

To miss the desert

In the centre

The floor in the hallway is hard and shiny, cold enough to cool a hot hand. At night, when her parents go out, she comes here to catch insects. Many creatures skulk across it, ants, spiders and other more sinister insects she doesn't yet know the names of. But as long as she is careful to catch them under a jar with a smooth edge, one that meets the marble without making any gaps, she is safe to watch them.

14 Floor Finishes

1. Location 1.5 and G5

Forbo Nairn lino sheeting 1.5 mm to be laid on 6 mm wbp ply sub floor.

Ply and lino to run under appliances and around kitchen units. Colour tba by client.

Aluminium threshold at junction with G2, G6 and 1.1

2. Location G3 and G4

Strip and seal wooden floor.

Replace all broken floor boards with second hand to match.

3. G6

Lay new flooring 300 mm x 300 mm terracotta unglazed tiles with sandstone colour groat 10 mm wide joints.

All tiles to be laid out from centre line.

Finished floor level to match G5.

The hallway forms the spine of the house, with rooms leading off on both sides. Surrounding the house, there is a moat of flints with furrows running through it at regular intervals like a ploughed field. But unlike banks of earth, when you run up and down these slopes, you can easily lose your footing and slip, that is when you really know the stones are sharp enough to cut your knees. Still it is safer here, than being outside the walls, in the waste-ground beyond, full of dry bushes and stinging insects, where you can hear hyenas cry in the night.

Our initial proposal was for a one-storey building with a courtyard at the centre and the accommodation around the perimeter of the site. This meant that the building would be fully accessible without the additional cost of a lift and there would be no problems of overlooking. The main entrance led to a central courtyard, covered and top lit. All the other facilities were to be accessed off this space.

A small pig and a spider; the tin roof drums with yet more rain. The rains are heavy this year, and they have come early. She lies tucked up in bed, reading about Charlotte and her web. Her tummy aches. It is swollen and a bit yellow, and worse still, it sticks out. Today she has

had her tenth injection, thankfully the final one. Each time the fat needle went into her it made another mark in a circle around her tummy button, first at mid-day, then six o'clock, then three o'clock, then nine o'clock, more and more, until she felt bruised and sore.

Big injections had been talked about ever since Bobby her dog got a tick on the rim of his eye. The tick would not come free, not even with a burnt match and gee. Poor Bobby, with his sad eyes and velvet brown ears, got sicker and sicker. He lay on his side in the shade, panting, with his ribs heaving up and down. Sometimes his tummy shook. Finally, he was taken to the Chinese vets and put to sleep.

But they kept on talking about big injections. And no one seemed to know why Bobby had been sick, was it from tick fever or from rabies? Tick fever was not a worry, they said, but rabies certainly was. It turned you mad, you frothed at the mouth and ran screaming from water, until it got you in the end. Everyone agreed it was the vets' fault; they had burnt Bobby's body. Anyone knows that you should keep the head and take a slide from the brain before burning it. Only then, when you look at that slide, can you tell whether a dog has had rabies or not.

Had Bobby licked my hands, they wanted to know. They looked at all the scratches. I always had scratches on my hands from stone hunting and mud pie baking, I told them. Of course Bobby had licked my hands, especially when I tried to comfort him at the end, poor Bobby.

On a Ethiopian airlines DC3, with their '13 Months of Sunshine' posters, all the way from Addis Ababa, came our special cool box. She knew the route well, it took you past Gondar, Lalibella and the place beginning with D. You could get out there for a bit to play on the grass by the lake, or stretch your legs and drink tea. For eating your snack of bread and jam, the stewardess gave you an orange cushion. The cool box was delivered right to our door by the nice Dutch Doctor. It was packed with jars of a maroon coloured syrup and big plastic syringes, horse syringes, the Doctor said and laughed. Everything else had to be taken out of the fridge, to make enough room to keep them all cold.

- 1. All ceramic tiling, plumbing and electrical work by main contractor.*
- 2. All plastering behind cooker, fridge, washing machine, and boiler to be supplied by main contractor.*
- 3. Rail above tiling provided by kitchen joinery subcontractor. All switches and plugs to be on this rail. Subcontractor to allow for all electrics to main contractor's electrician's requirements.*
- 4. Sink unit supplied by free issue by main contractor for fixing by subcontractor.*
- 5. Door and cupboard handrails supplied as in 4.*
- 6. All measurements and dimensions given subject to site checking.*

I swing back and forth, higher and higher, watching my black shadow on the dirt. As mid-day approaches, my shadow grows smaller, and then it disappears. Everything is grey but it is not a grey I have seen before. It is not a dull grey, like the light on a cloudy day when shadows cover up the sun; but a bright and dazzling grey, that hurts my eyes. I look up. The sun has disappeared. Instead there is a black hole, surrounded by a halo of white light.

On the edge

The bathroom has a floor of polished marble, black, interwoven with white veins. Perched on the toilet, with her feet dangling off the ground, she traces the white lines with her gaze. She keeps alert for cockroaches, at any time one might crawl through a crack on the edge and onto the blackness.

All the floors are marble, smooth and cool, laid out in careful grids, except for the big golden rug next to the sofa and the raffia mat in the playroom. She likes to follow the intricate patterns of the golden rug with her feet, like paths around a secret garden. But if you dance around the edge of the squares, you musn't be silly enough to fall in, who knows what could lie in wait in an enchanted garden?

Along one edge of her garden are a number of small rooms. These are home to Gullum and Kareem. Golum is tall and fair skinned, with light hair and green eyes. Kareem, is shorter, stockier, with darker skin, hair and eyes. They have fought each other in the past, and they will fight again, together, when the Soviets come to Kabul, and then again, when her own people search the Hindu Kush to wipe out all evil. But for now, there is no fighting, once the sun has gone down, they sit and eat together.

On weekday mornings she has to wait by the gate for the yellow school bus. She goes to a Catholic school, but the Italian Priest who teaches her doesn't notice that she doesn't read the bible. They call him a real revolutionary, a man who fights for the people of Afghanistan. It is exciting but a bit frightening, going to school through town in the bus, she clutches her lunch pail tight, wishing she had been allowed the Jell-O from the Embassy store like the American girls. On days when she doesn't have to go to school, they travel all over, they swim in the streams of the Hindu Kush, they buy blue pots in Istalif, they look at wooden chests in Peshawar, and one day, they go south, to visit Kareem's home and family.

He is a man with property and wives. Inside the walls of his house are sunlit orchards with trees full of dark purple fruit. A group of women dressed in different shades of red watch them

arrive. Some have their faces covered, but even at a distance she can see the pink nail varnish on their toes. Then, as her family draw closer, the women disappear.

They sit upstairs, in a long veranda overlooking the garden, the only furniture is a carpet laid out in a line down the middle of the room. Important men from the village, all in turbans, sit cross-legged around the edges of the carpet and eat from the dishes laid out between them. Her mother, her sister and herself are the only women. As they walk back down through the dark house to leave, she sees a pair of eyes watching her. The eyes belong to a girl, a girl with the hands of a woman, a woman who glints with silver. Later she learns that this is Kareem's youngest wife, once a nomad, who carries her wealth in the jewels on her fingers.

The proposal is for the building to be single storey with a pitched roof located at the north end of the site. The eaves height is 2m along the perimeter walls rising to a ridge height of 5m. There are a few windows along the perimeter walls facing north and east but the rooms are mainly lit by roof lights so the new building does not over-look adjacent property.

The café will seat up to 30 people and has a door to an outside area. It may be possible to create a garden area with a paved terrace adjacent to the building for both the café and the crèche. This entrance could be made wheelchair accessible by sloping the garden area from the street to the edge of the paving to eliminate the level difference.

You sit on a table too high for you, scowling at me. Who put you up there? I lurch towards you. You topple sideways and slip to the edge of the table. You wobble and then you fall, fast and heavy. The raffia rug tattoos your forehead purple with the sounds of your screams.

Around the outside

They park when it is already dark, perhaps a bit too dark. The children sleep in the camper van, a girl and boy down below and the eldest child, a girl, up in the roof of the camper van. Sleeping up here is a special treat; but it is cold and she sleeps badly, waking to all kinds of scuffling noises outside. Close by, the parents sleep four in a tent they have hurriedly erected. Each time she wakes, she can hear them breathing soundly beside her. Morning comes early in the Serengeti, her mother cries with alarm. The tent is surrounded by footprints. Their friend, an ex-gamekeeper, an expert on camels, examines them. It appears they have pitched camp on a main route to the watering hole. Beasts of all kinds, including lions, have been sniffing around them all night.

The implication of providing a space than can accommodate 140 people is that is necessary to provide an alternative means of escape and this must lead directly outside i.e. not through

any other room. This has been achieved by pulling back the north and east edges of the building from the perimeter boundary so creating a path around the building onto which fire doors from the crèche and the community space can lead. This also has the advantage of simplifying the planning negotiations by radically reducing the number of party wall agreements needed. It also makes the building more secure.

Pretending to be a postman, she slips her letters through the gap where the door of the playroom meets the hallway. You are standing on the outside and want to get in, you push the door open wide, when it sticks you push even harder. Her fingertips get trapped, tight in the jamb. The nail of the middle finger turns violet, then green, then yellow and finally falls off. She wraps it in cotton wool and puts the parcel under her pillow. When she looks there in the morning, she finds ten afs. A tooth would only have fetched one.

From her bed she can see out, over the walls, to the streets and houses outside the garden. There is a narrow street high up, with a bazaar, like the place where she saw rubber boots for sale. Lilac and mint green were the colours she was hoping for, but she ended up with red. One night she thought she saw a dwarf, shuffling slowly along, dragging his arms at his sides. When she wakes, she spies a hulk at the end of her bed. She moves closer to inspect it. It is a package wrapped in paper. Inside she finds a wooden doll's house, simply constructed, with two square floors, each with four rooms. The floors are held apart by a cross of wood that makes the walls between the room. With no walls around the outside, it is easy to take big pieces of furniture in and out.

She has been told that once when she was younger, when they lived in the Sudan, their house got burgled. The thieves left huge footprints in the sand outside. Someone said it must have been the Muslim brothers, who had their meeting-house next door. There had not been much to take, but still they had got away with their short-wave radio and some of her father's trousers. Her mother's dresses had been torn up and her lipsticks shoved into the sand. Next time, when her father went out in the landrover to check on wells at least a day's drive away, they stayed with the Greek family, who owned the shop. The Mamarcos' house had a cool, dark interior, which smelt of wood and polish. Unlike their house, they had an upstairs, a balcony with a ladder that was difficult to climb. She and her mother slept up here in white night dresses that shone out in the dark, and made pale reflections in the polished wood of the balusters.

Sectional Elevation to show handrails, balusters, and treads.

Ex 100 x 100 newel post

50 mm diameter (finished size) hardwood dowel handrail at 900mm above pitch line of stairs rebated to receive balusters.

Ex 32 x 32 balusters at 140 mm centres 2 no. to be housed in each tread. Except the first tread of the 3rd and 5th flight where the last baluster to be omitted.

Ex 32 mm softwood tread 280 mm wide. All treads to overhang string by 40 mm.

Ex 32 mm rounded nosing to treads to return to cut edges of treads – mitred at corners.

A hot red tent, the swathes of cloth are close enough to make me sweat. I rush headlong into the redness, with sultry breath and a wet tongue. Round and round, down and down, like the dream where I am twirling in the shallows in my swimsuit with the pleated skirt, until the waves encircle me and pull me down into a world beneath the sand. Towards me, staggering from left to right, comes a soldier. . .

I open my eyes. I am outside the redness, safe in a palace of lilac silk. I feel cool metal on my chest and in my mouth. A smooth brown hand holds mine.

On the inside

Her mother tells her another story, this time of her own life before you were born. Because she taught the Sheik's sister's daughter English; she was allowed to go inside the hareem. Underneath their abbas, she saw that the women all wore make up and perfume. They liked to play western music. Once they had asked her to teach them a dance. When, shyly, she declined, they had all laughed; we heard that you danced the twist until 2am last night. For her labours, she was offered a gift. She asked for a black abba with a gold trim and a gold leaf burqua, the costume that only the wives of the sheik can wear.

When she is born, it is the eve of the haj. Later she finds out that being a hajia means she will never have to make the journey to Mecca. Her mother's labour is not easy; she refuses to come out. Her mother walks the dunes along the creek, back and forth, past the apartment block where they live, but still she stays put. For a night and a day she waits inside. The chance of infection is high. The hospital has no glass in the windows, only mesh, nor any proper sanitation; patients' families bring in food and water. A caesarian section could kill both of them, one of them, for sure, certainly the mother if she turns out to be carrying a son. Fortunately there is a woman who is willing to take a chance. On the second night of her labour, the hospital is almost empty, everyone who can has gone to feast, to break their fast. An Irish nurse starts running a drip to encourage the baby to come out. But still she holds her ground. The Irish nurse turns the drip up. What a stubborn one, she still won't budge. The

nurse turns the drip up again, to dangerously fast levels, until she has no choice but to leave her warm waters and enter the world.

The main entrance is through an arch via a newly formed entrance lobby. The entrance level has been lowered to that of the existing street. The door is within a new entrance screen located behind the existing roller shutter to be retained for security reasons.

The office is located directly off the lobby. It overlooks the entrance and can also serve as the reception.

The counseling/meeting room is accessed from the entrance lobby. There is also a set of double doors to create a direct link with the office if required.

For her entrance, and her mother's bother, the sheik sends his apologies. Sorry, he said, so sorry it isn't a boy. For a boy I would have sent you a watch, but here with my condolences is a gift for the girl, a tiny gold coffee pot on a gold chain.

Sitting in my bikini by the pool, my back to the last rays of sun, the woman facing me is semi covered. She is a white English woman who has married a Muslim man and chosen to become Muslim herself. She tells me that many women agree with what is said in the Koran. It is a Muslim woman's choice to be covered, she says. It is important to keep yourself covered for your husband. Especially, she adds, with men always wanting to look at what is not theirs.

What if, I ask, men didn't really want to look at the inside, that it was only the women covering up that made them that way. And what if women didn't mind the looking, because they liked to look at what lay on the inside too?

In the middle

Along the other edge of the garden, leading from the gate, are two paths of concrete and a long line of zenias down the middle. A small girl in an orange dress searches for special stones. Before she crouches to pick one out, she checks for scorpions. Her dress is set with tiny mirrors and a handsome square of embroidery at the front. It is hard work to get it on, since it has no fastenings and the fabric is thin and could easily rip. She is very pleased with this dress; she looks just like all the other Afghan girls her age. The Afghan girls wear their dresses a bit softer, sometimes black, to match the black around their eyes.

In the playroom, on the window cill, is a row of large tins that have once contained milk powder. They contain a collection of carefully chosen and prized coloured stones. She takes

them out and pours water over them to make them glisten. Then she organises them into separate groups according to their colour. Her favourite stones form the most important group, seven in number, one for each colour of the rainbow. She puts them in a safe place, in a circle on a small piece of cloth on the table next to her bed. On certain days she takes them out into the garden and lays them on a soft clover patch in the middle of the rough grass. They help her search for four leafed clovers.

She has been told to always shake her shoes out before putting them on, in case a scorpion might be hiding in the toes. And she must make sure she checks for them beneath the ground sheet of tents, for scorpions like nothing better than this as a place to nest. Once when she was small, they went to camp with her father as he checked wells. The three of them slept in a tent with a loose ground sheet. She slept in the middle, in a cot between them. In the morning, when she was no where to be found. Panic broke out. Then they found her. She had fallen out of her cot in the night and rolled under one of the camp beds. Later as she and her mother were washing and the men broke camp. They called over, memsaab, memsaab, come and see. There, under the ground sheet, right in the middle, a large yellow scorpion had been found.

They say the way to make a scorpion suffer is to build a circle of fire around it and watch it sting itself to death.

One hot day, she takes the lids off the tins, and one by one she pours her stones over the raffia mat. There is a scuttling sound and movement among the stones. She stands firm and watches; a family of yellow scorpions has hatched in the warm, moist, dark of the tins, and is coming to the surface. She screams.

Kareem comes running. Calmly he kills each scorpion with the bare of his heel.

The final design proposal includes a crèche for 20 two to five year olds to be used on sessional basis as a childcare facility for the children of adults using the other facilities in the building. This is located adjacent to the café and accessed from the lobby, with the door out into the rear garden area. The crèche is large enough for 10 children. It has a small kitchenette area and a buggy store. There is also a children's toilet with a nappy changing area located directly off the play area for easy supervision.

There is an option of making the partition down the middle, between the crèche and the café, a flexible one. The partition we have suggested would be half-hour fire resisting and provide equivalent acoustic separation to that of a standard brick wall.

They run over towards us through the dust as the landrover brakes. Her father winds up the window, and gets out to check the pump of a well, closing the door behind him. They have all got bare feet, one girl has no nose and there is a young boy with only one arm. They press their pretty, dirty faces into the car window. Baksheesh, baksheesh, they cry and stare right at her. These children scare her, they seem so old, but they look about the same size as her.

Our suggestions for the conversion of the above property are based on the discussions we had with you and relate to your initial requirements. However the size and layout of the existing building impose limitations on what is possible. The overall space available in the building is extremely tight and is below that desirable for your purposes. There is only enough room for a small crèche and a small drop-in reception on the ground floor. Placing the crèche nearer to the other functions i.e. on the first or second floor could result in noise problems and would reduce space provision for other functions. The statutory requirements for crèches are:

0-2 years, staff/child ratio: 1/3, freeplay area per child: 3.68 metres squared.

2-3 years, staff/child ratio: 1/4, freeplay area per child: 2.76 metres squared.

3-5 years, staff/child ratio: 1/8, freeplay area per child: 2.30 metres squared.

She hates camping, almost as much as she hates churches. She finds them both boring. But the soft black of a Bedouin tent, that's different. . .

It is a scorching hot day in San Francisco; anyone with any sense is on a rooftop or in a park. Instead I force myself through the modern art collection. The gallery is badly lit; each room is a different shade of green grey. They say they are going to renovate soon. I stop at another tedious canvas square. This time it is a black one. I stare hard. Nothing happens. Then I scrunch up my eyes and look out to the middle distance from between the fringes of my lashes. And I remember what it feels like, to miss the desert.

endnote

Gavin Wade asked me to write a text in the form of a tabernacle. He had read a piece of my mine, where I questioned whether it was possible to write architecture, rather than about architecture. Was it possible, I had wondered, to write a bridge rather than about a bridge? The text was to be in relation to Nathan Coley's 'Black Tent' in Portsmouth Cathedral for Art and Sacred Spaces.

It is important to me that the writing is connected to different sites, however, I am interested in sites that are not only specific locations, but also indicative of generic spatial conditions, such as 'in the middle', 'on the edge', 'around the outside' and so on. This parallels two aspects of the siting of Coley's work, both the differing configuration of the piece depending on

the site and the particular position of the work in relation to the architectural geometry of the cathedral. The secular space of the house is my central spatial figure and I explore the changing position of the subject in relation to the various physical spaces of the home and the psychological spaces of security and fear, safety and danger. I use narrative to move between location and condition, between physical and psychological space. The narrative itself is spatial, composed like the squares, of two side, two voices.

The first voice remembers a childhood spent settling into various nomadic cultures and countries in the middle east. The second voice is drawn from the architectural design of contemporary sanctuaries, specifically a series of community buildings for different minority groups. These include ethnic communities, gay and lesbian organisations, single mothers with young children and people in long-term mental health care being moved from large scale institutions into 'care in the community' programmes. The texts are taken from design proposals and drawings, construction details and specifications. The two voices are pitched against one another to create a dynamic between personal and public sanctuary. One voice is highly subjective and uses the imagination to conjure up spaces of safety from memory; the other, equally engaged in the creation of secure spaces, adopts an objective and distanced professional tone to describe various sanctuaries at different scales and stages of the design process.

July 2003.

'To miss the desert' was published as a catalogue essay in Gavin Wade, *Nathan Cole: 'Black Tent'* (2003).