

Marie Curie Resurrected

Sue Hubbard, poems, **Eileen Cooper** RA artwork: *Radium Dreams* – the Life of Marie Curie (The Women's Art Collection, 2023)

Radium Dreams is a magnetic beautifully produced book; and an interesting collaboration between a poet and artist. The faces and foreshortened bodies of Eileen Cooper's figures add to the strong presence of Marie Curie throughout this sequence. They have a still, sculptural quality and seem to look through the reader with a knowledge the reader doesn't possess. They are certainly wonderful accompaniments, rather than illustrations, to Sue Hubbard's sequence of poems on which I will concentrate here.

To read Hubbard's sequence of poems is far more mesmerising than any biography could be. It illuminates an extraordinary woman who in an age where women had minor subservient, domestic roles on the whole, pushed the boundaries of her gender to extend the very boundaries of science and became a double Nobel Prize winner. With the help of her older sister who became a doctor, and despite the physical poverty of her upbringing and the poverty in her bones of her Polish ancestry, she got herself enrolled in the Sorbonne and changed her birth name Manya to Marie in order to sound more French. Here was 'a place where women can bloom//like the chestnut candles on the boulevards'.

Hubbard wears her own knowledge of science lightly and it transfuses the poems. She describes Marie's task by using lyrical images for science and these persist throughout the sequence, showing the beauty and magic it was for Marie to work in a laboratory, which was 'home'. Far from being distracted by boring technical images, the reader feels the wonder felt by Marie with the carefully chosen descriptive details, similes and metaphors:

She must climb into her immense life,
her story, explore the magnetic,
the transformative in pumps

and rubber tubes, long glass bulbs
shimmering with electrons
like eels migrating from the wide Sargasso sea,

to find the blue-green glow
of phosphorescence,
a light more mysterious than the moon.

Although Marie Curie's life is transmitted by Hubbard via the third person, each poem – with its careful choice of images, objects, perspectives, memories – has the intimate feel of a first person narrative. Indeed, each poem is slim like Marie herself, and also resembles one of the 'long glass bulbs' Marie worked with, and which shimmered wondrously as her discoveries progressed. With her husband, Pierre, 'research is everything,/ their shared language of love'. The love of research and their love for one another is a single love as exemplified in the poem 'Pierre' about their meeting: when

... he lifts the notebook on
calculus and coordinates lying

beside the milk jug of daisies,
she knows she's come home.

Hubbard makes Marie come across as a fully rounded person by giving us glimpses into every aspect of her life such as her childhood in a Poland subjugated by Russia where, at school in her 'serge tunic' with its 'steel buttons', 'her true self lies hidden/like a tiny wooden doll/inside a painted Russian Babushka' with her lineage: 'those hidden rivers/ of Polish blood, the Slav bones/ white as silver birch//under her fragile skin'. Even in childhood, she and her sister were little intellectuals with their inquiry into the meaning of the universe. In a hayloft with its 'broken wooden tiles', they 'lay out sheets torn from their exercise books, / to cover the dry husks and imagine infinity'. We also see into her personal sufferings such as the death of a little sister, of her mother ill from TB, and the contrast of the living woman 'a headmistress once' with the frail, deathly one whose skin is 'translucent as eggshell./Her eyelids veined with blue'. These are not just listed anecdotally but become part of the reader's own experience. Her little sister, Zosia, for example, 'lies upon her bier, little mole hands folded' – the accuracy of the image 'little mole hands' adds to the poignancy and contrasts to the picture we have a few lines earlier (as with Marie's mother) of the very alive Zosia on Christmas eve enjoying the sensuous delights of 'the starched cloth' laid with cake and apples, sweet wafers/sent from Poland to remind them of home'. The poem's final line makes her death universal: 'and the river Vistula swirls yellow with grief'. It is hard to dismiss the echo here of Heaney's 'Mid-term break' about the death of his little brother with its last, equally haunting line: 'a four foot box, a foot for every year'.

Hubbard records Marie's early unrequited first love affair in the poem 'Casimir' and shows the snobbery of the boy's family who disapproved of her being a governess (even though, in 'Floating University', from a library she has gathered of forbidden Polish books, she tutors 'dressmakers,//a kitchen maid, the girl with a limp/ from the butcher's', determined to 'lead these girls/ from ignorance into a credo of light'. The list of those humdrum pupils, each a person to Marie, highlights Marie's selfless dedication, still there when she goes on, like Charlotte Bronte, to be a governess, desperately saving to find intellectual freedom in Paris. She was protecting her 'wounded heart' and vulnerability when, by chance, she met Pierre vowing 'not to unlock/ her blooded heart again' but, as we have seen, when he lifts his notebook beside the 'milk jug of daisies', 'she knows she's come home'.

She and Pierre 'work in silence reading/the other's thoughts' and indeed 'like love,/all is action and reaction' While 'isotopes glimmer/ like something Holy/ in their aura of heavenly blue', she becomes more and more ill, unknowingly, from the radiation: along with nausea and vomiting, 'the pigmentations mottling/ her grey skin are the price/ of this unrequited love' and this 'unrequited love' this time is not for a man but for discoveries in science. Their joint, dedicated, self-sacrificing work is linked time and again by Hubbard to our human existence: she 'must question everything – / belief, conviction, love – / till she can feel the flickering current'.

Hubbard shows Marie doggedly continuing with her exploratory research into radium, despite the fact she gives birth to a daughter and, as we see throughout the sequence, hates housework and even clothes (she gets married in a black worn dress). Fame, with its autograph hunters, when she receives the Nobel Prize, is somewhat meaningless to her: ... 'she'll not let fame warp/the daily rhythms of their lives'. Pierre's sudden unexpected death from being run over by a horse and carriage in the Latin Quarter is made all the more

traumatic by Hubbard describing for three quarters of the poem ordinary bustling life going on until the shock second of the last few lines:

as six tons of carriage split open his walnut skull
his darkening brain
leaching into
the filthy
p u d d l e s

The fractured lines and fractured word at the end with no full stop convey the horrific shock at the nothingness left. Without indulging further – as Marie would no doubt have dealt with it – Hubbard shows Marie’s strength in continuing in ‘something like calm’ and ‘with the courage to live’. Yet, in an ensuing heart breaking poem, Marie throws his blood-soaked, brain-splattered garments into the orchard fire, wanting to cover herself in his ashes ‘so every bit of him//clings to// every bit of her//to stop her heart//from breaking’. Again the double spaces between the clipped short lines imply the almost withheld shock.

Hubbard handles very well the public scandal of Marie’s affair with Paul Langevin, a brilliant scientist who had been a talented pupil of Pierre and shows the vindictiveness of his violent, abusive wife. Marie has a philosophical approach and realises ‘that time collapses,/ universes explode, galaxies/dissolve like dust into infinity’. However, in a single poem (one of two about Langevin), we are given an earthy glimpse of the erotic Marie who needs him ‘To write her name with the tip/ of his salt tongue/across her thighs’.

Towards the end of the sequence we hear of the ‘Radium Girls’ – the factory girls who painted luminescent watch dials, innocently painting their nails and teeth with radium to give them ‘a lustrous/ Hollywood smile’ without knowing – nor did Marie know – ‘that this miracle cure/ for cancer – added to/toothpaste, suppositories’... ‘would become/ *il bacio della morte*’. Then, despite her increasing ill health from aplastic anaemia caused by her exposure to the radium, she studies anatomy, how to deal with wounds, learns to drive and creates small mobile x-ray vans, then heads for the Marne, desperate to help with the suffering of war.

The penultimate poem deals delicately with Marie’s death. So subtly is it handled, a little similar to how Pierre’s death in the accident was handled, that it seems to be just slipped into the poem as, for the first lines of the poem – apart from the pluperfect tense... ‘she had loved to go’... the image of her as a nun in black seems to be an alive Marie. But, with no details given about how she actually died:

Now they lay her
to rest in white – beside her Pierre

Then, just matter-of-factly, we are told her body is moved to the Pantheon in a coffin lined with lead – they ‘throw in her clothes,/ papers and cookbooks,/ all radioactive for another thousand years’. This calmly-told shock parallels that surrounding Pierre and, again, makes the two one. Yet this poem lingers with horror because of the timescale, for there Marie must be still today, radioactive in her coffin.

It is thanks to Sue Hubbard's exquisite sequence that we get to know Marie in a very special way, and to appreciate Marie saying, 'I am among those who think science has great beauty'...

Patricia McCarthy