As can be expected from the title, Kavan's stories are dominated by themes of anxiety, neurosis, uncertainty, and gloomy moods. However, these grim psychological themes and dispositions are channeled into short stories that are touching and to the point. Compact in terms of composition, each piece says no more than is necessary, leaving much to the imagination, and focusing on the central emotions and motifs in a slightly Kafkaesque style.

In short, these pieces are not for the fainthearted in search of some light reading, nor for aficionados of complicated literature. Rather, it's for those readers who aren't afraid to come face to face with the dark side of the soul.

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### Blair says

Kavan's brief, lucid stories have the quality of remembered nightmares. The first work published under the name of Anna Kavan rather than Helen Ferguson, *Asylum Piece* - a patchwork of interlinked vignettes that could be considered a novel or a short story collection - is sometimes brilliant, but a little patchy. The title story, made up of eight mini-stories, is somewhat hit and miss - while it's the longest and most complete piece, it's also the only one to deviate from the first-person narrative (seemingly always belonging to the same person) Kavan uses elsewhere, and it suffers for that. The motifs used throughout the rest of the stories build up themes of oppression, paranoia and the impossibility of escape familiar from her fantastic novel *Ice*.

Hopefully I'll come back and expand this review when I've had chance to go back to the book and pick out some of my favourite passages and details.

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### Arthur Graham says

I'm like a birrrd, I'll only fly awaaay...

### Anna Kavan's Asylum Piece, as reviewed by Petey, the great tit

Interesting book, I'll give it that. The woman has a tendency to blather, that's for sure, but then so do I -- what with my incessant tweeting and twittering -- and as anyone prone to such diarrhea of the mouth (or beak) knows, sometimes it's necessary to talk a WHOLE lotta shit before coming to the point. If you wanna see a

good example of this propensity on display, look no further than that jag-bag of a GR reviewer, Arthur Graham!

*Tweet tweet!*

There's a story in this book called "The Birds", and as you may have already guessed, this one struck a special chord with me. Not so much just because I *am* a bird, but because even one of Kavan's fellow humans would surely marvel at her ornithological obsession. She really seems to think we're the cat's pajama's, apparently, and I guess I can't blame her for admiring or even envying us a little, given her own perspective. Still, there were moments reading this where I was like "whoa, lady -- us birds ain't got it THAT good!"

Take flying, for instance. You wanna know what flying's like? Sure, it's pretty cool I guess, soaring all around and shit, but you wanna know what would be even cooler? Walking! Man, I can't even tell you what a pain it is trying to walk anywhere on these short-ass, spindly-ass legs of mine.

Grass is always greener, babe.

*Tweet, tweet tweet!*

So what's up with this lady, then? I know that she spent some time in a mental institution, I know for a FACT that she laughed out loud on page 46 where she catalogs all the various birds with the word "tit" in their name (I know this, because I SAW her laughing through the window), AND I also have it on good authority that the woman was a heroin addict. Now, I don't mention all this for the purpose of discrediting the gal or besmirching her good writing. Lord knows how much time I've spent in the ol' cuckoo's nest, and I'd be the first one to tell you how ridiculous it is to be called a "tit", let alone a "great" tit, when you don't even have any tits to begin with. Also, it's not as if I don't enjoy some intoxicating substances of my own. Why, just last night, I got so fucked up on fermented buckthorn berries, I nearly wrapped myself around a tree on the way home!

Yup, no one's perfect -- not even birds.

As for the rest of this book, I couldn't really get into any of the stories not featuring birds (call me chauvinist), but despite my complaints about this one, it was still good enough to warrant a ten on its own, hence my four-star rating overall.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got some things to poop on. Thank you all for reading my silly, bird-brained review. For a more serious, human discussion of *Asylum Piece*, I'll refer you over to GR's consummate reviewer and all-around hot momma, the lovely Ms. Jenn(ifer).

*Tweet!*

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## **Holly says**

Anna Kavan is an author I only heard of this year (I believe Ice came up as a Goodreads recommendation). Unlike other GR users, I've chanced upon some wonderful discoveries from this oft-maligned feature. Of course, because I usually read books I think will educate me in the intricacies of human emotion and trauma,

and will enlighten me on the vast spectrum of human experience, I tend to get good recs. That just sounded way more pretentious than I meant it to sound, but lately I've been subscribing to the philosophy of rejecting the tyranny of pretension. I was a little bit surprised to see *Asylum Piece* was written in 1940. I mean, at this point, that's practically nineteenth-century, right? Right. How can I have not heard of a woman writing about mental health in 1940?

So: confession. I have never been in an asylum. I have, however, been a patient in a psychiatric ward, self-admitted, and fairly recently. I am not "crazy," a term that should be on its way out along with "nervous" in the lexicon of mental health labels. I am an independent, successful, career-minded young woman who has clinical depression. I had the privilege of not only being educated enough to recognize that my life was in danger, but having the ability to do something about it. My story is a complicated, continuing one with a lot of emotional labor and loss, and I mention it only to reinforce my relationship to the subject matter.

Kavan's portrayals of mania aren't the TV movie, rocking-back-and-forth-in-a-padded-room type. Hers are a type of creeping paranoia, not of the conspiracy sort, but of the notion that there is something in the air that is trying to get you killed, something that is punishing you for something you did, something bad you threw into the world that is now seeking its revenge. Her prose is bare and speculative, and she perfectly captures the helplessness of being subject to irrational (or, as I often refer to them, but no one has to agree—acutely rational) emotions that cloud judgment.

*Perhaps I am the victim of some mysterious political, religious or financial machination—some vast and shadowy plot, whose ramifications are so obscure as to appear to the uninitiated to be quite outside reason, requiring, for instance, something as apparently senseless as the destruction of everybody with red hair or with a mole on his left leg.*

It seems wrong to refer to this as a collection of short stories, although they are quite literally stories which are short. But they are all interlinked, not by specific setting or characters, but by a pervading sense of doom which colors every single thought and every single interaction contained in the text. There's an uncinematic reality here which is lacking in the current canon of "asylum" narratives: a quick search will produce lists dominated by tales of madness and untreated schizophrenia. *Asylum Piece* is very inward-looking and probably has (more fortunate) people describing it as cold. But it is true, and human, and yes—terrifying.

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### **Nate D says**

It's sort of amazing that Anna Kavan can write so coldly and so compassionately at the same time. Coldly because of the clinical observational detachment she's able to turn on herself, and compassionately because she's able to render insanity so believably and so sympathetically. It's never too hard to recognize why her characters have been institutionalized, but it's also completely obvious that only a hairs breath separates them from the usual fears, anxieties, obsessions, and uncertainties of the supposedly sane. Insanity is not typically the territory of visions and voices, but that over everyday life rendered subtlety unbearable, it seems. And in most cases it seems that all these characters really need to pull them back from the brink is a shred of human contact or understanding which they are continuously denied. Totally chilling in its simply-conveyed believability, a crystal mirror of the phantasmorgic inner life she conveyed in *Sleep Has His House*.

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### **s.penkevich says**

*'And it seems both strange and sad to me that all those childish years were spent in preparation for this – that, forgotten by everybody, with a beaten face, I should serve machinery in a place far away from the sun.'*

History has not been kind on those deemed mentally ill. As with any aberration from the social conventions of ‘normalcy’, or anything we do not fully understand, there is a tendency to reduce the outlying subject to being considered less than human – a technique used to assuage any moral qualms with removing the subject from sight, or to treat them with any sort of indecency as a method of combating our inner fears of the unfamiliar. *Asylum Piece*, the first novel written under the name Anna Kavan, allows a shamelessly honest view into the mindset of those who’s inner wiring sets them apart from the standard, socially functional public, those who, for reasons beyond them, are herded away from the sun of society and into the darkness of 1940’s psychological care. Kavan, who suffered bouts of severe depression and was familiar with the inner inpatient world of asylums, is the Virgil whom takes the reader by the icy hand through the depths of suffering, solitude and systematic dehumanization experienced throughout *Asylum Piece*. The emotional roller coaster of the inner world of these patients evinces a collection of wills and desires not unlike those found in even the most ‘sane’ of people. Keeping a calm, unshakable poise on her unsettling visions, Kavan remains detached and allows the reader to witness first-hand the emotional self-reflections of the mentally ill as they suffer the oppression of their fellow man while trying to find their way in the world.

These shadowy exhibits of mankind would be far more repelling if it weren’t for the succulent prose that pours from Kavan. Each monstrous thought, each cold-hearted action, each emotionally draining cry from the depths is wrapped in poetic expression that pulls the reader along, always craving more and more of these horrific experiences just for the taste of her words. It is a shame that her name isn’t familiar in the minds of more readers, as she is a writer of great merit who cannot be forgotten after taking the first sip. Each word is both a dark weight upon the soul, yet a feathery wing lifting the reader towards the heavens. Kavan keeps a detached voice throughout much of the book, calmly, and clinically relaying these sights, sounds and smells of the asylum and the threatening outer world to the reader. By avoiding any obvious push towards an opinion through her prose, refraining from allowing her narrator to give a voice of instilling a great pity or disdain through emotionally charged passages about either the inmates, the people in society, or the asylum staff, Kavan allows the reader to draw their own conclusions. When the reader feels horror at the cold treatment of the narrator or a patient, or feels great pity for the woman abandoned by her husband, that horror or pity comes from within the reader, growing from the readers own convictions and insights into the sights that are shown and making Kavan’s exposition on mental illness all the more poignant. She deftly implant cryptic messages across these short vignettes (the book is technically billed as a collection of short stories, yet the way they all tie together and push forward with a frightening cohesive message gives the impression that this is a disjointed novel and presents the possibility that the format is indicative of the erratic mental states suffered by the narrator, however, more shall be spoken on that later) that cut multiple paths of interpretation through the wild, dark wilderness of her book. Always moving, always gyrating from high energy and lightness down to sinister oppression and sorrow, Kavan builds a horror novel out of every day observations and reality.

*'Lying peacefully curled up on a sunny day, the new house looks like a harmless gray animal that would eat out of your hand; at night the old house opens its stony, inward-turning eyes and watches me with a hostility that can scarcely be borne. The old walls drape themselves with transparent curtains of hate. Like a beast of prey the house lies in ambush for me, the victim it has already swallowed, the intruder within its ancient structure of stone.*

*Coiling itself round me it knows I cannot escape. Imprisoned in its very fabric, I am a small worm, a parasite, which the host harbors not altogether unwillingly. The time has not yet come to eject me. A few more months or years the house will nourish me like an owl's pellet into the arches of infinite space through which my husk of skin and crushed bones will fall for ever and*

ever.'

The narrators emotions and mental states seem tied to the world around her. Pleasantness viewed in the world allows a pleasant mental state, such as a bright spring day giving rise to euphoria and happiness, whereas just the opposite, such as an unwelcoming clinic waiting room or strangers glass allows her self-doubt to accrue to the point of near suffocation. Her image of the exterior world is also mirrored by her interior world.

*'No sooner had I discovered this than a change seemed to come over everything. It was as though, in some mysterious way, I had become the central point around which the night scene revolved.... The windows lighted or unlighted, were like eyes more or less piercing, but all focused upon me. The houses, the traffic, everything in sight, seemed to be watching to see what I would do.'*

The narrator, thwarted by her over self-consciousness, finds herself victimized by the world around her to the point of holing up in herself, becoming '*inexorably imprisoned behind my own determination to display no emotion whatever.*' There is this downward spiral of cognitive misinterpretation to any stimulus, interior and exterior working together, that leads her (her serving well as an archetype for many others) to this self-imposed, submissive prison. The earlier passage of the house works on several levels. There is the house as a metaphor for society, seemingly welcoming to all yet pushing her towards her cruel fate of institutionalization, a world that '*will soon cast me out like vomit, like dung*' for being an aberration from the norm. The house is also an outward projection of herself, the shifting states representative of her alternating mental states.

There is much discussion of an invisible enemy, someone foe who has not revealed himself to her that has set her fate in motion. The comparisons to Franz Kafka are rather valid, Kafka's works being a stated influence on Kavan, as she frets over thoughts that '*some secret court must have tried and condemned me, unheard, to this heavy sentence.*' The real tragedy lies in the treatment of those like the narrator, vomited out in a place kept from the sun and society without their consent. The reader witnesses how cruel one human can be towards another, simply for seeing them as inferior or damaged. The cruelest of actions are seen as coming from the ones that are the closest to us, and the betrayal of love cuts deeper than any wound inflicted by a stranger. In the asylum we see wives discarded by their husband, long grown tired and embarrassed of their behavior, and members that truly want to rejoin society but are held down by their own inner blockages. Their inner worlds reflect the same desires and understanding as any common person, yet, something out of their control has left them branded as unworthy of human dignity and a loving place in the world. '*Shall I be able to endure my self condemnation now?*' she asks herself. '*[A]lthough it is difficult to live with so much unhappiness and so many failures, to die seems to be harder still.*' They suffer, yet do not want to give up. However, the callousness of those purported to be sane gives pause to wonder whom the truly sane ones are?

The effects of mental illness do not just assault the inner world of the individual suffering from the illness, but it casts its shadow on all those who are near to them. While there are scenes of heart-wrenching callousness directed at the patients, those that love the patients are also given moments inspiring great pity and heartbreak in the reader as well. A mother wishes to visit her daughter, but is kept away from her by the staff and a husband takes his wife on a day trip which ultimately leads to more tragedy. While it can be seen as cruel that he abandons her despite her belief that he was taking her away for good, the reader feels the inner suffering of those that love the patients, yet are pushed away by the illness. The pain and coldness goes both ways, victimizing everyone, especially those that still hold love in their hearts. Everyone wants to be loved, the sane and damaged alike, and if we could see past fears and come to a better understanding of one another, much of our pains could be assuaged.

In the first half of the book (this particular edition used for the review is the 1972 Michael Kesend Publishing edition), each story has a blank page separating it from the preceding story, and each story has a unique title. After moving into the second phase of the book, each story bears the title ‘Asylum Piece’ followed by a Roman numeral, and the stories are not spaced by a blank page. This is an interesting technique that bears weight with one of the many motifs of the book, that of dehumanization and submission. Upon entering the asylum, the inmates loose their sense of identity, and submit to their authorities to the point of seeming to twitch at their commands.

*‘The long, lank, match-thin limbs with their enlarged joint mechanisms jerk into forlorn obedience to the Professor’s wires as, like a smiling puppet-master, he hurriedly takes control. And from behind the three pairs of dark spectacles large tears roll over the painted marionette cheeks and slowly drip onto the stone terrace.’*

The lack of separation seems to represent both the blurring of days, weeks and years into the monotony of routine as well as the breakdown of individuality causing the patients to become one giant mass, an expressionless group unhindered by uniqueness and individual will. The lack of unique titles and the number system is also reflective of this dehumanizing technique. The narrator even looses her ‘I’, the Asylum Piece stories being told from a detached third-person narration as she submits to the obdurate authorities. Machinery serves as a strong motif in this book, connoting both clockwork mechanism without individual identity and the inner minds of the patients, a machinery that starts and stops without their control, machinery that takes control of their actions and habits of which they are merely victims, helpless souls trapped in a machine mind that is indifferent to their wills and desires.

*Asylum Piece*, while being a quick read, is one that hovers over the reader long after they have escaped the horrors that hide between the book’s covers. There is much auto-biographical information at play here, which allows the reader a look into the mind that crafted such a piece of art and ultimately brings Kavan deeper into the recesses of the heart. Her ambiguity and elusiveness are some of her finer qualities, as she leaves a world of interpretation available for the reader’s enjoyment, allowing for a variety of impressions and an incentive to revisit the book. This is an excellent work that seems to offer insight and commentary into her other novels, many of which reflecting similar themes and also containing scraps of autobiography. This novel is a powerful scream that never leaves the throat, instead leaving the reader in an eerie stillness where the silence is deafening.

**4/5**

*‘How can one ever hope to prove one’s innocence when there is no means of knowing of what one has been accused? No, there’s no justice for people like us in the world: all that we can do is to suffer as bravely as possible and put our oppressors to shame.’*

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### **Steven says**

I had been meaning to read Anna Kavan for a long time; when *Asylum Piece* arrived in the mail I did not hesitate and started it immediately. I read it in the span of two days, rather breathlessly. What a great first encounter—I’ll definitely be collecting and reading all of her work. Not all the stories were equally good/gripping, but some of them really got to me (especially chapter II of *Asylum Piece*, which was brilliant), and overall the pieces put together a product, a vision, of rare quality.

*“A human being can only endure depression up to a certain point; when this point of saturation*

*is reached it becomes necessary for him to discover some element of pleasure, no matter how humble or on how low a level, in his environment if he is to go on living at all. In my case these insignificant birds with their subdued colourings have provided just sufficient distraction to keep me from total despair. Each day I find myself spending longer and longer at the window watching their flights, their quarrels, their mouse-quick flutterings, their miniature feuds and alliances. Curiously enough, it is only when I am standing in front of the window that I feel any sense of security. While I am watching the birds I believe that I am comparatively immune from the assaults of life. The very indifference to humanity of these wild creatures affords me a certain safeguard. Where all else is dangerous, hostile and liable to inflict pain, they alone can do me no injury because, probably, they are not even aware of my existence. The birds are at once my refuge and my relaxation." (48-49)*

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### **Jim says**

What a marvelous book - or better, how amazing that Kavan was able to get all these experiences down on paper. She manages, in what I suppose were her lucid moments, to chronicle her "descent into madness"; but that cliché is insufficient for this book. It's more like a calm, unpleasant journey - no screaming, no violence, just a bewilderment as events unfold and she finds herself incarcerated in an asylum in Switzerland.

Written as a collection of what first appear to be short stories, it becomes clear fairly quickly that the stories are just a formal choice and that we are reading a cohesive, continuous narrative. The control and restraint, and perhaps the quietness of the telling is what makes the book powerfully chilling. She realizes what is happening and the futility of resistance, and yet she maintains her composure, going quietly to the gallows without complaint.

Quite an amazing book and my first exposure to Kavan. Will be reading her more famous book, *Ice*, next.

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### **Tim Edison says**

The asylum is not a therapeutic environment  
People do not receive therapy in the asylum  
They are not offered cures  
They are merely managed, suspended, oppressed  
They suffer education, programming, behavioural realignment  
To be more obsequious consumers, obedient objects  
To surrender their identity and to behold the arbitrary  
To behold the imperious testament of sanity  
The asylum represents fear of economic burden  
The asylum is not a remote beacon of compassion

The asylum is the partition to the shame they arouse in others  
The border that separates one reverie from another  
The asylum is an opportunity to accept the correct hallucination  
For they are like windows into our communal madness  
Emblems of truth, the unwanted child, shadows

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### **Sarah says**

*To wait — only to wait — without even the the final merciful deprivation of hope.*

Some authors start out messy and learn to edit. Some start out spare and airy and then gradually let their leaves unfurl. I'd place Anna Kavan in the latter category.

This novel was Kavan's first truly modernist piece and her first work published under that name. Told in a series of floating and fragmented vignettes, it feels crisp, chill and is, in fact, highly effective in conveying a sense of isolation. The remove is appropriate—if not altogether satisfying.

In later years, she would learn to convey that sense of strangeness and otherworldly remove in a way that felt somehow *complete*: giving substance to the phantasmal, a name to namelessness; ultimately creating a narrative frame all her own. Here, she's only just beginning.

It's a beautiful book.

*There is no love here, nor hate, nor any point where feeling accumulates. In this nameless place nothing appears animate, nothing is close, nothing is real; I am pursued by the remembered scent of dust sprinkled with summer rain.*

*Outside my window there is a garden where nobody ever walks: a garden without seasons, for the trees are all evergreens. At certain times of the day I can hear the clatter of footsteps on the concrete covered ways which intersect the lawns, but the garden is always deserted, set for the casual appreciation of strangers, or else for the remote and solitary contemplation of eyes defeated like mine.*

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### **Ben Loory says**

a scary book from the frozen land of hopeless mental illness. it's hard to believe it was written in english; it reads like a pristine translation of something written on the other side of mars.

*It's not as though the place has any special attractions. It is a house of no definite architectural design, half old, half new. The lines of the new part are straightforward and easily read like a sum in simple arithmetic; the old part is oblique, full of treacherous angles, with a roof that sags like the back of a worn-out horse and is blotched with scabrous patches of lichen. Paradoxically, the old part has only been added recently. When I first came to live here it was an entirely new house-- that is to say, it had certainly not been standing for more than ten or fifteen years. Now, at least half of it must have been built many centuries ago. It is the old part which has grown up during my occupation that I fear and distrust.*

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## Sean says

The stories in this volume comprise two discrete types. The collection begins with a series of first-person pieces, many of which conjure up strong parallels to Kafka's *The Trial* (Kafka was one of Kavan's key influences in her shift of name and writing style), and in general portray a narrator consumed with the interior life, specifically its decay under the apparent assault of depression, while being oppressed by some unidentified official body (as in Kafka's work, the faceless nameless authority never explains itself).

Full review [here](#).

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## Jenn(ifer) says

Going off the rails on a crazy train...

What the heck happened to me? I used to be able to sit down & write my reactions to a book, make them have some relevance, make them mildly entertaining... Lately, I find myself with nothing to say.

Hello, Goodreads? Yeah, I'm phoning in another review...

I don't know what to say about this novel. I'm still not sure if I loved it or felt 'meh' about it. But there were moments... Moments I will not forget. Like the birds outside the window, and the feeling of calm that can only come from watching their freedom, wishing to be the bird. Just to be a little bird without any irrational fears getting in the way of my flight.

I wasn't immediately sucked in to Kavan's stark, emotionless style, but after a couple of chapters, it started taking on a bit of a Marksonian feel for me and I was reeled right in. I found myself relating to the narrator, her anguish, her paranoia, her self-consciousness – I mean, my wiring doesn't make the right connections all the time either. I understand the paranoiac all too well. I understand the iron bars of fear that keep us safe in our homes – even though sometimes we're not even safe there. Not safe in our own heads due to faulty wiring. I know that when I go off the rails, my own mind is the last place I want to be. There's no comfort there; no control. My mind has a mind of its own. I know what it's like to swim to freedom only to find myself lost, and returning to the comfort of the shackles.

Better the devil you know.

I understand the need to worry because of all the bad things that might happen if I don't. If I worry all the time, I can make the bad things stay away, right?

Anyway, I think what has me on the fence is that while I was very much engaged in the parts of the story told in the first person, when she switched to the third person, I became disconnected. She lost me for awhile there and never managed to pull me back in.

Still, I hope she is able to leave the iron bars and shackles behind, leave the cold & the darkness and the isolation. I hope she's outside on a blanket under a tree watching the birds fly off in the bright blue sky.

**3.75/5** - rounded up

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### **Mariel says**

My heart falls into my boots while I am speaking. I am plunged into despair because I see that neither of my hearers is capable of comprehending my appeal. I doubt if they are even listening to me. They do not know what it means to be sad and alone in a cold room where the sun never shines.

When she returns to the cold, foggy streets she belongs in as belief in a cruel God, unloving holder of the keys, she is returning and having never left. See the twisted smirk undisguised by the cold eyes in everything you see. Its shape in everyone. I squinted with her into a false sun stared into for too long. Please let me believe, give me your light. She would say give me and that is important. A warm world, a word alone. Denied, is it going to be cold and dark forever? Why wouldn't they listen to her? I listened for the they are not laughing with you they are laughing at you. Too small to notice. Why wouldn't they look at her?

What would happen if the lights came on? If the patrons suffered you to sit in their warm house?

The book jacket describes *Asylum Piece* as "one of the most extraordinary and terrifying evocations of human madness ever written".

I don't want to call it madness. I want to call it the door between the warm and the cold. I want to call it the feeling when you struggle against it, when you cannot find the handle. You try every one and they won't turn. Not for a prayer. The dark and the light are natural places to be and if you are one side it is the wrong side. The loss of time becomes a prison sentence. No one will tell you when you have repented enough.

Who shall describe the slow and lamentable cooling of the heart? On what day does one first observe the infinitesimal crack which finally becomes a chasm deeper than hell?

It is the birds you watch outside of your work window. It isn't so bad, if it is one day. If you think too long about the next day, and the next. It is sunny outside and when you get off for the day it will go down. Soon you will set and it will start again. But the birds fly over my car I am sitting in on my work lunch breaks. I have to be me, then a real live me, outside. I can't think about the next day, and the next day stretching out like a to be decided after a later time sentence, when I watch those birds. They are too fast for me to really see and that might be the best part about it. She wonders if the woman who works for her senses the doom over her head. I feel that when I pull myself away from what I need more and more each day. The time at the window in front of the birds is not enough. I feel the pressure of not wanting to not be able to get back if I forget who else could see. I have to leave.

I've had/read some interesting discussions about Anna Kavan and biography. I had this feeling when reading of the breathes money cannot buy you everything great divide. The woman of the secret world of the rich is embraced in the secret world when people say that a person is too stupid to be unhappy. If the world was like when people say stuff like that (a world I want no part of. The one where people would call anyone "white trash", as if there were kinds of trash instead of just people). She holds her. She could be a switched at birth baby in this moment. The nostalgia for a home. It doesn't have to be that way.

I had this feeling about Anna Kavan when I read about the older lady who watches her pet of a younger patient. Her husband will not be coming to family day any longer. The hope, the stealing into their window. If you love someone set them free. I had the feeling like I wasn't alone when I am turning my door knobs inside and looking for windows into others.

If I'm in any kind of a waiting place. Airports, hospitals, the dmv. The Mariel lights dim and the other voices must be what blind or deaf people mean they say that their other senses take the lead. I listen to conversations in an out of time place. I will wish that I had someone with me to live this too. I'll look around at the waiting faces that look turned off over ancient magazines and the voices will darken if I imagine (or was it really there?) a cold face. A smile makes all of the difference. They take the lead.

Not too long ago in the hospital I picked up frequencies of a grown man sobbing over a nothing at all pain. His mother spoke to him in enabling tones that it would all be over soon. I sensed a little bit of shame for him, a what would others think. She told the nurse that when he was a boy he was so good that they called him "the second coming". I think this wins out. I followed their voices to a prospective trip to Burger King. They left me with my point of pride to never flinch over pain, no matter how great, since my first shot at four years of age. It was the story my mother would repeat to praise me with, if she was in the mood to praise me. "The doctor said you weren't normal you were so stoic." You don't need anyone, Mariel, you're self-reliant. You asked for no one, you didn't ask for me. I sometimes imagine a wistfulness, sometimes it is adopted out. Pin it to my chest in vivid colors I see dulled behind glass. I felt for this overgrown infant at once envious of what he used to have, and horrified that if he screamed like that over that then what would happen to him. I have this feeling about Anna Kavan of the point when I could see what it would look like when you know how to look from the almost.

I have this feeling about Anna Kavan. In her novel A Scarcity of Love there is a young nurse who spares herself from deeper knowledge. The Pandora's box of what lays on the other side of the world shut and left under a stone. She must be a hummingbird or a shark and never stop breathing. I don't know which it is because I don't know what would happen if people stopped breathing and threw open their doors for someone else. Here is my light. In a story in Kavan's I Am Lazarus a doctor wishes he had never come. He wishes he had never seen the despair that becomes the air to be breathed. The eyes of a corpse open and beseech. Save me? See me? If the worlds orbit closer than at any other time of the year (is it an every fifty years phenomenon? Who can say) what would happen. Would worlds collide? The patients are buried alive in psychotropic drugs. He will leave and did anyone ever really know.

I have this feeling of Anna Kavan that she is in the waiting room before what would happen. If someone else could be you and you could be them. What would happen if someone sensed that you sometimes felt as if you were being chased down. Someone else was there and they were not looking over a magazine of the news of the world that is some place far away from you. I felt it when the older lady wanted the younger girl to eclipse her own dark world. Playing house. I didn't sense judgement but a living it. Living in another world when you look into other windows. Worrying about them, trying to understand it. Because you wouldn't stop flying if you saw them.

I had read that Kavan wrote *A Scarcity of Love* to cope with her mother. I don't know if she felt freed. Virginia Woolf had written *To the Lighthouse* to exorcise her own mother's eternal hold on her let go the ghosts. I don't know that I will ever be able to pass through completely but I believe in leaving the foggy streets. I believe in being able to get through by this way of seeing others and seeing different parts of yourself. I struggle with this. I didn't want to write about *A Scarcity of Love* and when I did I didn't go near the black woods of my mother. It has been so hard to write once I believed I had let myself down. I had felt shredded inside over my review of *Ice* that I'd written last year (I'd deleted it and later brought it back) from not wanting to touch the knife edges of a life long addiction to self-mutilation. Self-injury since the cradle. I wasn't capable of rationality. I raised myself in this way. I told myself that I couldn't be close to Anna Kavan because I couldn't forget myself when I read her, that I was blinded to some truth. My inborn mountains of loneliness seemed insurmountable. Maybe I take this too seriously but I had felt *normal* when reading *Asylum Piece*. A normal that I don't feel when standing around others. I want to dim myself around others. If I feel anything but free when I write about her it is devastating to me. When I try to find the words I don't feel normal anymore. I only want to be free.

I read in Peter Owen's introduction of this edition that Kavan destroyed a manuscript of a novella after it had been rejected for his publication. I can understand that action with no trouble at all. The afterwards is hard and living too much for the afterwards is when the imaginings of footsteps and hounds starts. I would guess that she felt free when writing and then it is the waiting room. Then it hurts to turn yourself down. Then you find out what you really believed when you felt you could have hope for the end of the letting go fall. Then she kept writing. I feel something for Anna Kavan. I feel it anywhere I have ever been.

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### **Larry says**

It's funny, somewhere in the middle of this collection I thought to myself, "sure I like her stories, but I'm not sure I'm going to join the cult of Kavan." How many stories of paranoia can I handle, but we all know "just because you're paranoid it doesn't mean they're not after you." It is a cult right? I never heard of this mysterious writer until two of her volumes showed up on the "Brain Pain" reading list.

I kept thinking back to Jane Bowles, who (16 years her junior) was publishing around the same time. Jane really nailed "crazy" in her novella "Two-Serious Ladies," but Kavan approaches crazy from a different angle. (Both women dealt with "mental illness" or what often seems to me "profound awareness.") Jane's women performed erratically. Kavan's "I" seems so composed as the clutches of the machine lurk in every corner.

A couple of stories later and I was looking for someone to initiate me into the cult. Or perhaps "Asylum Pieces" is the initiation ritual. Her language deceived me. Every statement is delivered as a "matter-of-fact," but the details she chooses to include in her paranoid sketches surprise and please me.

In the heart of the collection as the character gets closer to capture, (her crimes a mystery to her and the reader), the machinery imagery starts to emerge. I couldn't help thinking of Big Chief vs. Ratched and her Fog Machine.

But there is no Ratched at this Asylum, just tennis dates and a clockwork tapestry of unease. The foes remain hidden, but their work is accomplished through therapists, lawyers, and husbands.

I'm stoked to tackle "Ice" and some of her other works to see how she applies language to other

themes/topics etc.

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