Library of Dust
103–566

LIBRARY OF DUST

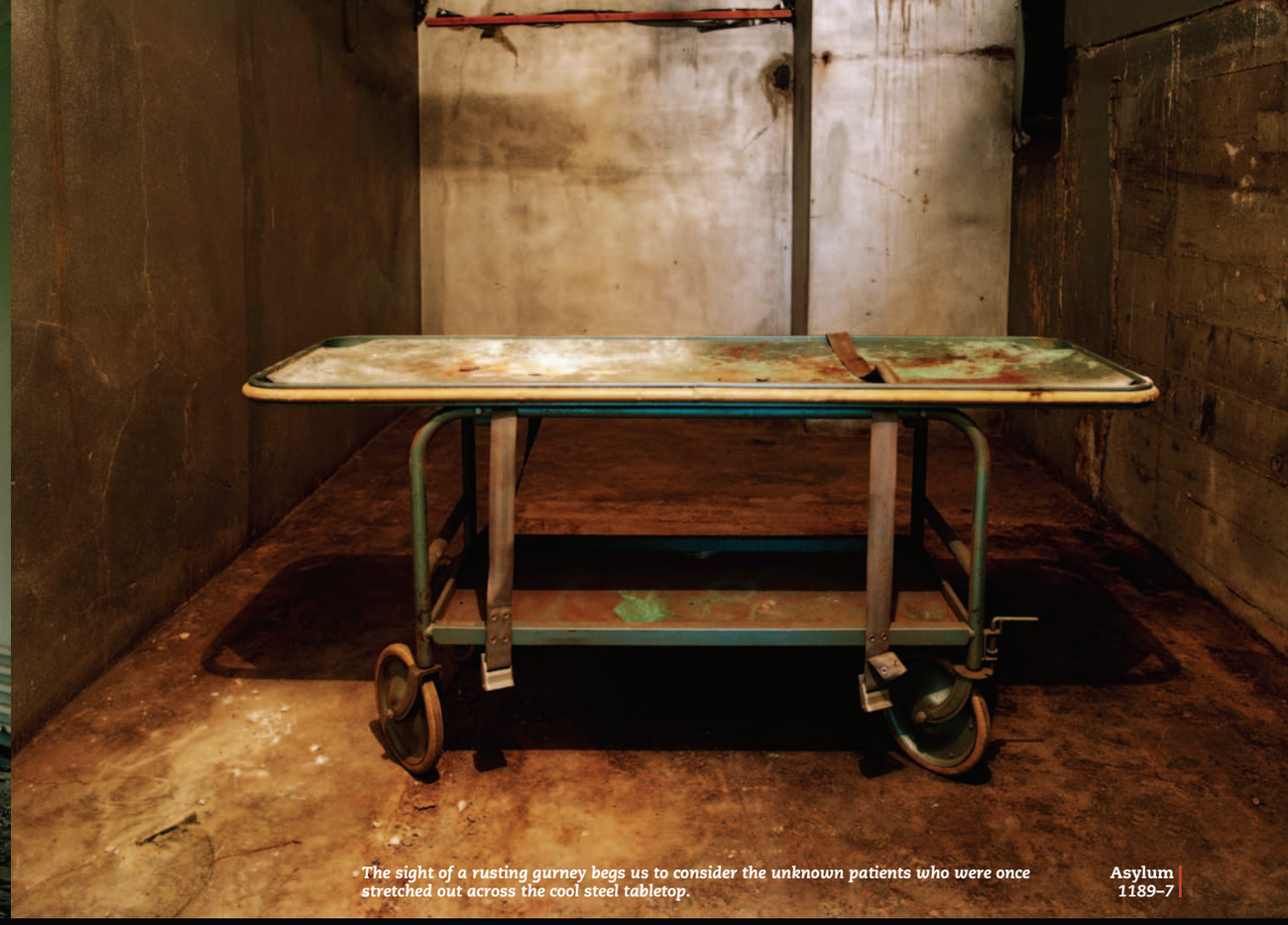
THE URNS IN AN ABANDONED HOSPITAL WARD ARE ANONYMOUS, BUT THE ASHES SHOUT OUT IN BURSTS OF DAZZLING COLOR

by Julie Hanus * images by David Maisel

The hospital is decaying. Crumbled plaster rests as rubble on linoleum floors that have burst at the seams, succumbing to the pressure of a buckling foundation. Yielding paint sloughs from the walls. Evidence of patients once treated here lies scattered—a deck of cards, a sodden book, a rusted razor blade. It seems impossible that the heart of this institution still functions, that somewhere at the end of a long corridor doctors and nurses still practice medicine. In these deserted wings, part of the Oregon State Insane Asylum as it stood in 1883, the only hint of life is a collection of crude copper urns that house the cremated remains of those who died here—thousands of patients treated over a century's time—stacked three deep on plain wooden shelves. * When photographer and visual artist David Maisel, best known for documenting human impact on natural landscapes ("Aerial Dreams," May/June), first learned of the cremains 20 months ago, he sensed that they would be the centerpiece of his next project. "I've spent many years obsessively photographing copper mines . . . so there's something about copper that I gravitate toward," he says. "But I didn't have any sense of what these canisters would really look like." Compelled, Maisel wrote a letter explaining his work to the institution, located in Salem and now known as the Oregon State Hospital. To his surprise, permission to see the remains was granted. * Abandoned or forgotten by relatives, the canisters house the unclaimed remains of patients treated between 1883 and the 1970s. Left to an institution not well equipped to provide long-term storage, the remains accumulated in a basement room until 1976, when they were interred in an underground vault where moisture went to work on the copper cans, destroying precious labels. A few years ago, upon discovering the damage, the cash-strapped hospital transferred the remains into a storage room in a shut-down wing. In 2005 a series of Pulitzer Prize–winning editorials published by the Portland-based *Oregonian* drew attention to the struggling hospital, Oregon's primary public psychiatric institution, and made the displaced remains a symbol of state neglect and pejorative public attitudes toward mental health throughout history.

Asylum
1197–7

The J Building, the oldest structure on the Oregon State Hospital's campus, was declared unsafe in 2005, when an architectural survey discovered it could collapse in an earthquake.



The sight of a rusting gurney begs us to consider the unknown patients who were once stretched out across the cool steel tabletop.

Asylum
1189–7

Library of Dust
1207

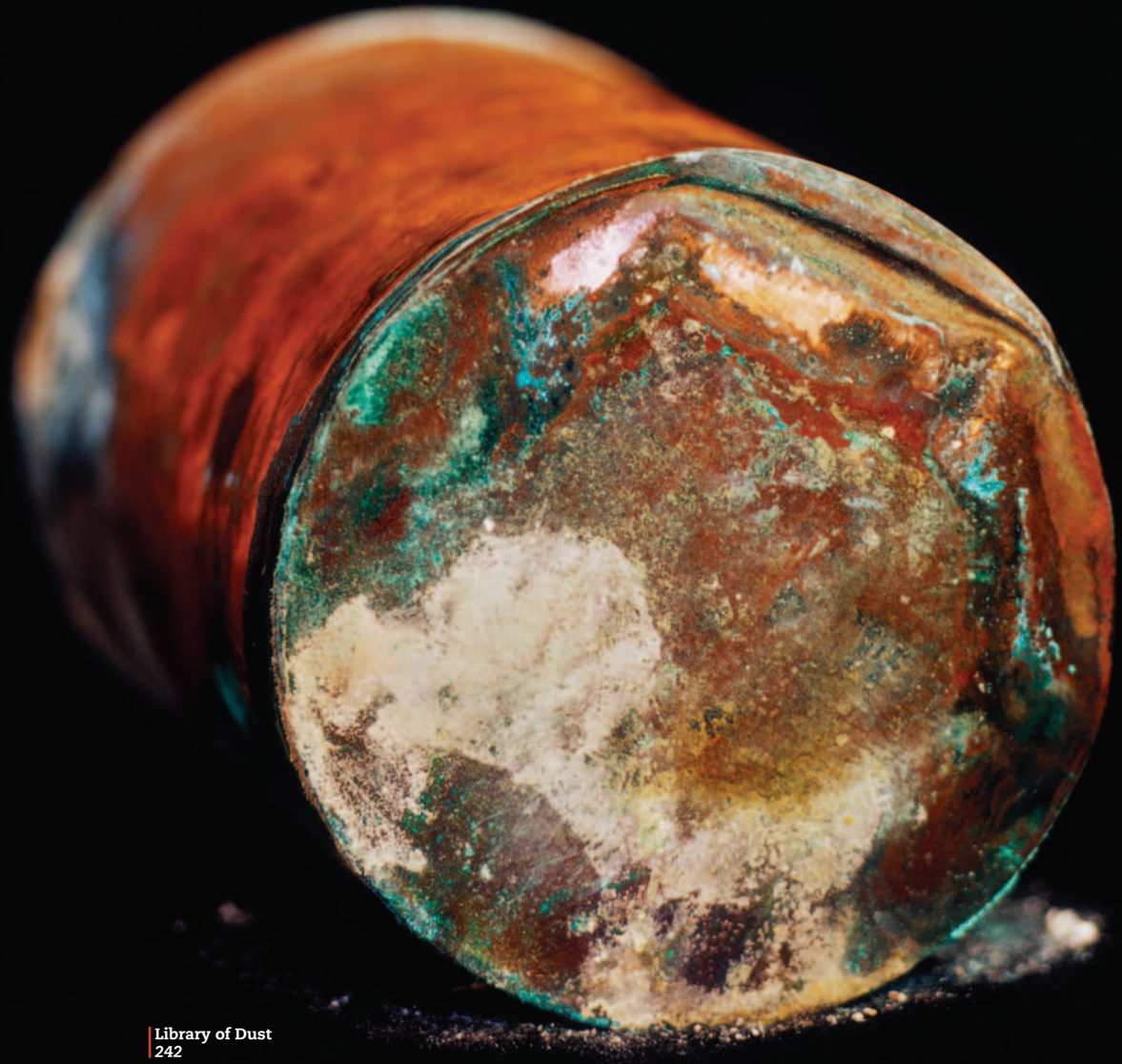
Maisel saw more than decay or mistreatment. Left to languish over time, the copper cans and their contents have literally erupted with color: marine blues, steely crimsons, salted grays and whites. Mineral crusts and burnished colors bleed gorgeously from the welded seams. "I'm not a believer," Maisel says soberly. "But they have a kind of continuity . . . a sense that the individual is somehow continuing, even if it's in an inorganic state." During Maisel's first visit to the hospital, as he considered the canisters' inhabitants, a young man on a cleanup crew sent in from a local penitentiary paused for a moment at the door and peered inside.

"The library of dust," he whispered.

Maisel has since arranged three more trips to the hospital, each time spending several days photographing the canisters in natural light to avoid augmenting or altering the images. He is a careful archivist, cataloging the photos with respect to the numbers stamped into the lids (ranging from 01 to 5,118). The reverence with which he approaches the project has fostered a positive relationship with the hospital, which has mobilized on the heels of the *Oregonian* coverage to acknowledge its imperfect past as part of crafting a better future. The state is moving along with plans for a new facility, and the hospital has invited citizens to share ideas for a proper memorial for the remains.

In an essay about the project posted on his website (www.davidmaisel.com), the artist articulates one vision of the library as a "microcosm of the hospital itself": each canister assigned to a numbered shelf, analogous to indistinguishable rooms in partitioned wards—an emblem of the institutionalization of identity, in which names become numbers and personal details slip away. The canisters, however, seem to resist this loss, each eruption of color and crust suggesting an individual identity that's both ethereal and organic.

Library of Dust
157



Library of Dust
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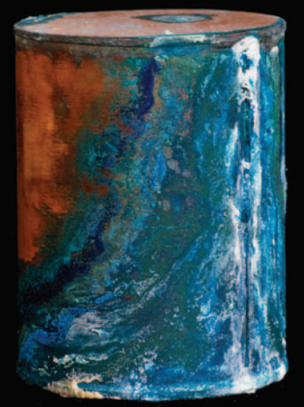

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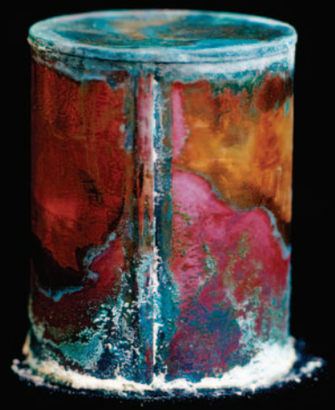

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