

Dear Celia,

Lately, I've been learning lines from *Prufrock*.¹ One stanza of T. S. Eliot's epic poem had been playing in my head, so I thought I might as well commit it to heart, to reckon with the scene somehow. Our anxious hero, J. Alfred, is caught in the perfect conditional, wondering whether it would 'have been worth it, after all,' to explain something monumental to his heroine, 'to have squeezed the universe into a ball', only to risk the possibility of being met by an emotional void: 'if one, settling a pillow by her head, | Should say: "That is not what I meant at all."' ²

As if that quiet devastation were insufficient or unclear, here comes the second blow: "That is not it, at all" ³. Something in that echo, its thunderous finality, makes me wonder how we manage to survive the weather of intimate relations. How can we bear to keep on sending ourselves into the fray? That same feeling comes knocking when I look at your self-portrait *Overwhelmed by Beauty*. Of course there are the soft eyes, leaking tears, but look too (I coax myself) at the gently open mouth, the hair tucked girlishly behind your shoulders, and the disarming gesture of one hand soft on your left breast; a greeting but also, perhaps, a pledge of honesty, integrity.

Now it's raining hard in New York and your voice is distant on the phone. I'm looking at a photograph of *Peony Shedding its Petals*, and thinking of how those jade green leaves remind me of your sloping shoulders, especially with the promising upturn of her goblet head. The last time we were together was in April at your studio on Great Russell Street, the spring light weak through the windows, just days before you left for Venice for a six-week residency. What a tender, liminal moment that was. You had never been abroad for so long in all your life and our conversation was thick with anticipation, the eagerness but also the uneasiness of what it is to venture into the fray.

We were not alone that day because some inner wisdom, let's call her 'Purusha', had urged me to invite a fellow artist, Elisa de Grey.⁴ Her work is also rooted in the mossy origins of self, of what it is to inhabit a body gendered female, and last summer she had lain out on a lawn with me, swaddled in your *Letters to Gwen John*, so I knew she'd be a (com)passionate respondent.⁵ She arrived with her Pre-Raphaelite hair flowing, a bicycle helmet braceleting one wrist, as she reached into a rucksack to produce two tiny cuttings: *Streptocarpus*.

Something in that triangle – three women, three decades of life – allowed us to delve deeply into the paintings leaning against the walls of the studio, as we steeped in the turpentine air. We spoke of exposure and envy, of death and desire, of how and when Eros might alight on a canvas. We spoke of the pandemic, the seizure of reality as it had been known to us, and what it is to *feel time marble*. Afterwards, Elisa and I dashed to the LRB Bookshop on Bury Street and greedily demanded that they find us *ribbon* so we could wrap a copy up for you of Denise Riley's *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* – that ultimate guide to the unravelling of our socialised selves amid grief.⁶

And while you were immersed in that watery city, we would sometimes imagine we could look down on you from the sky, as you made your way amid the canals, ‘tremendously early’, using the map Chiara from the gallery had drawn for you, so that you could confidently navigate the 20-minute walk from the apartment to the studio and back again.⁷ While you were there you painted her, as well as Pia and Simona; these young women who tended to you during this period of living otherwise, ensuring you had your diet of bare essentials: Proust, James, Tintoretto, Giorgione. I sense an immense calm in the arresting blue of Pia’s eyes, echoed in that primrose glow around her dark hair. She seems wonderfully untroubled, her brow soft, this kind custodian of yours.

You tell me on the phone that you made 23 paintings in total in Venice, which is quite something; eight of them will hang together in this show, alongside two of young women you met soon after your return. The title was suggested by Hilton Als, also writing from New York, and strikes me as just perfect. *Myself, Among Others*: a body of work that is intimate, humanist, relational. These are paintings that grow from the soil of your immediate self, but also stem from your many shadow selves that appear sometimes unbidden. They relate to the conundrum by which we can only ever really know ourselves through how we are known to others. There is no home here for self-composure or erasure; what Eliot dryly called the ‘face to meet the faces that you meet’.⁸

Somewhere in Walthamstow my cutting is on the windowsill. You are back on Great Russell Street, subtly altered by that chapter of heightened solitude amid the water and the light when everything felt ‘fresh and new as though [you] had just been born’.⁹ Elisa is in Italy and I call her to think back to that afternoon and the paintings that have arrived since our encounter. She sends me a photograph from her Nan Shepherd book (her fingers grazing the bottom of the page) which captures so well your spirit in the studio, London or Venice, wherever you take root: ‘walking thus, hour after hour, the senses keyed, one walks the flesh transparent’.¹⁰ And I think, poor Prufrock, this is why we send ourselves into the fray, to walk the flesh transparent.

Eleanor Nairne
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1 T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, 1915, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock>

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 In the Upanishads, a set of ancient Indian philosophical texts, ‘Purusha’ describes an abstract essence of self, without form and separate from the material world.

5 Celia Paul, *Letters to Gwen John* (London: Jonathan Cape; New York: New York Review Books, 2022)

6 Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (London: Picador, 2019)

7 Telephone conversation with the author, 25 September 2023

8 Eliot, *Prufrock*

9 Telephone conversation with the author, 25 September 2023

10 Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2019), p.106