Requiescat

Gwen North Reiss

An artist named David Maisel,
who had photographed copper mines,
learned about an abandoned
state mental hospital in Oregon
where they started, in 1913,
to cremate the dead.
It was the hospital where they filmed
*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.
The unclaimed ashes
were poured into copper cylinders
which were sealed and placed
on pine shelving in a shed.

The ashes and the dampness
caused minerals to form on the copper—
brilliant blues, whites, yellows, oranges
and the green-blues of oceans.
They reminded the artist of coastal maps.
Beauty is a by-product.

He took each can off the shelf carefully
and photographed them one at a time
with reverence.

He researched the people.
Some had been committed
because they were depressed
hysterical, inconvenient.

On a desk in the room
was a book of names
with corresponding numbers.
Paper labels had disintegrated over time.
Numbers had been stamped onto the cans.
There were 3,500 copper cans.

While the artist was beginning his work,
one of the prisoners of a local penitentiary,
hired to clean, leaned in at the doorway
and whispered "the library of dust."

Gwen North Reiss has published poems in the Connecticut Review, the Atlanta Review, Fairfield University's Dogwood, and other literary magazines. Her articles on architecture have appeared in Preservation, Connecticut Cottages & Gardens, and The New York Times, as well as on the Glass House Blog. She has a B.A. in Literature from Yale and attended Middlebury's Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in 2009.