

## **LAURA ROBINSON**

### **Protesting the Free Trade Area**

The second I walked into life-drawing class on that Wednesday night in January I noticed him because he started when he saw me, as if he recognised me. After a beat, I realised that I had never seen him before, so I pretended that I didn't feel his eyes on me. I was already nervous, entering this night class with fifteen or so strangers. I was in the third year of my Ph.D in history and needed something outside of university to keep me connected. I love art, so, like the stereotype of the bored housewife with extra cash, I signed up for an art class. Drawing in front of others terrifies me, but I thought it might help change my life.

Stan was an anomaly in that class, an unlikely hero. Among the black-clad, baggy-panted artists-in-training, Stan's crew-cut and muscular cleanliness singled him out. He looked like those men who entered bars in a pack from some military base, throbbing for action, sexual or otherwise. The types you stay away from. It would be joked about a man like Stan that he would take life drawing in order to gawk at nude women.

He wasn't military, though. We became improbable friends, and I'm not sure exactly how. It might have been the class I sat behind his easel, feeling uninspired and disconsolate. The young man who bared himself before us made me want to laugh. Unlike the female nudes, or perhaps simply the more experienced ones, this young man couldn't stay still. His fidgeting wasn't about being uncomfortable, physically or emotionally; rather, he seemed to be jerking his head so his eyes could roam his own muscular frame. I couldn't draw that. He was beautiful, granted, but he was already his own object.

Stan was not having a problem drawing the self-adoring young man, although he picked up on the same vibe. He perched in front of me in his well-ironed jeans and golf shirt, V-neck sweater over top, aggressively sweeping bold, firm lines. I shifted my chair so I could glimpse the picture, imagining it would be wrong somehow: lacking perspective, overly stylized, derivative. I didn't credit Stan, then, with much talent or intelligence. He seemed to smile too much, seemed too athletic, was too well-groomed to be a serious, talented, good artist. As if the first rule of being an artist is that you have to fail at your own self-construction.

The teacher, Peggy, impressed upon us that this was life *drawing*, not life *interpretation*. We were to capture reality as it really existed. As an historian, I wanted to challenge her. "Reality only exists in our interpretation," I wanted to shout but didn't. Peggy wanted us to "get it right" and would grab the charcoal to demonstrate: "Long firm lines, not little feathers."

“Confidence, Stacy, confidence,” Peggy placed her hand over mine, dragging both in a long dark line across the paper. I could see Stan watching my expression then, which I made consciously blank in response.

Those long dark lines terrified me; what if I made a mistake?

In his representation of the nude, Stan was deliberately naughty. Peggy would chastise him. In Stan’s sketch, the young man was half-reclined with a cloth draped over the middle, arm over the knee, just as Peggy set him up. Such a typical pose, I had mentally rolled my eyes. But Stan depicted the man as staring down at his own body instead of looking out over our heads, as Peggy directed. In the model’s hand, moreover, was a large quill, which didn’t exist in reality, of course, and the man was drawing his own leg into existence. It was quite remarkable, if derivative of Escher.

“Well, Stacy, how are you doing?” Peggy interrupted me with her earnest expectations and clinking costume jewelry. I hadn’t been doing so well, actually. I had only the vaguest of outlines.

“I’m trying to get a feel for it,” I peeped. I could see Stan listening. If he were a cat, his ears would have funnelled backwards to catch my voice.

To my surprise, Peggy just touched me and moved along. Instead of proceeding to the person next to me, however, she walked straight ahead to Stan, not her usual path. Stan and I both stiffened. She stood behind him, and he struggled to keep drawing, hollowing out cheekbones, creating sinewy muscles. She just stood there, as if formulating her chastisement. The dangly earrings were still; the rustle of clothing settled. She ultimately had nothing to say.

“Interesting,” she remarked as she moved along, defeated. Stan and I laughed about it later, over the second pint of beer, after the other students left the pub on rue Sainte Catherine where we collected after class.

“Her shoulders just slumped,” I narrated the event from my perspective. “I could see how tense you were.”

“When I heard her rattling up behind me, I felt like a little kid who’s done something wrong. When she didn’t say anything, I didn’t know what to do.”

Laughing, we both reached for the ashtray. Stan didn’t normally smoke, but bummed cigarettes from me to accompany his beer. Our fingers touched. We both drew our hands away. I waited a beat then reached again for my cigarette; Stan waited until my hand was out of reach to pick up his. Silly, how powerful those moments are.

Peggy had been defeated, not that she should have been, but this was our moment, Stan’s and mine. We realised suddenly that our teacher was a mere person after all, too used to cowing students with minimal talent. Stan may not have looked it, but he had talent. That talent might have been a relief to Peggy, like a cool breeze, except it was matched by an intelligence that took it places she didn’t understand. She was unprepared.

It turned out that Stan was a police officer from the outskirts of Montreal. He was so polite, he couldn’t chase criminals, accost people. The general view of police officers was that they beat people up at any opportunity, for fun, the way normal people might play catch or ride a bike. They were seen as big, brutal, stupid, narcissistic. Stan was none of those things, although he was rather well-groomed.

For me, drawing class was an oasis, a world apart from my dry academic one. I never told my historian friends that I had this life on Wednesday nights. Academic

pursuits and artistic endeavours were separated, as if by a wall that only I could scale. I needed this divide, then, because I felt helpless in school. Art class offered immediate action and power which I was declined, for the time being, in my lonely research: scanning primary texts, wading through dusty archives, compiling little books of notes. I wanted escape from books and advisors and pompous grad students who always seemed more successful than myself. I didn't want the two worlds to meet because I needed some sneaky secret about myself that other grad students or professors could never access, something unconnected to history. As if anything could be unconnected to history. I can say now that I was probably a little depressed. Art helps.

It wasn't just me. The other art students, for the most part, did not discuss their ordinary lives. It was as if the class connected us on a level that rendered all other considerations meaningless. Daphne had a child, I knew, because she always had to leave the *apres* class beer early or skip it altogether. George seemed very gay, but who knew? Karen was either anorexic or had a drug problem, but how could anyone know for sure? We came together for a common cause, in shared vulnerability and embarrassment for several hours once a week. Our daily lives receded before Peggy's demanding cry, "long, firm strokes."

As the weeks passed, I became thirsty to know more about Stan's real life. Did he have a romantic partner? I became a sleuth, examining fingers for wedding rings, movements for affectations. He was a canvas upon which was painted the bland, the tight-lipped refusal to reveal eccentricity or the unusual, like those paintings they produce *en masse* and sell to suburbanites to hang over their inoffensive sofas. But his art begged for more, for feather boas and stilettos, for un-ironed shirts, for cigarettes at breakfast, to

be recognised as beyond the reach of the ordinary. For all the depravity and depth his art promised, I still couldn't imagine him hung-over.

So each Wednesday when the group erupted in chatter after class, I felt myself strain towards Stan. We all banged out of the school and, variously, arrived at the pub on rue Sainte Catherine. I always angled to sit near Stan. He seemed oblivious. As people made noises to leave after the first drink, I had always just ordered another drink; therefore, I had to stay. Stan always did the gracious thing and ordered another drink as well, just to keep me company, of course.

I never told him about my lonely despair, the eye-burning exhaustion of reading all day, my normal life. There was so much else to reveal and discover, as if we were children with magnifying glasses and sunhats and little plastic shovels. I was fascinated by him, by his bold art, by his apparent slight indifference to me. I think, because of his art, I wanted him to love me, or desire me at least, as if that desire would bestow a stamp of cleverness or talent on me, by proxy. I guess that's what it was. We talked in the abstract. Toasters, and laundry, and libraries, and guns, all the stuff of our individual daily lives, were rooted in another world altogether, one that we could happily ignore for the length of art class and two pints of beer.

I haven't seen Stan since the second last class. Sort of.

As a scholar of contemporary Canadian gender history, I was quite caught up in the approaching Summit of the Americas. I was a part of the anti-FTAA group on campus. We were organising buses to Quebec City, April 20-22, to attend the massive protest against the Free Trade Area of the Americas. We met every Thursday night to

plan our protest. I drank red wine and listened mostly, nodding earnestly at all the right moments.

Those in power had erected a fence. The fence was so wrong, yet I acknowledged—quietly and to myself only, for the FTAA protesters wouldn't approve of my belief here—that the Canadian government had a responsibility to ensure the protection of all the foreign dignitaries. The so-called “wall of shame” was wrong, yet it brought the various protesting groups together under one potent symbol. We are on the outside, the wrong side of the fence, barred from power. I was infused with passionate indignation, preparing my protest kit: water (for pepper spray eye rinses and for drinking), bandanas, vinegar (to soak the bandanas in for tear gas), a plastic bag of clothes (the bag to protect them from pepper spray), granola bars (we really do eat granola), Band-Aids, cigarettes, and tampons (you never know). The Wednesday before the protest I could hardly concentrate in night class.

Over the second pint, I wanted to talk about the protest. Instead, I rubbed my hands, damp from the beer glass, on the thighs of my faded jeans and looked into Stan's eyes. The bar was dark, and his pupils were dilated. The air was smoky, smelled musty. The table top was sticky in spots, had beer spilled on it. We were alone in our corner. A few regulars at the bar. A table of older men against the opposite wall. And us. I looked at him intently because I wanted to speak but could say nothing. We didn't have a language, now, to communicate the real.

But, in staring into his eyes, I was suddenly aware of his eyes staring back at me. It *was* like electricity, that jolt that fired through my whole body. Do you believe in that electricity? Do you believe that, if one person feels it, that the other one does as well?

We said goodbye outside the pub later than usual. I was a real “take back the night” feminist, so declined the always-offered drive home, purely by rote. If I’d been thinking at all, I could have prolonged our time together. I didn’t know it would be the last. We had one more class, after all. We shivered slightly on rue Sainte Catherine, people straggling past, oblivious to the seething, unspoken emotions between us, as palpable as snowflakes or fur. The streetlights haloed us. We both wanted something but refused to speak. It was like there was this huge gulf between us, really, for all the art and abstract talking. We would both leap into this gulf, if we only knew the other would as well, but neither of us trusted the other’s willingness to leap. Or maybe I’m making that up, because how do I know what Stan was thinking? He hesitated in a way I’d never seen before, as if he were going to say something. But it was gone in a flash, like a fish who kisses quickly the surface of the water and is gone and you’re not quite sure it was really there in the first place. I looked back as I walked away; I like to think he did too, but at a different time perhaps and I missed it.

The protest was, at first, so much fun, so moving to be a part of all these people coming together for a common purpose. On the Friday, the protest split into two separate marches: the peaceful group and the “aggressive” group. Our campus protesters opted to march peacefully. I’m not certain what happened, but in the riot of people, combat boots, banners, and noise makers, the smell of sweat, I found myself with the aggressive crowd. This faction believed that the fence meant business—quite literally—and they were not committed to a peaceful protest.

The war-playing fervour of the protest consumed me. I lost track of the FTAA’s effect on women in poor countries. I forgot about trade altogether when the first canister

of tear gas sailed through the air, streaming smoke like a party favour. Suddenly I wanted blood. I really did; I'm not joking. If you are under attack, something takes hold of you and takes over. Some instinct that lies dormant at garden parties and thesis defences, but that bursts forth, gratefully and spitefully, at a protest that turns violent.

My animalistic vigour was short-lived, however. A small group of us surged toward the fence. The riot police formed a long black line: Peggy would have been proud. I was grabbed by police and forced behind the lines. My head got cut which produced a lot of blood and scared me. I'm really embarrassed to admit this, but I started crying. Everything was just happening so fast. They cuffed me and laid me on my stomach. One officer was rummaging my knapsack. Crazy thoughts entered my mind: my mother at the kitchen table, mending clothes with the radio on. I couldn't see out of one eye for the blood, which I couldn't wipe away because I was lying on my stomach with my hands cuffed behind my back.

That's when it happened. That defining moment that stands out in your life, becomes your own personal history, and you don't know what to do with it.

My face against the concrete, I saw a group of men I'd been standing with rush the police. I like to think they were motivated by a chivalrous attempt to avenge my abduction. They hit one officer, and he landed pretty hard. His truncheon clattered out of his hand, the Plexiglas shield sprawled helplessly at his side, and his gas mask slipped. His mantle of power shed, the officer was just a mere person, as assailable and as individual as the rest of us. Strangely, I thought of Peggy's defeat that night in art class. As if to demonstrate even the cop's inevitable vulnerability, the protesters kicked him violently a few times before they were swarmed, taken out of my vision.

I gazed at the downed officer for a split second before his peers attended him. He reached a shaky hand up to adjust his mask. Before he set it aright, he moved it completely off his face. He looked directly into my eyes, as if he recognised me. I looked directly into his. Electricity.

It was him.

Our eyes only remained on each other's for a second before officers pulled Stan to his feet and he was required to return to action. In that second, however, I searched his face for meaning. Did he want to be doing this? Was he the enemy? Was I his enemy? My hands were cuffed, and a police officer's knee kept me down. My peers had kicked him in the stomach. What did Stan think of that? What did I? He recognised me, I know because I saw that flicker, but his face remained tough, impassive, as if he was making it consciously blank. Perhaps he wanted to save me but knew he would get into trouble. I quickly lost sight of him amongst all the uniforms and gas masks and shields, and I was yanked up and forced into a van with some rather smelly protesters.

I didn't go to the last art class. I was bruised and unsure what to make of the protest. Perhaps I didn't need night class any more because my being detained but never formally arrested, my being "beaten," resulted in articles in the student papers, even in a Montreal daily. I had become an unlikely rebel, joking to the reporters about how police took my tampons, a comment which only one student paper published. Suddenly, my life in the history department took on a different perspective; rather than shrinking to the back, I was pushed forward. People wanted to meet me. Some history students and professors invited me out for drinks the night of the last art class. I hesitated, but only for a moment. Art did not seem as important as this dazzling celebrity.

I haven't seen anyone from art class since. I've hoped to run into a classmate so I could find out who went to the last class, what they did afterwards, if anyone asked about me. Since I didn't go to the last class, I don't know if Stan did. In my mind, I like to think that he did, and that he missed me. But maybe he stayed away from art after that too.