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The Van Gogh Field

William Kittredge

Clyman Teal: swaying and resting his back against the clean-grain hopper, holding the header wheel of the Caterpillar-drawn John Deere 36 combine, a twenty-nine year old brazed and wired together machine moving along its path around the seven hundred acre and perfectly rectangular field of barley with seeming infinite slowness, traveling no more than two miles in an hour, harvest dust rising from the separating fans within the machine and hanging around him as he silently contemplates the acreage being reduced swath by swath, a pale yellow rectangle peeling toward the last narrow and irregular cut and the finished center, his eyes flat and gray, squinted against the sun.

Robert Onnter, standing before the self-portrait of Van Gogh, had finally remembered Clyman Teal, his expression beneath that limp sweat and grease stained hat, the long round chin and creased, sun and wind burned cheeks and still shaded eyes, a lump of tobacco wadded under his thin lower lip, sparse gray week-old whiskers, face of a man getting through not just the pain of his last illness and approaching death, but the glaring sameness of what he saw, at least trying to see through.

Changing position every few moments, as if from some not yet discovered perspective he would be able to see into an interior space he felt the picture must have, Robert Onnter faced the self-portrait of Van Gogh on temporary display in the marble-floored main lower corridor of the Chicago Art Institute and felt the eyes in the portrait as those of a man looking into whatever Clyman Teal must have seen while watching the harvest fields that occupied the sun-colored, impenetrable August days of his life, the sheen brilliant and unresolved as light glaring off buffed aluminum: eye of Van Gogh.

In the same place the afternoon before, people dressed for winter occasionally passing, Robert had been distracted by the woman . . . her gloved hand on his sleeve . . . while trying to visualize something he could not imagine, what lay beneath and yet over the texture of thick blue paint, how the ridged strokes fixed there changed his memories of slick wheatfield prints under glass in frames on his

mother's wall. This morning he had left the woman sleeping in her cluttered brown apartment . . . her fragility only appearance . . . curled like a small aging moth on her side of a too-wide bed in a building that overlooked the northern end of Michigan Boulevard and snow-covered ice of the lake, gone by taxi to his room in the Drake Hotel and showered and shaved and changed clothes, and feeling clean as when outdoors on a long-ago summer morning and touched by dew which had dampened the leather of his worn-toed childhood boots, caught another taxi and returned to stand again before the picture.

There was a sense in which he had come to Chicago to look the first time at real paintings because of Van Gogh. Part of his reaction against the insubstantiality of his life had been founded on those flat wheatfield prints his mother cherished. Robert smoked a cigarette from a crumpled pack, wondered if he should have left a note for the woman and thought, as when the woman interrupted him the afternoon before, about his mother's life in isolation and her idea of beauty, surely implied by her love of those prints, desolate small loves in the eastern Oregon valley that was his home, the transparently streaked sheen of yellow-gold over the ripening barley fields under summer twilight, views of that and level wind-blown snow no doubt having something to do with the way he had felt compelled to spend this winter and what he saw in the eyes of Van Gogh, remembered from the simple death of Clyman Teal, and what he thought of his mother's idea, not so much of beauty but of the reasons things were beautiful. The woman's appearance beside him the day before had seemed inevitably part of the education he had planned for this winter, escaping stillness. Except for two and a half years at the University of Oregon in Liberal Arts, studying nothing, a course urged on him by his mother, four years in the Air Force, a year and a half of marriage to a girl from Vacaville, California named Dennie Wilson . . . when he lived in Sacramento selling outboard motors . . . he had always lived in the valley. So there was need to travel.

Twenty-seven when he returned to the valley, he worked for his father as he had always known eventually he would, and had been there since, spending his time at chores and drinking in the town of Nyall at the north end of the valley, seeing whichever girl he happened to meet in the taverns. Lately the calm of that existence had fragmented, partly because of his mother's insistence he was wasting his life, more surely because of constant motionlessness, reflected in the eyes of Clyman Teal and now in the detached and burning eyes of Van Gogh. Robert had been disconnected from even his parents since the divorce, and now it seemed there had been no one even then. The girl Dennie, addicted to huge dark glasses with shining amber lenses, so briefly his wife, now lived in Bakersfield with another man and a daughter named Felicity who was nearly six years old and ready for school. Robert could recall his wife's face . . . the girl he married . . . could not imagine her with a child, saw with absolute clarity the slender girl from Vacaville, eyes faintly owl-like in the evening because her sun-tan ended at the rims of her glasses. She had grown up while he had not. By missing knowledge of her strength in childbirth he had missed part of what he could have been. His sense of lost contact was constructed at least in part of that.

The previous year, early spring before winter broke out of the valley, a morn-

ing he remembered perfectly, he called Dennie before daylight, a frantic and stupid mistake finally shattering any sort of relationship they might have carried past divorce. Robert had been reading a book pushed on him by his mother, *The Magic Mountain*, written by a German named Mann, which seemed a strange name for a German, saying the book would tell him something about himself and that if he would only begin reading he would see why he must change. The day was a dead Sunday and he was a little hung-over and somehow bored with the idea of another slow afternoon in the bars of Nyall, the blotched snow and peeling frame buildings and the same people as always, aimless Sunday drinkers. So he read because there was nothing else to do and then for reasons he did not understand became fascinated and began to struggle seriously with comprehending what the German meant by writing down his story of sickness and escape, seeing why his mother might imagine it applied to him, yet sure it meant something more.

He spent weeks at it, reading and rereading each page and paragraph, savoring the way it was to be German and writing about sickness, staying in his room and working at it each night, waking in the early morning before daylight and thinking about it again. Until at four o'clock the morning of the phone call he turned on his light and began reading about a beautiful epileptic woman and began to feel as if he were himself at the next breath going to descend into a spasm and ended terrified and unable to focus his eyes on the print, even move, as if the merest responses of his body might cause the heavy and shrouding weight of stillness to settle like a cloud blotting away all connection, and finally he forced himself and called the girl who had been his wife, Dennie, who he sensed might understand, might not have completely deserted him. She told him he was drunk and hung up quickly, and Robert felt himself alone in his cloud and could think of nothing but awakening his mother, begging her to make it go away, ended going weeks through the motions of days surrounded by terror of something simple as air.

Now the heavy and vivid symbolic color of the self-portrait seemed reality, expression and agony of a man abruptly giving up, Clyman Teal who had been dying that last summer, a wandering harvest-following man who could have been Van Gogh, who traveled north with the seasons along the west coast in a succession of gray and rust-stained automobiles, always alone: hard streaked color of the painting ridged and unlike the wheatfield prints, actual as barley ripe before harvest, all bound into the stasis Robert was attempting to escape in this city, while traveling.

The woman's amber colored hair was long and straight, over her shoulders, contrasting with the natural paleness of her clear oval face. She brushed her hair slowly. "I'd just finished washing it," she said, smiling, "when you called."

So casual she seemed younger, and small and full rather than tiny and drawn together by approaching age, she sat in a black velvet chair by a window overlooking the lake, lighted from behind by gray midwestern sunlight, wearing a deep and soft blue gown which concealed all but her white shoulders and neck, bare feet curled beneath her. Worn embroidered slippers lay on the pale, almost

white carpet in the room cluttered with sofas covered by blankets and tables whose surfaces reflected intricate porcelain figures. "I like nice things," she'd said the night before. "Most of these things were my mother's. Is there anything wrong with that?" Robert told her he imagined not and she smiled. "Call me Goldie," she'd said. "Everyone does." He had read the card inserted in the small brass frame beneath the entry buzzer. *Mrs. Daniel (Ruth Ann) Brown*. Her husband, she explained, was away in Europe. "He's no threat," she'd said. "He's gone for the winter."

They'd come here in the evening at her insistence, sat in flickering near darkness before the artificial fire, and she changed into a dressing gown and served tiny glasses of a thick pale drink that tasted like burnt straw. Finally he kissed her, moving awkwardly across the sofa while she waited with an ice-like smile. "He's away," she said, "to Greece, to the islands, to walk and think."

In the soft light of afternoon she was completely serene. Robert asked why her husband had gone. "Because of the clearness," she said. "The light . . . things have gone badly, with the unrest, and he wanted to think. . . ." Perhaps, Robert thought, he would follow, to the pale sunlight and dusty white islands and the water of the sea, New York and then London, Paris, Rome, at last to the islands off Greece and see the water moving under the light, flow and continuity which might illuminate his vision of a desert stream low in a dry summer and water falling through crevices between boulders, always images of water, the cold Pacific gray beneath winter clouds, waves breaking in on barren sand, the heavy movement of the troopship just after leaving San Francisco for Guam, where he spent a year and a half of his Air Force time, always water moving, quieting.

In childhood he had imagined the barley fields were water. After the last meal of the day, while dishes remained stacked in the sink to be washed later, they would all of them go out into the valley and look at the ripening crop, his mother and father, Robert, and his younger brother and even younger sister all in the old dark green Chevrolet pickup. Now his brother had been dead eleven years, killed in an automobile crash his second semester of college, and his sister, married directly out of high school, now lived distantly with children in Amarillo, Texas. Then they had all been home and his father had driven them out over the dusty canal bank roads until east of the fields, looking toward the last sunlight glaring over the low rim, and those yellowing fields were luminous and transformed into a magic and perfect cloth for them to walk on, watery, and Robert imagined them all hand in hand, walking toward the sun.

His mother had named the largest field on one of those trips and because of the prints in the house it had seemed she was only silly. But surely she had been right, however inadvertently. The yellowish rough sheen of bearded, separate and sunlighted barley heads matched perfectly the reality of Van Gogh, glowing paint, his eyes, texture. "The Van Gogh field," she said, repeating it as if delighted. "It's so classic." She would often say that. "It's so classic." They stayed until the air began to cool and settle and then went slowly home, Robert and his brother in the back of the pickup, watching the dust rise soft and gray as flour behind them and hang in the air, streaked and filmy as an unlighted aura

even after the pickup was parked beneath the cottonwood trees behind the house, dust moving like water.

Robert wondered what those evening trips had meant to his father. Nearly sixty, silently beguiled by sentiment, his father wept openly for a month after Robert's brother was killed, sat abruptly upright and drinking the coffee Robert's mother brought, never going outside until spring irrigation forced him to work, after that revealing emotion only with his hands, gesturing abruptly and reaching to pick up a clod of dry and grainy peat soil, crumbling it to dust between callused fingers. During planting the man would sometimes walk out over the damp tilled ground and kneel, sink his hands and churn up the under-soil, crouch lower like a trailing animal. "Seeing if it's right," he would say. "If it's ready."

The woman returned with drinks. "I didn't think you'd be back," she said. "I hoped, but. . . ." She smiled, perhaps wishing she were alone, the last night an incident scarcely remembered. "I went back to the painting," Robert said.

"What are you really doing? I don't think I believe what you told me." She continued smiling. He had lied, unable to admit he had borrowed ten thousand dollars from his father, feeling childish over his search for places and cities missed, had told her he was an insurance salesman. "Looking for islands," he said, wondering if she would take him seriously.

She glanced away, stopped smiling. "The wheatfields," she said, "you should see them, the last particularly." Robert didn't answer. "Before he shot himself, I mean," she said, "when you think of what it meant to him . . . the yellow and that field pregnant, those birds . . . his idea of death and remember it was there he killed himself, in that field, then you see."

"Yellow?"

"Simply love." The afternoon had settled, blue winter light darkening, her face isolated as if detached from her dark gown. "I don't think you can tell from prints," he said, "we had prints and there's nothing in them . . . my mother must have thought he was pretty and bright." Robert could not explain the insincerity of imitations, falsity.

"So?" The woman leaned forward just slightly, perhaps interested and no longer getting politely through an afternoon with a man she'd slept with . . . would have preferred never seeing again. Her tone was sharper, quick, and she sipped her drink, turned the glass in her hands.

"The way she acted. . . ." Robert stalled.

"Your mother acted improperly." The woman's voice was impatient, dropping the "improperly" as if she had changed her mind while speaking, finishing awkwardly, perhaps not wanting to acknowledge the moral distance implied in her judgement of him and his judgement of his mother.

". . . as if it were an example of something."

"Are you so sure. Perhaps it was all a disguise."

"I don't think she. . . ." Robert hesitated. "A man died and she knew some pictures and so it was beautiful and emblematic of something." His mother had stirred her coffee and smiled with total self-possession. "He finished doing what he loved," she had said. "Until the job was over."

The woman rose from her chair and began walking slowly before the win-

dows, carrying a half-empty glass. "Women see more than you imagine," she said. "Sometimes, perhaps everything."

His mother: Duluth Onnter, what did she see, having come west from Minnesota to marry his father out of college, so taken by color and names? Her parents had moved from Minneapolis to Tucson the year after Robert was born and while he had visited them as a child, he could not imagine the long-dead people he remembered, a heavy white-haired man and woman, as having lived anywhere not snow-covered half the year. His grandfather had been in Duluth the day Robert's mother was born, and because of that had insisted she be named after a cold lakeport city. "Papa always said it was beautiful that morning," his mother told him. "That I was his beauty."

"Maybe the pictures were only warm and nice," Robert said. "Maybe she did see."

"My husband is like that," the woman answered, "imagines he's going to find spirituality in Greece . . . in some island. I don't. I'm lucky." She continued walking before the windows, gown trailing the carpet, her thin figure silhouetted. "I have what seems necessary and it's not freedom. I'll go Friday and confess having slept with you. That's freedom."

"To a priest?" It seemed totally wrong, sleeping with him and then carrying the news to church the kind of circularity he had been escaping. "I don't see that at all," he said. "Why do anything in the first place . . . and pretend you didn't."

"It's not pretending," she said. "It's being forgiven. I go to look as you do, somehow for a moment you helped me see better, look at Van Gogh, and even my need to see is a sin, a failure of belief . . . I sold myself for what you helped me see. If that sounds silly maybe it is, but it wasn't to me then and it's not now. It's my own freedom and I don't need to go anywhere to find it. And it has to be confessed."

Robert wondered if she found him foolish, in Chicago, planning on Europe, if she wished to be rid of him and would regard his going coldly as his mother had taken the death of Clyman Teal . . . if for her anything existed but hope. "I must seem stupid," he said.

"No . . . I just don't think there's anything like what you're looking for."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, but it isn't here . . . or Greece or anywhere."

"Perhaps I should stay." There was the easy possibility of a winter in Chicago, walking the street, looking at pictures, going from Van Gogh to Gauguin, Seurat, seeing her occasionally, as often as she would permit.

"I wouldn't," she said. "If I were you." Feeling denied some complex understanding she could give if only she would, Robert knew she was right and trying to be kind. "I wouldn't bother you," he said. "Only once in awhile, just to talk."

"No," the woman said. "I'll get your coat." Her face was hard and set and he thought how melodramatic she was with her insistence on futility. Standing in the hallway with her door closed behind he saw how much she believed she was right, her belief founded on quick sliding glances at whatever it was Van Gogh and Clyman Teal had regarded steadily in their fields of grain.

The next morning he returned to the Art Institute, and she was there, standing quietly in a beige wool suit with a camel's hair coat thrown over her shoulders, a thin and stylish, nearly pretty woman who was aging. "You came back," he said. She turned as if surprised and then smiled. "Let's be quiet," she said, "the best part is silence, then we can talk."

Beside her, sensing she now wanted some word from him, Robert was drawn to the fierce and despairing painted face, memories of Clyman Teal in the days before he died. Summer had been humid, with storms in June and a week of soft rain in late July, and the crop the best in years, kernels filled without the slightest pinch and heavy by the time harvest started in August. Clyman Teal arrived the day it began, lean and thick-shouldered, long arms seeming perpetually broken at the elbows, driving slowly across the field in the latest of his rusted second-hand automobiles, a gray two-door Pontiac. He rubbed his eyes and walked a little into the field with Robert and his father. Dew was just burning off. "Come last night from Arlington," he said. "Finished there yesterday." He'd been working the summer wheat harvest just south of the Columbia River two hundred and fifty miles north, and for twenty years, always coming when it finished to run combine for Robert's father. After this job ended he'd go south to the rice harvest in the Sacramento Valley. Thick heads of barley drooped around them and Clyman Teal cracked kernels between his teeth and chewed and swallowed, squinting toward the sun. "Going to be fine," he said, "ain't it boy." Leaving the trunk lid open on the Pontiac, heedless of dust sifting over his bed roll and tin-covered suitcase, he drug out his tools and spent the rest of the morning working quietly and steadily while the rest of them waited, regreasing bearings Robert had greased the afternoon before, tightening chains and belts, running the machine and tightening again, finishing just as the noon meal was hauled to the field in pots with their lids fastened down by rubber bands. They all squatted in the shade to eat, then flipped the scraps from their plates to the seagulls, and the work began. With the combine motor running Clyman Teal motioned for Robert to follow him and walked to where Robert's father stood cranking the old D7 Caterpillar, dust goggles already down over his eyes. "When there's time," he shouted, "I want this boy on the machine with me." Then he walked away, climbed the steel ladder to the platform where he stood while tending the header wheel, waved for Robert's father to begin the first round.

So when there was time between loads, Robert rode the combine, learning to tend the header wheel, the amount of straw to take in so the machine would thrash properly, to set the concaves beneath the thrashing cylinder, adjust the speed of the cylinder according to the heaviness of the crop, regulate the fans that blew the chaff and dust from the heavier grain. "Whole thing works on gravity," the old man said. "Heavy falls and the light floats away."

Sometimes the old man would walk behind the machine in the fogging dust of chaff, his hat beneath the straw dump, catching the straw and chaff, then dump the hatfull of waste on the steel deck and slowly spread it with thick fingers, kneeling and blowing away the chaff, checking to see if kernels of the heavy grain were being carried over. "You need care," the old man said. "Otherwise you're dumping money."

But most often he just rode with his back braced against the clean grain hopper. The harvest lasted twenty-seven days, the last swath cut late in the afternoon while Robert was hauling his final truckload on the asphalt road up the west side of the valley to the elevator in Nyall. Returning to the field in time to see the other truck pulling out, a surplus GI six-by-six converted to ranch truck and wallowing in compound through the soft peat soil, Robert waited at the gate. The other driver stopped. "Claims he's sick," the man said, leaning from the truck window. "Climbed down and curled up and claimed he was sick and said to leave him alone." The combine was parked in the exact center of the field, stopped after the last cut. Tin-eyed and balding, the driver lived in the valley just south of Nyall on a sour alkali-infested 160 acres, and now seemed impatient to get all this over and back to his quietude. "Your daddy wants you to bring out the pickup," he said.

Robert drove the new red three-quarter ton International pickup, rough and heavy, out to the combine. Clyman Teal lay curled on the ground in the shade of the machine. Robert and his father loaded the old man into the pickup and Robert drove slowly homeward over the rutted field while his father supported Clyman Teal with an arm around his shoulders. The old man grunted with pain, eyes closed tightly and arms folded over his belly. Parked at last before the white-washed bunkhouse, they all sat quiet a moment, nothing in the oppressive empty valley moving but one fly in dust on the slanting windshield. "We'll take him inside," Robert's father said, and Robert was surprised how fragile and light the old man was, small inside his coveralls, like a child, diminished within the folds, his odor like that of a field fire, sharp and acrid. They left him passive and rigid on the bunk atop brown surplus GI blankets. He opened his eyes and grunted something that meant for them to leave him alone, then drew back into himself. The window shelf above the bed was lined with boxes and pills, baking soda and aspirin and home stomach remedies. Robert's mother carried down soup and toast that evening and the old man lay immobile while Robert's father washed the dust from his face. They tucked him under the blankets and the next morning the meal was untouched. That afternoon Robert's father called a doctor, the only one in Nyall, and after probing at the curled figure the doctor called an ambulance from the larger town fifty miles west. It was evening when the ambulance arrived, a heavy Chrysler staffed by volunteers, red light flickering at the twilight while Robert helped load the old man on a stretcher. Clyman Teal was sealed inside without ever opening his eyes and Robert never saw him again. During the brief funeral parlor ceremony six days later he didn't go up and look into the coffin, nor did anyone.

Operated on the night he was hauled away, Clyman died. "Eaten up," the doctor said, shaking his head. "Perforations all through his intestines." Robert remembered his mother's reddened hands gripping the tray she carried down the hill, his father's fumbling tenderness while washing the old man's face, the mostly silent actions. Three days after Clyman died the sheriff's office located a brother in Clovis, New Mexico, who said to go ahead and bury him. Seven attended the funeral, Robert and his father and mother and the truck driver and his huge smiling wife and a drifter from one of the bars in Nyall. The brother

was a grinning old man in a greenish black suit and showed up a week later. He silently loaded Clyman's possessions into the Pontiac and drove away, heading back to New Mexico. He hadn't seen Clyman, he said, in thirty-eight years, hadn't heard from him in all that time. "Just never got around to anything," he said. But the trip was worth his trouble, he said. He'd found hidden in the old man's tin suitcase a bank book from Bakersfield showing total deposits of eight thousand some odd dollars. He said he thought he'd go home by way of Bakersfield.

The woman took Robert's arm. "I've had enough," she said. "Let's have a cup of coffee." Seated in the noisy cafeteria, she smiled. "I liked that," she said. "Standing there quietly together . . . that's what I first liked about you, that you knew how to be quiet." Robert wondered how often she did this, picked up some stray; what had driven away her husband. "Is that why?" he said, involved in a judgement of her which seemed finally unfair, perhaps because it came so close to being a judgement of himself.

"You could appreciate stillness . . . the moment I love in church is that of prayer, silence before the chant begins." Her hands moved slowly, touching her spoon, turning her cup. "I've changed my mind," she said. "I'd like you to stay the winter."

"You could go with me on Sundays," she said, "and see how the quiet and perfection . . . the loveliness on Easter."

But he couldn't. It was useless, for her perhaps all right, he couldn't know about that, but stillness would mount while they chanted and not her church or any city in Europe, even clarity of water, would do more for him than going home to those cold wet mornings in early spring while they planted, the motionless afternoons of boredom while the harvest circled to where the combine parked. "Yes," he said, not wanting to hurt her, knowing he might even stay. "I could do that." Wheatfields reared toward the sky under circling birds, evening dust hung still behind his father's pickup and his brother's childish face was staring ahead toward lights flickering through the poplar trees marking their home, the light yellow color of love, Van Gogh dead soon after, nearby.