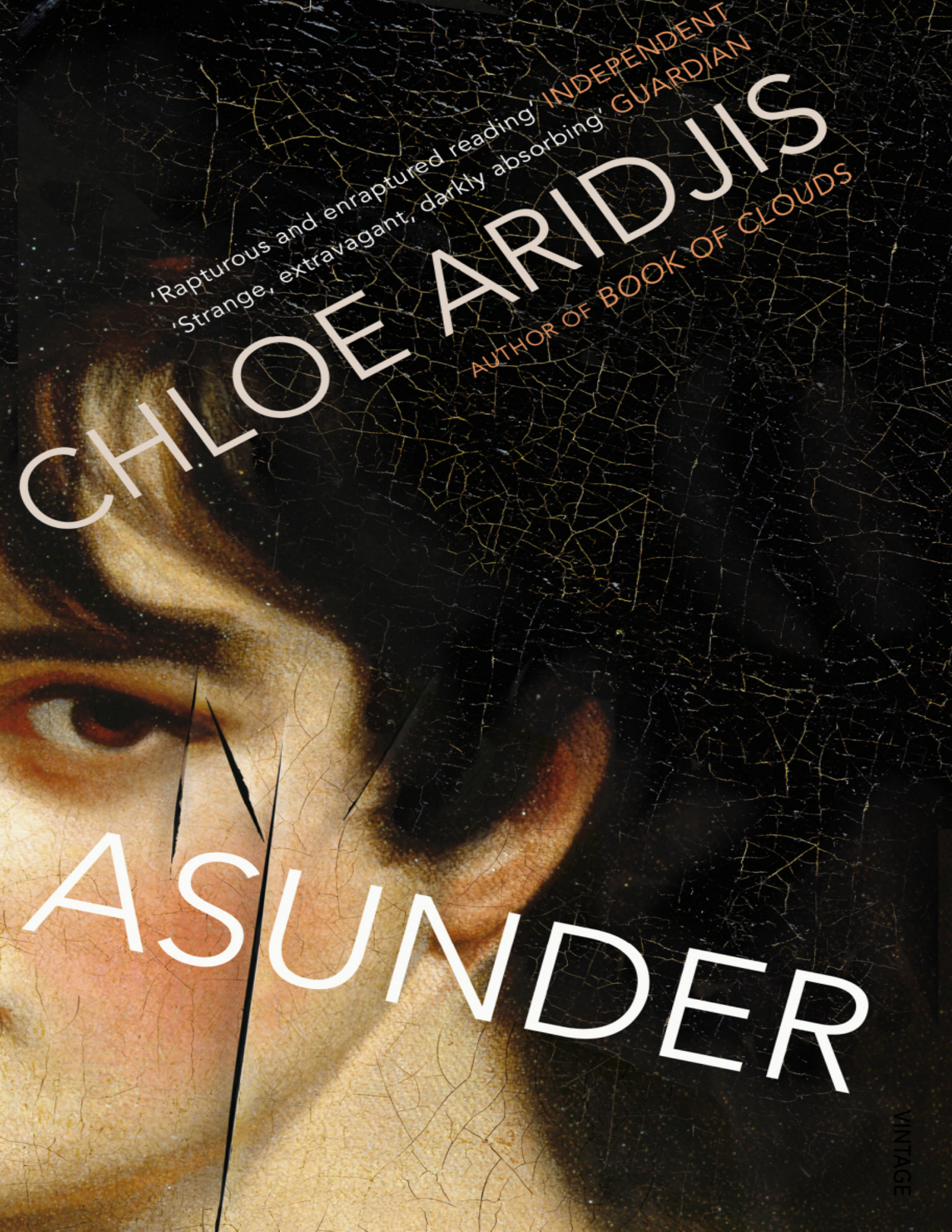
'Rapturous and enraptured reading' INDEPENDENT
'Strange, extravagant, darkly absorbing' GUARDIAN
CHLOE ARIDJIS
AUTHOR OF BOOK OF CLOUDS
ASUNDER
VINTAGE

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About the Book

“They call us guards, warders, invigilators, room keepers, gallery assistants. We are watchmen, sentinels, but we don’t polish guns, shoes or egos. We are custodians of a national treasure, a treasure beyond value stored behind eight Corinthian columns of a neoclassical façade, the dreams of the ancients stuccoed to our building.”

Marie’s job as a museum guard at the National Gallery in London offers her the life she always wanted, one of invisibility and quiet contemplation. But amid the hushed corridors of the Gallery surge currents of history and violence, paintings whose power belie their own fragility. There also lingers the legacy of her great-grandfather Ted, the warder who slipped and fell moments before reaching the suffragette Mary Richardson as she took a blade to one of the gallery’s masterpieces on the eve of the First World War.

After nine years there, Marie begins to feel the tug of restlessness. A decisive change comes in the form of a winter trip to Paris, where, with the arrival of an uninvited guest and an unexpected encounter, her carefully contained world is torn apart.

Asunder is a rich, resonant novel of beguiling depths and beautiful strangeness, exploring the delicate balance between creation and destruction, control and surrender.

About the Author

Chloe Aridjis was born in New York, and grew up in the Netherlands and Mexico City. She received her DPhil in nineteenth-century French poetry and magic from Oxford, then lived in Berlin for five years. Her first novel, *Book of Clouds*, published in 2009, won the Prix du Premier Roman Etranger in France. She lives in London.

Also by Chloe Aridjis

Book of Clouds

Asunder

Chloe Aridjis

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

If one hundred dogs bark at a phantom, the phantom becomes reality.

ONE

THEY CALL US guards, warders, invigilators, room keepers, gallery assistants. We are watchmen, sentinels, but we don’t polish guns, shoes or egos. We are custodians of a national treasure, a treasure beyond value stored behind eight Corinthian columns of a neoclassical façade, the dreams of the ancients stuccoed to our building. And our title should honour that.

I came to my profession half by chance, half following an ancestral call. After stumbling upon an ad for a Travelling Exhibition Assistant, I applied for the position but found the vacancy had been filled. Yet the kind man who answered my call mentioned another opening, this one at the British Museum. A guard had just resigned due to the diagnosis of an incurable ailment, and decided he wanted to spend his remaining months staring at something other than nymphs and satyrs locked in battle. They offered him the choice of other wings but he said he wanted to leave London and retire from culture.

My time there didn’t last but it led me to my calling. After the British Museum came the National Gallery, and nine years later I have come to know all the paintings and panels better than the palm of my hand.

How will you handle the boredom, they had first asked at the job interview. I laughed before realising they were serious, and told them I didn’t easily grow bored. But you will, they warned, and I replied that I would then simply draw up lists in my head or count the number of skirts or stripes in the room. You’re meant to protect the works of art, they said, to which I replied of course, yes, I would.

Acedia plagues the novice much more than the experienced solitary; unlike some of the new guards, I do not suffer from boredom or listlessness. Half of us have the right temperament, the other half don't. Only time can distinguish us. Yet museum acedia isn't triggered by a crisis of faith or the shifting angle of the sun and, what's more, my profession is actually suited to those afflicted by it, perfect for individuals who are unconcerned with their position in the world and have fallen prey to a relatively permanent mental or physical sloth. The museum provides an activity for which we are paid to do little more than stand or sit for hours contemplating immobile images and mobile figures.

Occasionally I remind myself that I could have become a dozen things in life. I could have finished university, got a degree in English, perhaps added some letters after my name. I could have had a desk and a fountain pen, people knocking at the door bringing in papers to sign. Or, at the very least, my own filing cabinet and phone extension. But I have always been more interested in being than becoming, and as soon as I stumbled upon this job I knew nothing would budge me. Ambition has never been high on the list, nor marriage or adventure: the only thing that occasionally tempts me is the thought of another museum.

And I admit that at first I was more than a little jealous of the guards at Tate Modern, watching over their collection housed within an old power station, yet the energy being generated, while neither nuclear nor electric, came with its own set of perils. But it wasn't until the Scandinavian artist set up an immense fake sun in the Turbine Hall that I thanked my guardian angels for my job at the National Gallery.

Until then, it is true, I envied my colleagues at the new Tate, and when this sun first rose I would, on days off, walk along the river to the museum and spend long whiles on my

back staring upwards. A mirror had been fastened to the ceiling and there'd be dozens of us lying in random configurations on the concrete floor, waving at our reflections above, and I felt like I was at a site of pagan worship, all eyes converging on this great yellow sphere whose emanations remained a mystery – that is, until the guards began complaining of headaches and dizziness and cursing the fumes released from the artificial astral body, especially Martin Strake who, already prone to migraines and sensitivity to light, made a point from the start of looking the other way. After a few weeks the monofrequency lamps really took their toll; Martin succumbed to their haze, his legs grew weaker, his eyesight began to blur, his movements trance-like as if dictated by this overhead sun, attached to it by invisible strings.

And I succumbed, I too, and for several weeks went to worship the ephemeral god, until I found out this supposed orb wasn't even a whole but a semicircle. We had been going to pay our respects to a semicircle, made whole by its reflection in a mirror. To this day I wish I hadn't looked at the catalogue and had continued with my fantasy of the whole, but in the end, all that matters is that the Scandinavian's piece was eventually replaced by something else of monstrous proportions yet not as precarious and that Martin Strake gradually regained his former self and could turn his eyes towards the Turbine Hall without dissolving. I used to envy those who were assigned temporary rather than permanent exhibits before realising that temporary is too risky; you never know what you are going to get.

Life at our Gallery is more predictable.

Early each week we are assigned different sections of a wing and, within these sections, four rooms a day. In the morning we shed our civvy clothes and slip on our uniform: a mouse-grey jacket with matching trousers or skirt, a pale lilac shirt and a shiny purple tie. We are given twenty-four

minutes a day to change, an iron always available in the changing room, and in my nine years working here those twelve minutes in the morning and twelve in the evening, during which all kinds of little transformations take place, have gone by in a flash.

Once the museum opens at ten we must be in uniform and at our post. As of that moment we start patrolling our rooms, followed by a forty-five-minute lunch break, then back to our rooms. We have two twenty-minute tea breaks, morning and afternoon. It works well, this variation, after a while even beauty grows tiresome, and I have served every room in the Gallery except for the Portico Patrol, for which special training and a more assertive temperament, ideally, are required. Rotation is the salvation of the museum guard.

Our job has often been regarded as a knacker's yard, the final outpost at the end of a long journey. Many of my colleagues are in their fifties and sixties, a few even older. People usually end up here after working in something else for years. George used to sort letters at the head post office at Mount Pleasant from midnight to four in the morning. Charlie worked as a car mechanic at his brother's garage in Clapton. Pat began the job only after the last of her six children had left home. John was a nightwatchman at a bank for three decades. Dave spent twenty-eight years tweaking rides at the carny. Janet had gone bankrupt and was forced to sell her pub. Roland worked at a construction company called Sisyphus until suffering a nervous breakdown caused by a speed habit and industrial fatigue.

Some of us live in Zone 1 or 2, others in Zone 3 or 4 and spend an hour on public transport each morning. Some of us have a degree, most of us don't. Some of us look at the art, some of us don't. But we all protect the pictures and are able to direct visitors towards an entrance, an exit, towards whatever they want to aim for or depart from.

In the canteen, during one of the many hypothetical conversations we liked to engage in, conversations that led nowhere and for that very reason were all the more entertaining, we established that if most of us were given a painting we would sell it off immediately. Another hypothetical scenario is *Which painting would you save if there were a fire*. Some colleagues would choose a specific work they'd run to remove from the wall, others had none in mind, and yet others tried to think of the most valuable, usually a da Vinci or, for some reason, a Manet.

I was fond of my colleagues, every one of them, and welcomed the sight and sound of them most mornings, first my female colleagues in the changing rooms, where we'd often touch up our faces and comb the city from our hair, and then the male ones during team assembly, always taking note when Roland or another favourite was absent, which wasn't often, given the serious nature of our job.

It was nearing four that Tuesday, an autumn day that had started like any other, and the light in the museum lay on the cusp of natural and artificial illumination, the skylights and louvres still filtering in what they could of the early dusk, the light sensors poised to climb a notch as soon as they registered a gloaming.

I was in Room 25 with the van Hoogstraten peepshow, always a source of curiosity, at least at first. Four adolescents came in and gathered round, taking turns to peer in through the side holes as if they were dark forbidden slits. Yet I knew their interest wouldn't last. Despite the cupids on the exterior, the Hoogstraten contained nothing but a masterly exercise in perspective: the bare, orderly, well-swept interior of a seventeenth-century Dutch home, the only living beings a spaniel with tawny eyes and two women, one nightcapped in bed and the other seated in the far background reading a book, with the silhouette of a man behind a door.

Familiar with expressions of disappointment, the promise of something erotic trumped by the everyday, I watched with satisfaction as the teenagers shrugged and moved on.

And then I saw the man's face heading towards me, his short legs taking long strides in my direction, and though his command of English was shaky he managed to articulate with a few words and as many gestures that he and his wife had noticed that the guard in Room 23 was unwell.

I left the teenagers and hurried to tell Roland, who was haunting the threshold between 26 and 27, that I was going to investigate an incident and could he in the meantime alert Security, and with that I took a sharp turn into Room 23 to find my colleague Leighton Crooke slouched in his black leather chair. Instead of the formal vertical required of our profession, his body was slanting to the right, a forty-degree angle tipping into forty-five, as if nailed to the chair at the base but struggling, after decades of obedience, to wrench itself free. His eyes had withdrawn their vigil and his hands lay formless and inert in his lap. I approached as calmly as I could and tapped the stiff shoulder encased in the grey uniform. Crooke was nearly seventy and had dozed off on the job before.

After the tapping failed to produce a reaction I held up his wrist and felt for his pulse, pressing lightly and then, upon feeling nothing, a bit harder. It seemed extremely faint, if present at all, but I didn't trust myself to declare any man dead or alive – I thought I could detect some faint life current but wasn't sure, it could simply be the residual warmth of an expired system – and, fearing it would soon be altogether nonexistent, I stepped out of the way to allow Frances from Human Resources to take charge. With a cool air of authority, years of moving with ease through the different strata of our museum, she crouched down beside Crooke and reached for his other wrist, removed his watch, and pressed her forefinger and middle finger against the base of his thumb far more assertively than I had, the pale

blue veins that ran beneath his papery skin forming an unlikely continuum with the blood-red polish of her nails.

Curious visitors had begun to turn away from the pictures towards the spectacle in the chair, and I could almost sense the man’s fading pulse radiating outwards into the room as if searching to latch on to new hosts.

Two more colleagues arrived, murmuring loudly, their agitation unconcealed. Frances stood up, straightened her skirt and asked us to help clear the room. Just as the last visitors, the couple who’d found him, by then probably feeling invested in the man’s fate, had left, four medics rushed in through the far door with a stretcher.

Something was happening in the Gallery, a flicker of an event that would be committed to the annals, and this time I was part of it, though from a historical perspective it was only the quiet death of a sixty-eight-year-old felled, most likely, by a heart attack, I had to remind myself as I watched sadly on as the corpse was gently lifted, laid out on the stretcher, and removed.

TWO

THE DUSK OF Millbank had filled with the amber lozenges of unoccupied black cabs, miners with lantern-strapped foreheads rushing towards or away from the city centre, as I made my way to meet Daniel at the Drunken Duck, a pub a few streets from Tate Britain.

I stepped inside and searched for my friend in the noisy crowd that had gathered amidst the wooden stools and nodding taps, and eventually found him at a table that offered a strategic view of his current passion. The girl at the bar, though he had yet to speak to her.

'I'm sorry about Crooke,' were his first words once I'd removed my coat and draped it over a chair. 'I remember him from my years there . . . He seemed like a good man.'

'Yes, I thought so too. How did you hear?'

'Oh, the news reached us pretty quickly,' he said, pushing a pint of beer towards me. 'I got stout, hope that's okay.'

'Thank you,' I said, though he knew I preferred wine.

He shot a longing look in the direction of the bar, then turned back to me, his heavy-lidded blue eyes sloping down into his temples with the melancholy that sometimes crept into his face when he wanted something he couldn't have.

Daniel Harper and I met nine years ago, patrolling neighbouring rooms of the Sainsbury Wing and, by day four or five, discovered a kinship. His air was removed, fugitive and self-contained, his focus on something far beyond the Gallery's grand portico and vestibules, and from the start he struck me as different from the other guards. Whenever I'd peer into the next room I'd see him either pacing back and

forth or writing in a notebook. He wrote at lightning speed, I observed, yet when visitors entered the room the notebook would vanish into his pocket like a magic trick in reverse. I couldn't figure out what he was writing – cricket scores, shopping lists, endless games of noughts and crosses – but he did it with such stealth, I imagined it must be something confidential; I later found out they were poems.

Apart from his withdrawn aura, the other noteworthy characteristic was his limp, a visual stutter that accompanied most of his movements. When stationary, he looked geometrically even; the moment he moved, the evenness was lost.

Daniel was as honest, knowledgeable and courteous a guard as they come but in the end he was fired, fired for his pacing, since he couldn't keep still and would pace from one end of the room to the other, the pacing made worse by his limp, for he would take one step forward and then drag the other foot in its wake at four- to five-second intervals like a broken metronome. It didn't help when he changed to soft-soled orthopaedic shoes; you could still hear every step and drag of his feet. He would only come to rest when asked a question, but the moment he finished answering he would resume his tortuous path.

Because of his kindness and because, apart from the pacing, he was an exemplary guard who knew more about art than the rest of us, no one had the heart to complain, until one day a professor of early Flemish painting came to the Gallery to examine a triptych and by day six he was driven mad by the four- to five-second intervals and marched over to the management and lodged a complaint. It turns out this professor of early Flemish painting was married to one of the gallery's main patrons, Lady So-and-so, and one week later Daniel received a letter of dismissal. Nearly catatonic with disbelief, he stopped writing for a year, talking only about his 'pacing dragon', and how these

two feet of his, pacing and dragging in close alliance, would spell the end of him.

A few months after his disappointment at the National Gallery, Daniel was offered a similar job at Tate Britain. The paintings weren't as magnificent, even the best of them, but he liked most of them too. The museum lay farther from home, now a bus and two Tube journeys rather than a simple bus ride, but he could use the time to read. And the building wasn't as large or grand as our Gallery, but at least it too was classical in style, with a six-column portico and a central dome. A different kind of cathedral, less holy and with fewer pilgrims, yet my friend was determined to protect the paintings with the same degree of devotion.

As for the other warders, they were of a different breed from those he was used to. He was amazed by how scarce they were and by how many rooms seemed to go without protection, but then realised there were fewer visitors as well. And unlike many of us at the Gallery, the guards at Tate Britain were mostly art students or aspiring artists who had no intention of spending their lives working in security.

At first Daniel had a crisis over the presence of so much twentieth-century, even contemporary, art – how could it compare, how could it coexist, with that of the past? He couldn't help feeling that by placing the centuries so close together they were stretching things, diluting the force of the greats, and it took him several weeks to stop feeling a jolt each time he turned from a room with Blakes or Turners into one containing less transcendent work.

Yet to enter the room with Turner's late paintings, he would say, was extraordinary, and made it all worthwhile, it was like entering a room of light, pure sunlight pouring forth from the walls, that was when the voltage surged, when the museum became a cathedral.

In fact, early on in our friendship we had agreed, during one of our very first conversations, that we much preferred