

PROSE-POEMS

*Juan Carlos Vargas Bolaños**

Van Gogh's Les Vignes Rouges D'Arles

*Vincent, child, put on the white uniform of death
infected now with one dimming star.*

from *The Imagined Van Gogh*

Yes, yes, so paint speaks to paint, text to text, and there they were, Van Gogh and Gauguin, walking together, immersed in their classes of art history. "In the interpainterly world one hears it all, and sees, and studies life and, of course, it all comes down to this field and the sun in the end."

He walked down that little pathway into their midst. He knew them—women working at the edge of burning, the hardening pose of bent bodies. He would place someone in the center with an upright parasol to anchor it all. He would make the sky yellow, shade in pale yellow the rim of the basket, offset the blue with other shades of blue, the sky dyed in a yellow and pale distant language, twilight, poised yet lifeless, a man standing there, yes, on the wet empty road bending away—what he wanted to see.

He would landscape it with color—this union of grass and desecrated desolation, of tattered women and twig—let the drab gray of labor trickle out in bright slashes, mark out those dying footpaths in sprigs of russet and red. They would face opposite directions, each drawing attention like a centerpiece, one woman in yellow, the soil broken by touchable light, the world of trees behind about to flame.

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He had come to know so much and yet so little, the women eternal in fields, the meandering slide into the frame, the liquid lute of half method, the hopeless edge of twilight, the little bristling of paths leading nowhere, twilight in a gaze, the growth of summer's shrubs, a peopled field heavy against the unmasking of an hour. Away from the horizon the trees appeared and then the two-building town, the sky and the road, arcs and diagonals, the light falling on the women, twenty-or-so, in the vineyard. He would make it all regular, the dying pathways into the field, the trees that went off into space, these greeting fires amid the lush stained glass of the ground and turf, soil, shrub, and tree. And, yes, a man would stand on the road bending away and stare back at the field—this field beyond the common sea, ringed with twig and stamen, leaf and petal.

Self-charity, he had thought, where is charity for the self and the world? Was it something to be found in the loose association of sight and canvas, something to place in the frame, sunbeams and a watery vista, that serried row of blue, the wet light of his road, something to quench loneliness or harbor his pain if only for one short mooring of the self to the paint and the frame—something even more than the consolation of the earth relieving itself of its tragic nightmares, the slight slaughter beneath the slow twilight circuitry of the stars each night.

This will do it, hold down a life that keeps slipping past. Was he already standing before his easel? Bodies stitched by colors, acorn-brown and silver-white, the ash-white sun, golden in the brass-bright expanse, a day burying its last crop of alpenglow and amber-yellows deep into the turning soil.

Vermeer's *Girl Asleep*

So that's one way to end it, one way to get out of the whole mess. Simple enough.

He must have imagined an
abandoned voyage, cameo glass
and paperweights, Eros sleeping,
breath quivering in dreamwork,
a breaking glass at noon.

He probably lifted the tapestry by accident, pushed it across the table as he told her that it wasn't going to work out for them. *She was beautiful, yes*, but there are lanes that fail the feet, half vases and long stretches of dark, loose coils and linen sheets, a stream yet to be found.

She told herself, *not for a second
had she felt bad*— she had set out
the fruit, let him in, held out her hand,
offered him some wine. He had come
to tell her something, and he did.
When he left he pushed back
the chair and then the lifting
of the tapestry as she heard
the breaking porcelain, the dark
door closing upon the day.

She didn't stand up. *Nothing said, nothing more to say.* Just before she fell asleep, she thought of failed cargo jettisoned long ago from ships lost at sea—small skies and pale clouds breaking into sight beneath a blue sky, the cherished desire of holding him in a kind of glass.

*Now across our sleep, in dreams so hesitatingly
drawn as if across a vase of peonies
and chrysanthemums
we watch each other and share
in the vacancy of voyages:*

A tablecloth stirring though open windows, winter gloom and glassware, the pale blossom of certain doors, a white light falling across a dark cutting board.

Diego Rivera's *Desnudo con Alcatraces*

In Diego Rivera's *Desnudo con Alcatraces* a woman is turned away from us, her hair is tightly worn before the opening of a basketful of flowers. Her outstretched arms mediate the distance; her spine and even her hair help to divide it all. Why are there so many hearts here? She is speaking, humming perhaps, between a few words and phrases, *alcatraces, alcatraces, alcatraces*, her voice falling into the flower's whitest district, in praise of white in praise of brown, in praise of weathers of a world brought to life and into time.

In Diego Rivera's *Desnudo con Alcatraces*,
a woman is about to lift flowers
in her arms, the body, a felt texture,
a lavish simplicity like a coming clean,
a lost stare found in ours, as we
become her staring at the held flowers,
in the found stillness, in the coming clean.

If I had painted her, I would have her rise and walk barefoot, the thin warmth of earth cooling beneath the words, *alcatraces, alcatraces, alcatraces* between her breath and she would turn, dissolve, and reassess herself and hear herself call out, *Where am I now?* What could bring you back to this?

A naked body's sense of belonging to a place,
flesh and petals, skin and nakedness—
entranced, transformed, the resurrection of labor,
the stigmata of duty,
of obedience, and of pain, repainted.

She would stand, if I had painted her, and walk through a crowded marketplace, down a country road, her body shrouded in white vacant air,

the light would turn brown, that country road
would become a path leading back
to the marketplace, and she would sit

back down, her outstretched arms bringing back
the limit, a figure sitting before white flowers
staring at the deep white and yellow beauty
of her place—white flowers in her brown gaze,
lit once of dreams, in the holding or, in the making,
as words or paint, or love, would finally have it.

Cézanne

Houses like boats at sea
Fruit on slaps of wood,

A roof above the waters
The shadows of a still life

Resting amid the seas,
A ledge of blue

Retreating, pathways
Of endless lingering

There amid planks
Pitchers and flowers,

And slabs of blue,
The layered browns

Echoing umbers
Towns and mountains

Napkins and flowers
Nowhere, nowhere to be seen

The formality of it all
An elaborate silence

Nowhere to be seen, a
Person

The town is there,
The trees marking

The frame, the light
Bringing it forth

In black casements and
Blue shutters, emptied,

Gone, or the inhabitants
 Inside—where are you

Cézanne? Where are you
 Cezanne in this sky

These ways of stillness
 These ways of stirring

As apples wheel in
 Round baskets of air.

Van Gogh, *Notes on a Last Day*

It was always as if sight kept calling itself by some name other than his own, a word he could not translate back into an intelligible verb or textured noun, thick and shimmering against the hopeless discourse of water and paths, of transgression and the unaccepted, quick as a turn of balance. It was always as if the short strokes that lit the world with small fires kept the night still awake in the mind and the day still lingering in the night air. He had looked up. He had seen nothing. His brush worked against the expanse. Noontime trees burst into blossoms. He heard the leaves as they fell into the frame, saw the night sky blaze against the shadowy world: Wheat fields gashed in the foreground, cloud-coils and smaller spirals, the visual made manifest even beyond itself and then set back into the dashed limits and persistent qualms of framed silence. Light and love, the gashed and the wounded. What was it that made us want to leave? The crossing in the air of vying birds?

He had come to understand it only as a canvas of light and color—to stand in the small of the wind, in the narrow of the horizon and *stare and stare and stare* into the unwanted, to accept that he had been relegated to his sight: Fields wavering beneath the small tirades of air and cloud, a web of color that one held delicately in one's hand, silver pewter, gray-drenched and ultimately growing thin as he might have done if he were to live to see himself in one more reflecting mirror. Something would bring it to a bloody halt. The color of dark galleons across the blue Aegean sea, the yearning, bit by bit, of light coming down across distant western shores.

Days before in Arles, the sky, round and bright, fractured into loose light and wet blue clay—moments reckless in their contempt at the wide passing of the clouds. Drifting between the freshly laid colors of childhood, he walked amid the foreground, small empty winds nudged the solid colors that seemed to lift as if a migratory flock of haze, the soul's migration shared by a thousand flimsy bodies—the world's final mimicry and mime. He watched white blossoms ascending the wet trees, hopeless amid coils of drying colors, the hillsides filled with small birds, the sky in its own strange way matching the trees, leaf to cloud, brown on white, white on brown—night understood as a heaven that stains earth with its final love. What was there left, in this vacancy, for a generous mind to explore? And, sure enough, time stepped aside—unkept and disorderly in the unruliness of the hour.

Monet's Woman with a Parasol

He will probably paint me when I am on my deathbed! My body, my shadow, even the slight reflection of myself is his—my mirror has cracked, and I am his, inevitably.

*Paint can be an empty musiclike thing,
an architectonic perfection, precision
becoming grace and a color blurred.*

Is that really true? He wants Jean to move back a bit—he will take it in, touch it up later, add a little yellow here and there, tender as a gardener, find some way to make me feel the wind more.

*The sky maps out
its buildings
in the clouds
and the forms
of faith and sight
copy themselves out
in hopeless calligraphy
and mumbled French
because the eye
and hand
carries off
what can not be taken in.*

Is the parasol too heavy, the sun too hot, the wind much too wild? He is trying to place his mind in the forest of the world: A small wooden house bathed in light amid apple trees and wind-chimes, picket fences and sunny gardens, a wet stillness moving before the certain clock. I look up—we enter each other's gaze,

*On the
fringe of air,
slate blue
and sheer mist—
behind,
the bright clouds,
the scarf, the light,
the wind,
the final
chapter
of his sight—*

*Is he there?
Where is he?
Where am I?*

Clouds, tossed up and warm, grass and flowers ungathered like hair—morning, blue as a gasp, quiet as frost.

Toulouse-Lautrec's *Two Friends*

Tsk, tsk, what a thought. Toulouse-Lautrec must have known, to keep love at a safe distance,

He must have heard the world beating after his own heart, its repetitive murmurings, its recurring failures,

the afterthoughts and revisions of love still wet—drying on the wall. As he painted them,

the words must have emptied out onto love's stage into puns of water and splashes of lake,

and his face filled with shadows as he stood gazing at them, warm and small, fingers laced, the sky

through a small window, the blue held out like the steam and vapour at love's edge in late morning sheets.

Rilke and Cezanne

Rilke might have known, understood the poet's painter,
Bright against the shadows
Of the mind, understood the smell of three branches
Of heather sent to him, pressed inside a letter,

By his wife, which he compared to autumn earth,
Ceylon tea, tar and turpentine.
How like an embroidery the heather looked: These little
Branches of cypress, these twigs which, against velvet,

Appeared like fireworks or a Persian rug.
Something of love
And our anger and our world. How it inhabits us,
And uninhabits the self. An emptying out of love:

How it flings itself out of the self
And then creeps
Back through the world into the self—in the end
Painting was something like that love, something like

That circular wandering, its route out and then
Back in, something beyond
The partial, or even the judgments of love,
Something that brought him to the purity

Of baking apples and wooden tables
 And made him,
 In the end, a crabby old man—who had
 To be free of it in order to find it in the world

And bring it back into the self, a sort of visitation
 Of the lost and wayward
 Upon the land, a cold hermit amid warm
 Autumn leaves. Rilke understood it as something

Bright against the shadows of the mind—
 Something warm, lit,
 As of love, and left out for us to see: An old flash
 In the worn pan: Tin yellow and lead white.

Napkins and tablecloths, wicker baskets
 And teapots. A crabby old man still
 In love. Days, windows, mornings. His quiet
 Frame before the tilting world.

Two Dramatic Monologues

I. Van Gogh

What can I ask of myself now? It is all over with,
 All that wavering, that slog and slush,
 Of my making, a wet-coppered field, impasto-crease,
 The blue creamy, the paint raining into lines.

Skylarks and nightingales in gardens by the sea.
 I will make this line arterial-thin, those trees
 Bright as English archery, this field and path
 Needs the blush of shame. Stars on

My right, my cupped hands fill with light
 On the left, fistfuls of red and blue in the rough hands
 Of the frame. Gray-dreary, blue-dressed.
 And next to it, one last barrier.

Can I shake the wind a bit? Colors and crows.
 Will the night still come forth
 Woken by black wings and bright leaves?
 I should have been born a peasant in harsh light.

In the hope of finding something, *something* . . .
 That once, *yes*,
 In losing what one finds—
 All I find is Emptiness veering into Emptiness,

And dreams of rest . . . Rest . . .
The paint releasing me to die,

Iris and bluebells against the wind,
Lilacs and stems curling in the air.

I am framed, painted and unsold,
A vapor of air and new found nothingness

Unattached to anyone—other
Than these small grains of sight.

II. Gauguin's *Two Tahitian Women on the Beach* and *Self Portrait*

He keeps bumping into me with his eye.
 I hear his brushstrokes, his hand

Sliding across air—halos on everyone,
 All this crossing of boundaries and borders.

Jabs, jabs, jabs, jabs, jabs,
 Touching me up, strokes, strokes,

He will keep us silent except for the gray
 Of distant waves, but who can hear,

Longing and alone, amid the splashes
 And the waves. Can you hear the waves?

Would hear? Can he? As if we didn't!
 I am behind, beneath and round his eye,

Untouched and touched. I doubt
 He can understand this—no voice,

No sounds, no movement. Fix me up,
 Monsieur, touch me up, Monsieur France,

The dolls that you shake with the sharp
Whip of your brush. What is he saying now?

Hush. Hush. Hush. Hush.
Jabs, jabs, jabs, jabs, jabs, jabs,

And look here capture this, capture this,
Mons. Savage, and send it back

To them, so that they too can gaze,
Our two selves engaged, the two blue I's

Of my summery self. I respond,
Recede, poured and pierced.

Why do I feel this way lurching
Into his beauty in the sun's glare—

Rings in the mud, the twisting palm,
The half-lure outspread—mingling with his eye.