

EXTRACT: CHRISTOPHER JONES

*When was the last time she could remember properly looking? For herself? I mean when she was still able to engage, before she found she was on a one-way-street? Involved only in reception?*

It was a conversation with a friend. They were discussing Stendhal syndrome.

*Is that an actual condition?*

I think it is recognised as a condition though a cynical diagnosis might perceive it as psychosomatic; a version of the vapours.

*What happens?*

One becomes physically overwhelmed in front of artworks; when one has seen too many Piers, too much Michelangelo. Dizziness, a feeling of disorientation ensues, weakness, nausea, fainting. An extreme version of what, in my mind at least, really *does* happen in front of great artwork. A shifting of something, a chink in the firmament...

*And she had previously felt that way?*

The friend had asked her whether she had ever had the experience of standing in front of a painting and crying. She, the friend, meant more than simply weeping; she was asking about becoming overwhelmed - emotionally and sensorially - within that moment of experience. An absorption, both of and by. She answered that yes, there was a single occasion when facing a Rembrandt; she did not recall which but she liked to think it was a late self portrait *Self Portrait with Two Circles* at Kenwood House perhaps, or *Self Portrait as The Apostle Paul* in the Rijksmuseum. The insolent, querulous 'What else did you expect?' of the gaze returned. It could

even have been *The Jewish Bride*. She mentioned the physical sensation of shaking being more memorable than anything. And as she described the moment to her friend, she underwent a kind of flashback and a semblance of the tremors revisited her.

She became transfixed by the memory of the painting, perhaps as much as she had been by the original. She listened quietly as her friend discussed it, until she moved on to other matters. Her feelings passed.

Later that day, she recalled, for herself alone, one other time when a painting took her over in such a way – an occasion she could identify with certainty. The sour, slightly more yellow than lime green was what stuck in her mind – the characteristic that seemed to marry what it looked like with how it made her feel.

*It sounds like a kind of synesthesia...*

Looking later, examining the image on screen, she did not see so much acid in that green, nor could she feel its sour strength. She wondered whether it was the memory or the reproduction that shifted the colour; or was it that, in the flesh, on that specific day, the light and her own circumstances lent the painting's colour the capacity to sicken her in that highly particular way? She had recalled inaccurately the image of tears on the woman's face in the painting: in her mind, it had been a series of sharp lines with drips at the end, rendered almost as mechanised rods. Yet looking at it again, she noticed a sole droplet at the end of a single line looping left, coursing the contour of a high cheekbone. The mismatch was almost certainly to do with conflating her memory of standing in front of the painting with the description of it previously given - over forty years ago now - by her teacher in the school classroom, chalked in abbreviated form on the board. She was sure the teacher had spoken of "teardrops like knitting needles" that day. She could feel them better than she could see them. The contradictions remained. There was nothing naturalistic about how the painting looked yet at the same time it was

completely right, correct, even true to life. Beneath a fashionable hat bedecked with a large blue cornflower beauty collapses, useless in the face of grief; eyes crinkled and shattered like crystal glass, lashes fat and waterlogged; fingers and their sharp nails pressed into skin; colour drained away from the nose and mouth; three purple bruised blotches; teeth clamped hard on a scrap of faded blue cloth. But standing there in front of the painting - however many years ago now lost...absorbed...gradually. Mirrored.