

# Day 96

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Charlotte Hobson

Moreton Mill, January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

8 am In the chill blue light of a January morning, William Peers' workshop lies under a layer of white dust. On shelves and laid out on the floor are the sculptures created on days 1-95; around them tools, children's toys, a bicycle - all of it transformed by dust, whitened and stilled. In the depths two donkeys shift sleepily.

'I need a new block,' says Peers, taking a saw and slicing into a huge piece of marble that is lying in brambles by the workshop. Behind a tattered, gently listing barn, the sky is pinkish, drifted with grey-gold clouds. He fits wedges into the crack and taps them. 'You need to listen for the music... at first it's a high note and then - there,' he smiles, 'the note deepens when the marble splits.' He hefts the rough rectangle, greenish with mould and moss onto the stand and looks at it from all sides. 'Number 96.'

'Since about day 91 I have been exploring these female forms that rest on four points.' He is sketching, fast, with a pencil on a dust-coated board. Lines that displease him are wiped out swiftly with a thumb. 'I like this weighty thigh, here ...' The figure of a reclining woman, her arms casually folded above her head, her hips pushed up by voluptuous, curving legs. He draws directly onto the marble, frowning with concentration. Then, taking up a smaller diamond disc saw, he makes the first cut into the stone. The dust arcs out, caught in the beam of an Angle poise lamp.

'Every evening,' his wife Sophie told me the night before, 'he comes in from work as though he has aged a decade, grey, lined, drained of everything... and then, every morning he picks himself up and starts the next one. He's been working in the snow, -10 degrees, and the rain' (for the workshop is open to the elements - a three-sided shed, really, of corrugated iron), 'He starts before light, finishes after dark. It's rough, dirty work.'

The distance between this image of him, like one of Salgado's miners, setting to work on the filthy stone, and the exquisite marble forms on the shelf beside him, seems frankly insurmountable. This is the distance that must be covered today.

9.05 At the back of the workshop, the donkeys bray. 'They're reminding me I haven't fed them,' Peers says, breaking off. At one end the marble is still rough and greenish, but at the other, veins of pinky-grey have appeared and the curve of one leg. 'In fact,' he says, continuing the conversation from the night before, 'the physical side of the work is tough, but it becomes less dominant as you get more used to it. You adapt. Years ago, I did a walk from Lands End to John O'Groats ... At first it's so arduous, you are at the limits of your endurance. But after a while your body grows accustomed, the physical side drops away, and you are simply left with an idea.' Peers is drawn towards these great adventures. He has walked and slept in ditches across France and Corsica, and sailed to Spain with a friend in a tiny open boat, until they sank in the Bay of Biscay and swam ashore. But physical feats, in

themselves, do not interest him. 'Breaking up the rhythm of one's work is always helpful – the size, the material. The swiftness of the 100 Days has been so liberating.'

9.30 The sun breaks through the clouds, and the concrete outside the workshop glistens like leather. Sunlight warms the old barn, picks out the reddish- chestnut hens and their dapper black and white cockerel. Peers is working on the third side, frowning, barely shifting his glance from the small figure. He occupies an area perhaps two foot square, within which he is constantly moving, bending, stepping back and forth. Occasionally he hums, happy.

I crouch down among Numbers 1-95 and wipe away the dust. The pieces spring to life: here a torso, delicately twisted, and a graceful Cycladic form stretching up... here dancing limbs encircle each other, a couple hold hands and a strange, mythical creature, half woman, half scorpion, rises from a point.

'I conceived of the 100 Days as an exploration into the boundaries between the abstract and the figurative,' Peers explains. 'Although really, of course, there is no boundary. Everything is abstracted... At the beginning the ideas were more staccato, I followed different paths, turned back, tried others... Then I settled into the rhythm, produced longer series. At about Number 70, I began a long exploration that I think will carry on all the way to the end.'

The outpouring of creativity at my feet charts an extraordinary journey, a meditation into Peers's own profound responses to the figure, as well as to a huge range of influences, from Aztec carving to Picasso, Henry Moore and classical forms. Each day is a reaction and a development on the day before, resulting in a fluent, looping progression of design – the process of thought made tangible. 'Perhaps I will do some of these on a large scale,' he says, looking around. 'There's so much here.'

11.30 am A breeze gets up, rattling the corrugated iron. Peers is working on the fourth side of the figure. The small opening in her folded arms is problematic; an area of her back is not flowing. He takes up his hammer and chisel with the confident, swift movements of a master craftsman. When we go indoors for a bowl of soup at 12.30 he tells me how he started working in stone. 'I met a stone mason in Oxford, Michael Black, an eccentric, wonderful man. He used to drive down my street at five in the morning, beeping his horn, with the neighbours shouting 'Shut up!' out of the windows. I'd stumble out of bed and there he'd be, beckoning furiously at me. 'Come on!' I could never resist him ... I learnt more with him in six weeks than in three years at art college.' Years of carving by hand, on Black's suggestion, have left Peers with a profound, instinctive knowledge of his material and his tools.

1.15pm. The rough outlines of the piece are in place. He takes up a sander and works on, constantly smoothing her with his other hand. 'The aim is to try and avoid any dead areas,' he explains. 'Every form should flow smoothly into the next, giving the whole piece a unity, an integrity. These creases, here, punctuate the smooth lines. I love this crease across the stomach...'

People pop in and out, borrowing equipment to build a chicken run, delivering parcels, each of them leaving with a dusting of white marble. A photographer friend, Pooch, takes pictures, joking, 'I don't need to use black and white in here.' The car needs fixing, the hens must be fed, the children return from school. Beyond the workshop a long cob wall runs down to a grassy courtyard and the white farmhouse with its donkey-grey, low-slung roof, which Peers

has built and shaped himself, rounding off the plaster with sculptural curves, carving oak doors and windows, baking terracotta tiles for the kitchen floor. Beyond that, over a tussocky field pitted with hoof-prints, the Tamar snakes its way down the valley. It is only a stream here, hurrying and bubbling, slicing its own smooth curves out of the mud and the knotted underhanging willow roots. I have a sudden glimpse of life spiralling out, broader and wider, copying and re-copying itself, and at the centre - a small stone figure, serene and sensual, emerging into the world.

3 pm. Peers has put down his tools and moved onto the roughest grade of sandpaper. 'The annoying thing is, the rest of the body gets used to the work, but your fingers just keep wearing out.' The donkeys munch in the background. The light is fading already and the ray of the anglepoise picks out the scene in a faintly theatrical manner. 'Something Michael Black taught me: "When you think you're finished, spend another three hours on it." Good advice.'

4.15. The sky is lit up by a dull evening glow that hits the undersides of the clouds. A flock of starlings flies overhead with the sound of a rushing wind and the donkeys let out one long, mournful bray. A still, quiet winter's day drawing to a close. 'This time in the afternoon is really good. The problems start to reveal themselves,' murmurs Peers. He looks up and grins. 'I could just go on and on for ever...'

Already it seems inconceivable that this figure could ever not have existed. She lies back, holding one hand gracefully to her head, propping herself up with another. Suddenly, Peers makes a discovery: she will stand inverted, her legs stretching up to the sky – an athlete or a dancing girl, a goddess perhaps. She is dynamic, sprung, as though all the energy expended by Peers over the last long nine hours has soaked into her.

5.15 Peers takes up a pencil and writes '96' on her back, sets her carefully on the shelf next to 95, and stands back. Suddenly he looks exhausted. 'Yes,' he says quietly to himself, turning out the light. 'Number 97 tomorrow.'