

a room, unbounded

I have no idea how I chanced upon this room. It was after many hours of walking that I came face to face with the tall, heavy-set door standing slightly ajar, the colour of dense tissue on an x-ray.

A tentative push revealed it was easier to move than anticipated and it opened with one smooth, continuous motion in an elegant arc. It uncovered a stark and cold light that bathed the entire room. Several windows at the far side shone with such ferocity that I couldn't see anything beyond them. While my eyes adjusted, I followed the light as it traced the hard edges of a huge cluster of metallic machinery that ran from the back of the room, into the centre.

The machinery occupied a low height toward the windows, but escalated to a height of a dozen feet in the centre of the room, its peak formed by a huge funnel that towered above me. My glance continued upwards to note that no ceiling was visible since the room disappeared out of sight on the vertical plane and I shuddered at the prospect of an infinite regress.

Just then, above the low hum of technology, I heard the clear, reverberating sound of a chair scrape. My gaze darted down and to the right to meet a startlingly present figure, seated upon a chair of the same colour as the door and the funnel and every other single thing in this room, picked out in this light that paradoxically gave everything a wan pallor in its piercing intensity.

He sat facing the funnel, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees in a display of resigned weariness. He looked deep into the metal surface of the funnel and beyond it. No doubt his reflection was the only point of interest in this room, and he scoured it for something that couldn't be returned by this passive projection that only multiplied his evident sadness.

He was old – over 70 at least – with a scattering of white hair topped by a bald crown, his face framed by a surprisingly neat and clean white beard. He wore humble clothes of brown and blue that hung loosely around his body and gathered at his unshod feet.

I fell still and felt my hands perspire as his head slowly turned to look at me. The eyes were heavy and his movements were painfully drawn out, as if he hadn't moved in years and feared he may shatter. His eyes met mine and I saw no glimmer of recognition, no spark of surprise, nor even a hint of curiosity. I was merely there, human or not.

As soon as his head completed its 90° turn, it began its return journey. No pause, just a slow sweep to look at me, and a slow sweep back to rest at the funnel. He clasped his hands and settled back into the position he had held before I arrived.

I jumped at the sudden, shrill sound that filled the room. An alarm rang on the opposite wall, emanating from a

sinister black cube that hung above another door, mirroring the one I had entered through. It was unmistakably a digital sound – emitted through speakers – but, oddly, it mimicked an old-fashioned metal bell alarm. I looked at the man to see how he would react.

He responded in much the same way as he had responded to my entrance; after a small delay, his head slowly swept round to meet the alarm before it began its return to rest at the funnel. The alarm continued to sound and, just as I began to wonder what it was in aid of, the man abruptly began to stand. Still staring ahead, he clambered to his feet and reached out to grip a thin metal ladder that ran to the top of the funnel.

He tentatively pressed his right foot into the first rung and, with a small exertion of effort, pulled himself up into a slow ascent. I watched with curious amusement until it became evident what the purpose of this exercise was. The man's feet reached the top few rungs of the ladder and he paused. Leaning slightly forward to maintain his grip, the man's head began that familiar sweep. Again, his eyes turned to meet mine but, in contrast to the previous occasion, he stopped to look.

He maintained eye contact up until the very moment that he toppled forlornly into the funnel. Before I had chance to move, the door opposite me swung open with a loud boom. To my surprise, another man, clad in very similar clothing, entered through the doorway. He looked nervous, and a lot younger than the previous man. Without acknowledging my presence, he sheepishly walked across the room to take his place in the recently vacated chair.

He sat down, toying with the edges of his sleeves, and stared into the pristine surface of the funnel.