



**PAT  
BARKER**

'Triumphant, shattering, inspiring' *THE TIMES*

**LIFE  
CLASS**

Life Class  
by  
Pat Barker

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# One

They'd been drawing for over half an hour. There was no sound except for the slurring of pencils on Michelet paper or the barely perceptible squeak of charcoal. At the centre of the circle of students, close to the dais, a stove cast a barred red light on to the floor. The smell of burning coke mingled with other smells: sweat, hot cloth, cigar and tobacco smoke. Now and again you could hear the soft pop of lips inhaling and another plume of blue smoke would rise to join the pall that hung over the whole room.

Nobody spoke. You were not allowed to talk in the life class. In the Antiques Room, where they spent the mornings copying from casts of Classical and Renaissance sculpture, talking was permitted, and the students – a few of the women, in particular – chattered non-stop. Here, apart from the naked woman on the dais, the atmosphere was not unlike a men's club. The women students had their own separate life class somewhere on the lower floor. Even the Slade, scandalously modern in most respects, segregated the sexes when the naked human body was on display.

Paul Tarrant, sitting on the back row, as far away from the stove as he could get, coughed discreetly into his handkerchief. He was still struggling to throw off the bronchitis that had plagued him all winter and the fumes irritated his lungs. He'd finished his drawing, or at least he'd reached the point where he knew that further work would only make matters worse. He leaned back and contemplated the page. Not one of his better efforts.

He knew, without turning to look, that Professor Tonks had entered the room. It was always like this with Tonks, the quiet entry. He seemed to insinuate himself into the room. You knew he'd arrived only when you saw the students sitting opposite straighten their shoulders or bend more anxiously over their

drawings. Tonks was a dark planet whose presence could be deduced only by a deviation in the orbit of other bodies.

Paul risked a sidelong glance. Tonks, bent at the shoulders like a butcher's hook, was scrutinizing a student's drawing. He said something, too low to be heard. The student mumbled a reply and Tonks moved on. Another student, then another. He was working his way along the back row, passing quickly from drawing to drawing. Sugden brought him to a halt. Sugden was hopeless, among the worst in the class. Tonks always spent more time on the weaker students, which indicated a kindly disposition, perhaps, or would have done had he not left so many of them in tatters.

So far his progress had been quiet, but now suddenly he raised his voice.

'For God's sake, man, look at that arm. It's got no more bones in it than a sausage. Your pencil's blunt, your easel's wobbly, you're working in your own light and you seem to have no grasp of human anatomy at all. What is the point?'

Many of Tonks's strictures related to the students' ignorance of anatomy. 'Is it a blancmange?' had been one of his comments on Paul's early efforts. Tonks had trained as a surgeon and taught anatomy to medical students before Professor Browne invited him to join the staff at the Slade. His eye, honed in the dissecting room and the theatre, detected every failure to convey what lay beneath the skin. 'Look for the line,' he would say again and again. 'Drawing is an explication of the form.' It was one of the catchphrases Slade students sometimes chanted to each other. Along with: 'I thy God am a jealous God. Thou shalt have none other Tonks but me.'

There was no getting round Tonks's opinion of your work. Tonks *was* the Slade.

Paul looked at his drawing. If he'd been dissatisfied before he was dismayed now. As Tonks drew closer, his drawing became mysteriously weaker. Not only had he failed to 'explicate the form', but he'd also tried to cover up the failure with all the techniques he'd learned before coming to the Slade: shading, cross-hatching, variations in tone, even, now and then, a little discreet smudging of the line. In the process, he'd produced the kind of drawing

that at school – and even, later, in night classes – had evoked oohs and ahs of admiration. Once, not so long ago, he'd have been pleased with this work; now, he saw its deficiencies only too clearly. Not only was the drawing bad, it was bad in exactly the way Tonks most despised. More than just a failure, it was a dishonest failure.

He took a deep breath. A second later Tonks's shadow fell across the page, though he immediately moved a little to one side so that the full awfulness could be revealed. A long pause. Then he said, conversationally, as if he were really interested in the answer, 'Is that really the best you can do?'

'Yes.'

'Then why do it?'

Why indeed? Paul made no reply and after a moment Tonks moved on. At last, from somewhere, a rush of anger. 'If I knew how to draw I wouldn't need to be here at all, would I?'

He'd shouted, though he hadn't meant to. All around people were turning to stare at him. Without giving Tonks a chance to reply, he threw down his pencil and walked out.

The corridor, empty between classes, stretched ahead of him. Its walls seemed to throb with his anger. The heat of it kept him going all the way to the main entrance and out into the quad. There he stopped and looked around him. What was he doing, storming out like that in the middle of a session? It was asking for trouble. And yet he knew he couldn't go back. Students were sitting in small circles on the grass, laughing and talking, but they were mainly medical students enjoying a break between lectures and there was nobody he knew. He threaded his way between the groups and out through the iron gates into Gower Street. At first he started to walk towards Russell Square, the nearest green space, but that wasn't far enough. He needed to get right away, to think about his future in unfamiliar surroundings, because although, in one sense, his spat with Tonks had been relatively trivial, he felt that it marked a crisis in his career.

If you could call it a career.

★

He'd been walking round and round the lake for over an hour. His shadow, hardly visible when he first entered the park, now trotted at his heels like a stunted child. Round and round the problem went: no talent, wasting my time, better leave now and get a job. Or would it be more sensible to wait till the end of the year? He'd always intended to spend two years at the Slade and it seemed a bit feeble to leave before the first year was over, but then what was the point of continuing when his work not only failed to improve, but actually seemed to deteriorate from week to week? It wasn't as if he had unlimited money. He had a legacy from his grandmother, a slum landlord of quite astonishing rapacity who, by skimping on repairs and bringing up her large family on bread and scrape, had salted away a great deal of money in the box under her bed. What would her advice have been?

*– Have nowt to do with nancy-boy stuff like art, there's no money in that, and if you've got tangled up in it, lad, get out as fast as you can.*

She'd been horrified when he went to work as an orderly in a hospital; real men earned their living by their own sweat and blood.

This was getting him nowhere. He found a bench and sat down, feeling the heat heavy on his shoulder blades. Craning his neck, he looked up at the tops of the trees, dark against the pulsing sun. Everything was flooded in lemony light. After a while he straightened up and looked about him, and it was then that he became aware of the girl on the other side of the lake.

A young girl, still with the childish blondeness that rarely survives into adult life, was wandering along the waterside. She was about fifteen, dressed in the shabby, respectable clothes of a maid, her only ornament a bunch of purple velvet violets pinned to the crown of her black straw hat. Sent into service, he guessed, away from her own overcrowded home. Girls that age are not easily accommodated in two-bedroomed houses, parents needing privacy, adolescent brothers curious, younger children sleeping four to a bed. This would be her afternoon off.

He tracked her with his eyes. A few paces further on she stopped, standing at the water's edge looking down into the depths. Thinking they were going to be fed, swans, geese and ducks set off towards

her from all parts of the lake, so that the slim, grey figure quickly became the focal point of thirty or more converging lines. There was something odd about her and at first he couldn't think what it was, but then he noticed that the buttons on her blouse had been done up in the wrong sequence. There was a glimpse of what might have been bare flesh between the edge of her blouse and her skirt. He kept expecting her to pull her shawl more closely round her or turn away and put herself to rights. But she did neither. Instead she stumbled a few feet further along, then stopped again, the shadows of rippling water playing over her face and neck.

She was swaying on her feet. At first he thought nothing of it, but then it happened again, and again. It came to him in a flash. Incredibly, this fresh-faced, innocent-looking girl was drunk. He looked up and down the path to see if she was alone and there, about twenty yards behind, stood a portly, middle-aged man watching her. *Ah*, authority. Probably the man was her employer – he was too well-dressed to be her father – but then, if he had a legitimate reason to be interested in her, why did he not approach and take control of the situation? Instead of strolling along at that loitering, predatory pace, his eyes fixed on her back. No, he was nothing to do with her – unless of course he was the man responsible for her condition. That, or he'd noticed the state she was in and recognized easy pickings when he saw them.

Bastard. All Paul's long frustration in the life class – a frustration which could never be vented on Professor Tonks because he respected the man too much – boiled over into hatred of this man with his florid cheeks and his expensive suit and his silver-topped cane. He jumped up and began striding along the path, meaning to cut them off before they reached the gate.

The sun, past its height, had begun to throw long bluish shadows across the grass. Paul's heels rang out on the pavement as he half-walked, half-ran round the head of the lake. He felt vigorous, clear. All the disappointments and complexities of the past few months had dropped away. He drew level with the girl, who had once more paused and was gazing out over the lake. A few yards away from her the geese were beginning to come ashore. Big, webbed yellow

feet made puddles of wet on the dusty path as they lurched towards her, open beaks hissing. Startled, she took off her shawl and flapped it at them until at last, honking and hissing, they flopped, one by one, into the water again.

Now that Paul was closer he could see that her hair had slipped loose from the pins at the nape of her neck and straggled down her back. The blouse was badly torn, it must have been ripped off her back. Looking down, he saw that only one foot had a stocking on; the other was thrust bare into a down-at-heel shoe. He looked at the slim, naked ankle, and felt a tweak of lust that hardly broke the surface of his consciousness before it was transmuted into anger. Who had done this to her? She was such a child. He was afraid to startle her by speaking to her and, anyway, she might well misconstrue his intentions.

The middle-aged man had stopped a few yards away and was gazing at him with obvious resentment. Paul turned to stare at him. Medium height, heavily built, bulky about the shoulders and chest, but a lot of that was flab. His trouser buttons strained to accommodate his postprandial belly. His eyes kept sliding away from Paul to the girl and back again. At last he stepped to one side, ostentatiously allowing Paul plenty of room to pass. Paul held his ground.

Meanwhile, the girl tried to move on, but staggered and almost fell. She seemed disorientated now and after standing for a moment simply flopped down on the path. With a glance at Paul the man moved towards her. Paul stepped forward to cut him off.

‘What do you want?’ the man said.

A Yorkshire accent? ‘Are you responsible for this?’

‘What?’

‘This.’

‘I never saw her before in my life.’ Greyish-green eyes, the colour of infected phlegm. ‘I was going to put her in a cab and send her back to her family.’

‘Course you were.’

‘Do you have a better idea?’

‘We could take her to the police station.’

‘Oh, I doubt if she’d thank you for that.’

‘Let’s ask her, shall we?’

The man leaned forward in a fug of port-wine breath. ‘Look, piss off, will you? I saw her first.’

‘I’m not going anywhere.’

‘It’s not your business.’ A hiss the geese would have been proud of. ‘For God’s sake, look at her. Don’t you think you’re closing the stable door after the horse’s bolted?’

‘And a slice off a cut cake won’t be missed. What a fund of homely northern wisdom you are.’

Gooseberry-green eyes swelled to bursting. A purpling of pendulous cheeks, then Paul caught a flash of silver from the upraised cane. He raised his arm to break the blow and pain jolted from his forearm into his shoulder. Now he had his excuse, his legitimate reason. He twisted the cane out of the other’s hand and brought it crashing down on to his shoulders, once, twice, three times and then he lost count. There was no reason ever to stop, he’d never felt such joy, strength seemed to flow into him from the sky. But a minute later, as the man turned away, presenting only his bowed shoulders to the blows, Paul started to recover himself. In a final burst of exhilaration, he sent the cane whirling in a broad arc over the lake, its silver knob flashing in the sun.

‘Fetch!’ he shouted, feeling his spit fly. ‘Go on, boy, fetch!’

The cane plopped and sank. Concentric rings of ripples, laced with foam, spread out over the surface of the water. Its owner turned to face Paul, goosegog eyes red-veined with rage. ‘Do you know how much that cost?’

‘More than the girl, I’ll bet.’

The man’s neck seemed to swell over the rim of his starched collar. He’s going to have a stroke, Paul thought with interest, but the moment passed. At that point the girl, whom they’d both forgotten, staggered off again, stumbling from side to side of the path. Paul followed her, glancing over his shoulder to make sure he wasn’t being accompanied. No, the man merely stood and stared. Paul turned and went on walking. A second later, a blow between his shoulder blades sent him sprawling headlong. He was up and on his feet again in a second, fists raised, but the other man backed

off, collected his bowler hat from the ground where it had fallen and, with several looks behind him to make sure he wasn't being followed, walked away. At first it was a brisk trot rather than a walk, but when Paul showed no sign of wanting to pursue him, his step became more nonchalant. A hundred yards further on, he might have been any prosperous businessman out for an afternoon stroll.

Paul was still shaking, as much with glee as anything else. Again and again he relived that moment when the cane had wheeled through the air and disappeared into the waters of the lake. The return of Excalibur. Except that made him Sir Bedivere and beer-gut back there King Arthur.

By now, the damsel in distress was several hundred yards away, walking quickly in the direction of Lancaster Gate. He hurried to catch up, aware of a curious doubling, for now he was doing exactly what beer-gut had been doing a few minutes before. With different motives, he reminded himself sharply. Nevertheless there was something disturbing about it and, half consciously, he slackened his pace. No, but this was stupid, he had to see it through. He'd call a cab, select the most respectable-looking driver he could find and pay for the girl to be transported back to her own people. If she'd go. Suddenly the simple plan bristled with problems. She wouldn't be keen for her parents or her employer to see her in this state. And could he trust the driver not to take the money and tip her out of the cab as soon as they turned the corner? He'd have to go with her, that's all, but then, would she get into a cab with a strange man? He'd face that problem later.

Decided now, he quickened his pace, but just then a group of nursemaids pushing perambulators came bowling along towards him, taking up the full width of the path. By the time he'd made up the lost ground the girl had turned through the gate. Panting as he reached the spot, he looked up and down the road, but the pavements were crowded and, among the hundreds of hurrying people, her unsteady gait was no longer so conspicuous. And then he saw her, far away now, on the other side of the road, but there was no pause in the traffic to let him cross. He stood on tiptoe, seeing the black straw hat with its little bunch of cloth violets

bobbing along, until eventually it was lost to sight in the milling crowds.

He'd left all his things at the Slade so he had to go back there. Jumping on a bus, he found a seat on the top deck and gazed out over the heads of the crowds. For the first few minutes he kept on searching for the girl, though he knew he wouldn't see her.

The exhilaration had gone now. He was back with his own problems. Should he admit defeat and leave the Slade? Was he wasting Nan's legacy?

– *'Course you bloody are. Art! It's not for people like us, such as that.*

What 'people like us' did – or, more frequently, didn't do – had been a favourite topic of hers, the pincers used to nip off any green shoot of hope and ambition one or other of her children might have been cherishing. They'd learned not to, fast enough. She hadn't applied it to herself though, at least not towards the end of her long life. At eighty, she'd bought herself a motor car. The only motor car previously seen in their streets belonged to the local doctor. Every Friday afternoon and all day Saturday she'd been driven round to collect her rents, sitting up on the back seat, ramrod straight (though she was a martyr to her back), dismounting now and then to bang on the doors of one ramshackle house after another, wresting coppers from reluctant hands. She must have been the most hated woman in the city.

– *Aye, mebbe. But it put the clothes on your back, didn't it? And paid for you to go to that posh school.*

He got off near Russell Square and walked the rest of the way. Students were streaming away from the Slade as he approached, but he kept his head down, not wanting to speak to anybody. He hadn't reached a decision, though if anything all that pacing round the park had strengthened his feeling that he ought to leave as soon as possible.

The Antiques Room did nothing to change his mind. Plaster casts of Classical and Renaissance sculpture stood in a line along one wall.

– *Cartload of fellers showing their whatsits.*

He'd spent whole mornings copying them, whole days when he first started, except for an hour at the end of the afternoon session when they were allowed to troop down the corridor to join the life class. On benches at the far end were smaller pieces: decapitated heads, limbless torsos, amputated arms and legs. Like an abattoir without the blood.

Had all his time in this room been wasted?

No time to be asking that question now. He picked up his bag and was about to leave when he heard a noise and turned to find Elinor Brooke standing by the open door.

'I thought I heard somebody,' she said.

She came towards him until she was close enough to touch. A stir of desire, almost indistinguishable from irritation. He wasn't in the mood for 'the treatment' – by which he meant the air of intimacy Elinor created between herself and any man she spoke to, though to be fair it wasn't only men, he'd seen her adopt exactly the same approach to women. No, he wasn't in the mood for Miss Brooke, but then she raised her gigantic blue eyes to his . . . 'Gig lamps,' his father used to say. 'Eyes like gig lamps.' It had been one of the magic phrases of his childhood.

'Are you all right?' she asked.

'Why shouldn't I be?'

'Only I heard you'd walked out of the life class.'

He wondered which of the men had told her. 'I needed a bit of fresh air.'

'Was it something Tonks said?'

'You know Tonks. He more or less said I was wasting my time.'

'Ouch.'

'Ye-es, *ouch*. Anyway, after that I thought I'd better go away and do some thinking. I couldn't just go on drawing.'

'Where did you go?'

'Hyde Park.' He smiled. 'I didn't exactly run away to sea, did I? Do you mind if I smoke?'

'No, go ahead. I might even join you.'

Her pupils shrank as the match flared between them. 'What are you going to do?'

No advice, he noticed. She often asked for advice from men, but never gave it. 'I don't know. I don't know if there's any point staying till the end of term. I mean, you could say, if I'm wasting my time the sooner I'm out of here the better.' A dragging pause. 'He likes your work.'

'Yes,' she said, simply. 'I know.'

They smoked in silence for a while. Then she said, 'Life drawing isn't the be-all and end-all, you know.'

'It is here.'

'So perhaps here isn't the right place?'

He shook his head. It had taken so much determination to cut loose from his background and come to the Slade that he could hardly grapple with the idea that he'd made the wrong choice.

'Anyway,' Elinor said, standing up. 'I'd better be getting on.' She turned towards the door, then looked back. 'A few of us are going to the Café Royal tonight. Would you like to come?'

He hesitated, but only for a second. What else was he going to do except sit in his lodgings and brood about his non-existent future? 'Yes, I'd like that. What time?'

'About eight.'

'Good. I'll see you there. Are you going home now?'

'Soon.'

He opened the door for her and watched her walk away down the corridor. With her cropped hair and straight shoulders she looked like a young soldier striding along, and for a moment he saw something in her, something of the person she might be when she was alone, not adapting in that sinuous way of hers to other people, not turning herself into a mirror to magnify whatever qualities he – it was generally he – fancied himself to possess. He'd have liked to know her, that secret person, but the mirror was also a shield and she'd be in no hurry to put it down.