

Ann Howells

Portrait of Dr. Gachet -- 1861

*"I have found a true friend in Dr. Gachet,
something like another brother, so much
do we resemble each other physically
and also mentally." -- V. Van Gogh*

Critics say
I painted him to look like me,
and why should I not?
We're bound one to the other
by mercurial moods,
by melancholia and obsession.
By physical similarities and addictions.
Our spirits align:
I find myself in him and he in me.
How can I not, when I lift my brush,
confuse us? His threadbare coat,
his angular and loose-jointed bones,
his manic or lethargic manner?
And I cannot resist dabbing
a sprig of foxglove at his right hand,
for he makes of it an elixir,
strives to cure me. He poses for me,
and I gift him with a portrait.

He seeks a place where I might find peace,
the asylum, Saint-Remy-de-Provence.
Releases me mornings, to paint,
brings me home evenings --
Christ returning his lost sheep to the fold.
He is both doctor and friend.
I have not many friends.

Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen -- 1884-85

*. . . those very incorrectnesses, those deviations, remodelings, changes in reality . . .
untruth if you like . . . but more than the literal truth. -- V. Van Gogh*

I've done multiple studies of this small church
where Father preached. In each,
a gravedigger leans on heart-shaped spade
beyond the doors.
Were I to leave that loitering workman,
Mother would find rebuke, recrimination,
recall childhood accusations:
my name, my date, simply transferred
from a stillborn brother,
and I wish this gift to please Mother,
bedridden with fractured thighbone.
To appease her sensibilities
I over-paint a small congregation retiring,
dab in autumn foliage of which she is so fond,
but retain the dark heavy line of Japanese prints
so appropriate to that austere little building
without icon, fresco, or stained glass.
I paint it desolate, clinging to sere grass --
wooden box in a desiccated landscape --
still, it will please her.

About My Right Ear

keep this object carefully -- V. Van Gogh

If you are reading this
I am dead,
for I gave my word
to take our secret to the grave.
There are those who believe
I severed my ear in a fit of melancholia,
suicide attempt for loss of a woman,
a friend, even dear Theo
whom I know would never abandon me.
These rumors are unfounded;
I offer my unbloodied razor as proof.

No, it was my friend,
lovely Paul, who might have become
my paramour.
He excised that dispensable appendage,
quite without malicious intent,
storming from our lodgings after a row.
I followed. To apologize? Plead?
Curse and hurl insults?
An exceptional swordsman,
Paul mistook the palette knife I carried
for a razor, struck a defensive blow.

Remorse was immediate and profuse,
but fearing police action --
they've little use for painters such as we --
we pledged secrecy.
I wrapped the offending ear,
presented it to Rachael, a prostitute
of whom I occasionally avail myself.
Paul fled to England
neither of us mentioning the incident again
except obliquely, in correspondence.

The Potato Eaters – 1885

Art is to console those who are broken by life. -- V. Van Gogh

Neighborhood children chide,
dance about me in circles,
label me *L'Homme d'Arc en Ciel*,
for smeared and spattered hues
adorning fabric and flesh.
Unable to afford studio and flat
I toss on a pallet near my easel --
cheap rent and extraordinary light.
I eat from crockery
in which I mix paint,
sometimes eat the paint itself
rather than pause my work.

Today, I paint potato eaters,
miners gathered around their table
in dim lamplight,
sustaining themselves on roots
while I am sustained by obsession.
I paint roughhewn hands,
knotted and stained, scabrous,
accustomed to honest labor,
scowl at my own uncallused ones.
Guilt drives me,
breath and passion, all there is.

Theo Speaks of Vincent

I loved him,
as I'd love a scarred alley cat
or broken-winged pigeon,
a blend of love and pity.
His raging passion,
deep despair, and self-loathing.
I settled him in Arles,
warned him from that whore
who tried to palm off her bastard
as his son.
My wife, Johanna, loved him too,
set up shows, encouraged,
found buyers.
We sent Paul (Gauguin)
to care for him, a mistake.
How could we expect such egos
to exist in harmony?
Then, the commitment that failed:
releasing him days to paint,
to feed his obsession,
that incident with the ear.

After the gunshot, I rushed bedside.
Bandaged and wan, smoking his pipe,
blankets pushed to his waist,
he assured me he was fine.
Three days later he was dead,
too fragile for this calloused world.

Ann Howells has edited *Illya's Honey* since 1999, recently going digital: www.IlyasHoney.com, and taking on a co-editor. Her publications are: *Black Crow in Flight* (Main Street Rag), *Under a Lone Star* (Village Books), *Letters for My Daughter* (Flutter), and an anthology of D/FW poets that she edited, *Cattlemen & Cadillacs* (Dallas Poets Community). Her chapbook manuscript, *Softly Beating Wings*, recently won the William D. Barney Memorial Chapbook Contest.