

Restoration

Violet flung back the shutters and let in the cold February sun. It was just past noon and the snow outside sent blues and pale purples to bounce off the studio walls and floor. She removed her hat and gloves and cursed the light. It would add yet another obstruction to a task already complicated by short hours and the inconsistency of the paint at low temperature, not to mention the odd tremble brought on by sudden chill.

Her subject was impervious to any cold, of course; flushed with pink and as relaxed in her nakedness as she had been for over 300 years. Violet flinched slightly as she met the eyes in the painted mirror. It was a mismatched matronly face, curiously at odds with the incredible body. "Heal me" said the eyes.

This morning Violet would start on the worst of the slashes that had ripped through canvas and the shimmer of Velasquez' painted flesh. For it was flesh - an artistic transubstantiation which couldn't be denied, not in this room where Violet strove with her brush to match the blaze of colour on shoulder blade and buttock.

The Times and its readers had made no bones about it at the time and had been suitably outraged in letter and commentary. The Rokeby Venus was the living victim and Mary Richardson an unnatural woman, a monster, less than human.

The cuts the suffragette had inflicted were real tears in skin and muscle. One reader had called them “injuries” as if blood had spurted from the frame, spattered Mary’s skirt and dripped onto the polished parquet floor. “A cruel wound” on the neck was generally deplored, as was the “ragged bruise” of the seventh and last cut.

Seven cuts. It had been a wonder at the time how Richardson, for she had quickly ceased to be Mary, had managed to do so much damage before her arrest. The bulky meat cleaver had been smuggled past the gallery guards without mishap. Even the special detectives, employed after rumours circulated of an imminent attack, had held back. Alone on her first day Violet had raised her own arms in mimicry of the act. The seven downward strokes had taken an eternity.

Violet touched their results now, slowly and delicately, with lead white and carmine. She had prepared her palette scrupulously in the way of the Old Masters, matching tone for tone and was applying the paint with a fine sable brush. The studio filled with the smell of linseed which fought the fug from the paraffin stove. It smelt like Arthur’s cricket bat and she thought of him striding to wicket in the late summer light, the faintest green smear of grass running from knee to thigh.

Arthur had encouraged her studies at the Slade, although she had never discussed the life classes or her tutor Henry Tonks and she was careful to only

show him sketches of plants and inanimate objects. If Arthur had been surprised that she hadn't looked away when he removed his clothes for the first time, he hadn't shown it. She had found him as reassuringly inexperienced as herself and had seen her beauty reflected in eyes that held the whole wide sky. When she ran her hands across his back the touch of his skin under her fingers had been a new way of capturing a likeness.

Violet hadn't produced any of her own paintings since the current restoration had become more demanding. She always worked in natural light, which had slowed progress over the winter months but she was determined not to rush. What she did here and now might have to last a century. But then, in truth, there was very little pressure on her. The younger curators who might have been more impatient had gone. The old men remaining had no appetite for speed and spent their days dozing or reminiscing over youthful Pre-Raphaelite rebellion. There were only old men now it seemed; the old men who had been left behind and the prematurely old men who had returned. Someone of middle years seemed out of place.

Violet supposed that Tonks would be considered middle-aged by most, although he had always appeared ageless when she was being taught by him; not only ageless but a giant - a terrifying giant who ate his young. He had intimidated all his students with his clipped impatience and his genius of line. Some, like Kit Nevinson, left early in an ill-disguised huff. Others, like Nash and Spencer, crawled on towards their goal, inch by inch, under the barrage of his disdain.

“What a devil!” she had thought during that first term; what an angel he had become.

She read the casualty lists obsessively these days, noted when one or other of her friends were wounded, went missing, were presumed not to be coming back. It was hard to believe that so few months separated them all from those heady times when she had drunk Russian coffee and harsh red wine. She had watched, intrigued, as the more adventurous girls unfurled from their suburban buds, sheared their hair and dressed in trousers. Through some alchemy that was never fully explained to her, they had become more beautiful and sexually attractive in the process. Violet had chosen to keep her hair long, less for conformity and more to have something for Arthur to unbind and spread when he kissed the nape of her neck. She had always been the careful one. She pursed her lips in concentration. Care was what would be needed now.

It was Tonks who had first urged her to undertake this work; Tonks who had convinced the gallery director that she had sufficient talent and will. She had laughed bitterly at the suggestion when it was first mooted, seeing it as the latest manoeuvre in a campaign of cruelty. She had been wrong. Each day the painting showed its scars was a day that she felt less impotent. If she leant her cheek against the cloth she could see her minute canvas repairs beneath the brushwork but from a few inches away the painting’s beauty was unblemished. In a year’s

time Venus would be able to turn her back and face her public without a blush.

At three o'clock Violet cleaned her palette and brushes, turned down the stove and threw a protective blanket over the canvas. The room was locked with a key that she left with the director's secretary and double locked by the guard who covered the floor.

Later, taking the train down to Sidcup, Violet wondered if she would be seeing Tonks that evening. Their meetings had become more irregular as his work had increased. Sometimes she only glimpsed him across the ward as he sat quietly before a new patient. He painted tenderly and with compassion and the movements of his hands were those of the surgeon that he had trained to be. He painted them all: the ones with missing eyes, chins and cheeks; the young men with holes between eyebrow and lip or elephant trunk pedicles stretching to chest grafts; the one poor man whose entire jaw and throat disappeared from the side. Tonks painted them all with the same unflinching attention to detail and somehow the men grew more whole under his regard. He had painted Arthur with the same care.

When she arrived that night she found that the baths had been delayed by some disruption caused by the latest intake. The young nurse was struggling as usual, cheerful as ever:

“Oh Mrs Dodds, we are so very, very behind. And it's not our fault at all, is it

dear? Now let's get you covered and respectable. Is it still snowing outside?"

The sheet was raised quickly but not before Violet had caught sight of the seven wounds, the strips and squares of skin harvested from Arthur's shoulders and which she would meet stretched across the bone when he turned to receive her. Then she would be struggling as usual, cheerful as ever, looking straight into a mismatched face in a place without mirrors. She would need to look without flinching into eyes that held the whole wide sky and said "Heal me".