

# **What does it feel like to be the object of the medical gaze?**

Exercises in Creative  
Writing by Jane  
Hartshorn for  
Thinking Through  
Things



Do images like this  
accurately represent  
what it might be like  
to have an illness?



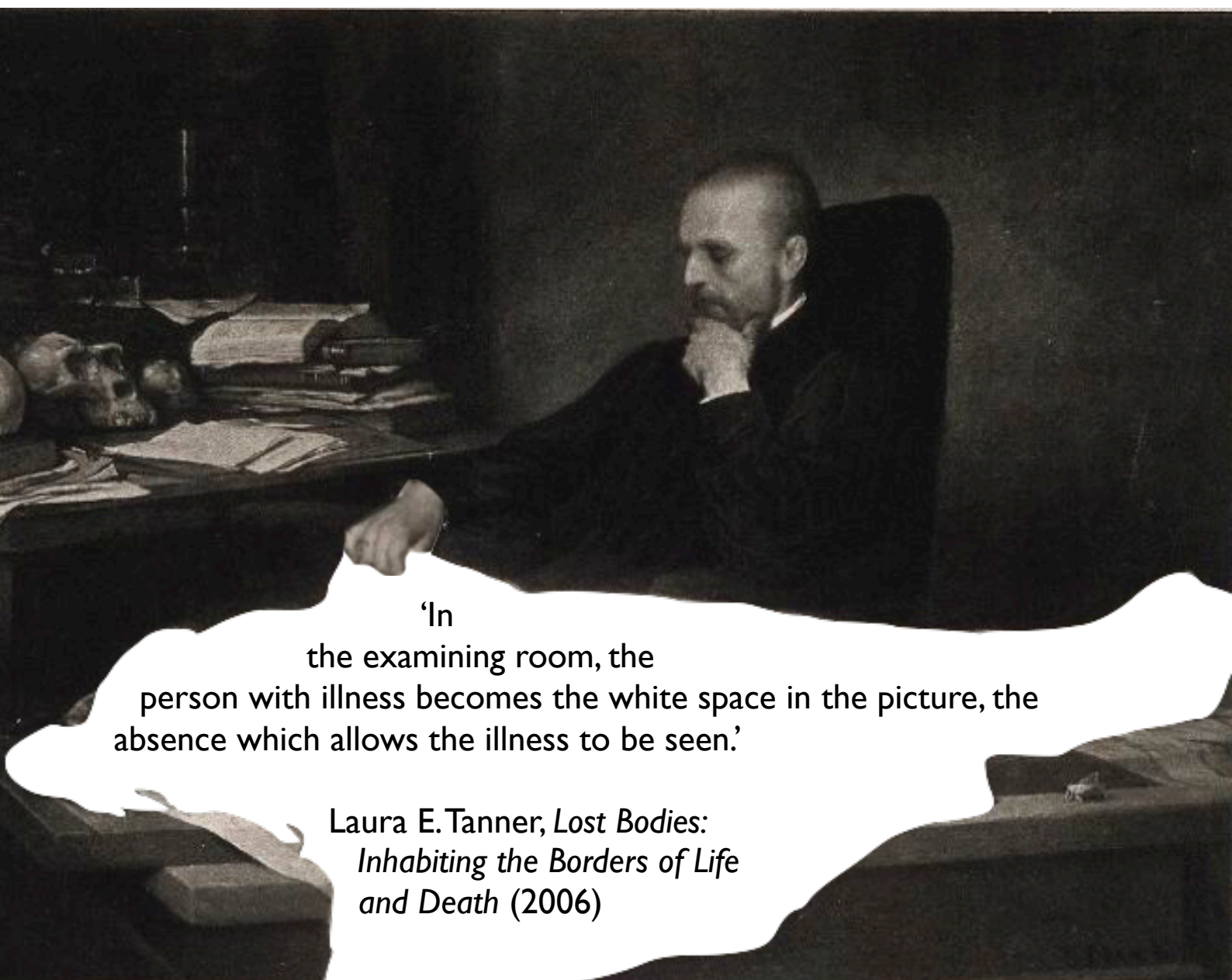
A female patient being hypnotised in front of a group of four men.  
Wellcome Library no. 18584i

Do you think they  
represent what it  
might feel like to be a  
patient within the  
medical encounter?



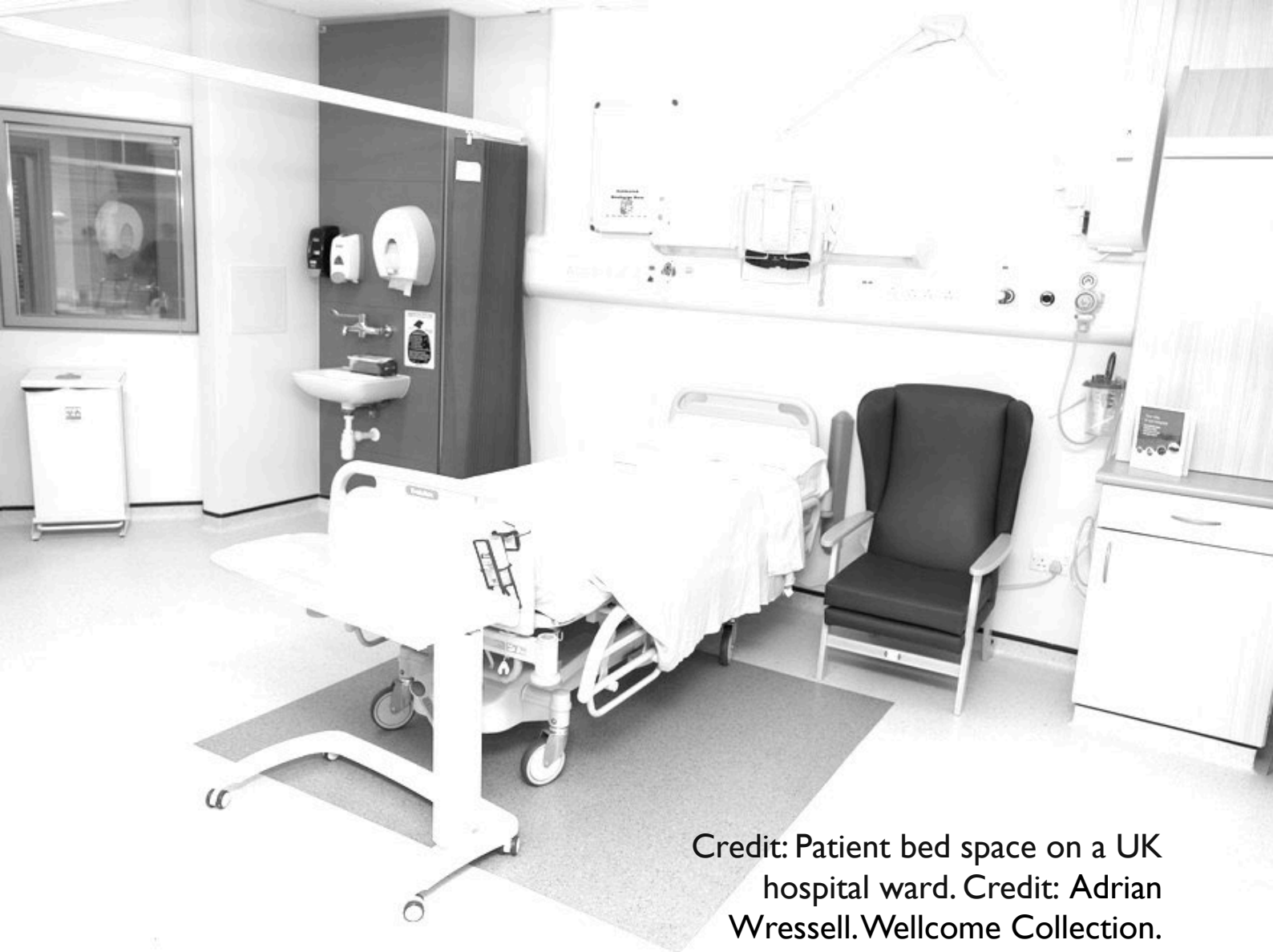
Do the women depicted seem like real people, or are they ciphers? Do they function as models of how we expect patients to behave? Are they there to illustrate a certain point or narrative?

An anatomist meditates on the corpse of a beautiful young woman, laid out on a table next to his desk. Lithograph by F. Hanfstaengl after G. C. von Max, 1869. Wellcome Collection



‘In the examining room, the person with illness becomes the white space in the picture, the absence which allows the illness to be seen.’

Laura E. Tanner, *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death* (2006)



Credit: Patient bed space on a UK hospital ward. Credit: Adrian Wressell. Wellcome Collection.

Can you respond to these images in a way that treats the patient as subject, rather than as an object?

Imagine seeing through the patient's eyes:

What does the room look like?

What objects are in the room?

What colours does the patient see?

## **Sylvia Plath, 'Tulips' (1960)**

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.

Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.

I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly

As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.

I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.

I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses

And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.



Jo Spence lying in a hospice bed at the Marie Curie Hospice, Hampstead, holding a camera trigger. Described in *Cultural Sniping* (1995, page 227) as 'Jo Spence on a 'good day' shortly before her death, photographing visitors to her room'. 1992. Wellcome Collection Library no. 306950|i.

You can base your writing upon your own experiences of visiting your GP or dentist for routine examinations etc – it need not be an account of severe or debilitating illness.

If you feel uncomfortable writing from the perspective of the patient, try writing from the perspective of the doctor/nurse, or of an onlooker/family member/friend.

The response could be a snapshot, or a series of fragments. It doesn't have to be very sophisticated or polished.



These micro guides are based on workshops designed and delivered for the Thinking Through Things project.

We are asking how thinking and feeling ‘through things’ can generate new understandings of health and wellbeing.

What other things will you think through?

Designed by Bentley  
Crudgington. Image use  
under Attribution 4.0  
International (CC BY 4.0)

If  
these  
patients  
are ghosts; can  
creative writing help  
them haunt those who  
excluded them?

Corpse of a beautiful young  
woman, “released” from a  
lithograph by F. Hanfstaengl after  
G. C. von Max, 1869. Wellcome  
Collection

