

Eating Van Gogh

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I ate a Van Gogh. Not a major one. And not all of it. But I did manage to tear off an entree size piece and chew it until the bitter oils burned metallic hot in the back of my throat.

I would have swallowed it too, had it not been for a disconcerted museum guard who pried my mouth open, allowing his associate's thick, frantic fingers to hunt around inside. He removed the piece, roughly the dimensions of a Hershey bar, savaging the soft pink tissue beneath my tongue in the process. It was a highly unsatisfying end to my hastily realized fantasy. And a poor beginning to my November.

The French have wine in their prisons! Can you imagine this sort of hospitality in America?

They say the French know how to incarcerate better than anyone in the world. I've had only one other jail experience (nothing major and too embarrassing to even talk about), but I'd have to agree. The food here is good. Better than good. Fresh vegetables, never canned. And though the meats are sometimes gray, they are always accompanied by fresh, crusty bread. And wine. The French have wine in their prisons! Can you imagine this sort of hospitality in America? (Would you like the Shiraz or our house Cab with your week-old meatloaf?)

Don't think, by the way, that I'm a gourmand of any kind. Until the day my eyes settled on 'La Siete d'Apres Millet,' eating meant little more to me than fueling up.

If you've never experienced 'La Siete d'Apres Millet' in person, you've missed out on a rarefied experience. And if you haven't, I apologize for its regrettable removal from view. I read in the papers that the acids in my saliva had not removed the paint from the canvas, but that the canvas itself had been fairly damaged by the gnashing of my molars. I have always maintained that the damage was greatly exacerbated by the abrupt manner in which the piece was extracted from my mouth. At any rate, suffice it to say that if the talented restoration workers in Italy can piece it back together, you should make it a priority to discover this masterpiece for yourself.

"Oh my God," you will likely whisper (as I did), "the brush strokes." For you will feel their violence, the dizzying electricity of them immediately. Then, after a more prolonged encounter, all of a sudden — like the way those 3-D pictures suddenly reveal themselves — you will know that each and every stroke mirrors a torment so exquisite, its only possible expression was beauty. Only love and art (I include literature and music) are capable of this kind of human irony.

Let me take a moment to describe the major details of my painting so you'll have some reference of the world I visited for 23 straight days. The caveat is that I'm aware of how frustratingly futile it is to describe art. I remember five years ago as an impressionable college sophomore, I came upon a concerto recording one night that filled me with such delicious melancholy, it commanded me to play it again and again until the sky finally lightened to a desperate morning pale. (I would have continued to listen to it even then, had it not been for three floormates who broke down my door and tossed both the CD and my CD player out the window. I held no malice toward them. They were hockey players from Canada who'd been admitted on scholarship. I did not expect them to understand how each note — though emotionally neutral on its own — when placed in specific combination with other carefully chosen notes from other instruments, could create an effect that twisted and plucked so many strings inside me.) Yet — and this is my point — I was absolutely mute to describe the way in which it managed to do this.

My painting is a pastoral scene. Two farm workers take an afternoon nap beneath the shadow of a hay bale. One man. One woman. The sun is hot and high. The sky the driest blue, the very Provence sky Van Gogh came to Arles to paint. The man's clog-like shoes are off. Their two scythes lie, just like them, side by side.

His straw hat is tipped over his eyes in an attempt to block out the mid-day sun. His facial features are not revealed. The artist chose them to be so irrelevant he hadn't bothered with them at all. Or perhaps he'd grown tired of the painting and planned to come back and finish the fellow's face later. But he never did, and the man's face remains a gray cast, giving him the ashen, featureless appearance of a burn victim.

In the field behind them are two oxen, unhitched from their plows, waiting like two reliable old Buicks. How long have they been resting? Fifteen minutes? An hour? It doesn't matter. You can tell by the way they lazily graze, that had it been even the briefest of breaks, they'd long forgotten they were beasts of burden.

It is a captured moment of absolute tranquillity which is completely at odds with the frenetic energy of Van Gogh's technique. This dialectic makes it almost impossible to emotionally digest the painting. No matter how many hours you stand before it. (Trust me.)

In the tiny jail just three blocks from the museum where I'd been hastily sent, my lawyer asked me why I would be driven to commit such a selfish and brazen crime. He was a small man, fastidiously dressed with a maroon-colored handkerchief in his breast coat pocket. I was impressed that he knew an English word like "brazen," which was, incidentally, my primary reason for accepting him as my legal representative.

“Because I tried to own it with my eyes, but my eyes alone were not enough.” I assumed that since he was French and the French possessing a superior love of the arts, he would understand this. But if he did, he offered me no encouragement.

“So one day,” I continued, “when the guards changed positions and the crowd was light, I satisfied myself with a gentle, quick stroke of my fingertips across the canvas.”

“You touched the painting?!” He seemed alarmed by this, as if he hadn’t yet heard that I’d eaten a large hunk of it.

“Many times. But only lightly. And what amazed me was that I could still smell the sharp, acrid character of the oils after all these years.”

“Well,” he said, which came out in a kind of harumph, “that is because the acids from your fingers caused the oil to decompose.”

“Perhaps,” I admitted. It was a good point. “So I stared at my painting while I sniffed gently at my fingers until the acrid scent wore off.”

This must have sounded odd to him as well because he cocked his head at me like a lap dog straining to understand a high-pitched sound.

“I wasn’t obvious about it,” I explained with a slight defensiveness that surprised me. “I did things. I pretended to rub an itch on my upper lip, to scratch my nose, to think deeply using my fingers as an aid. I don’t think anyone suspected I was smelling my fingers, not even the more observant German tourists.”

“What did you think you’d gain by destroying the very vision that consumed you?” he asked.

The truth was, I’d never gotten around to considering the after part. I had no answer for him. He paced back and forth in my tiny cell. Two steps to the wall. Two steps back to the bars.

Finally, he turned to me and said, “Your crime. It is a crime of artistic passion, maybe. Yes? Perhaps it is not unlike rape. For a rapist, it is not enough to just view the woman, to enjoy her beauty from afar. Some men must, for whatever reasons of derangement, possess them.”

I sincerely hoped he was not planning to use this as my primary line of defense and I did my best to encourage him otherwise.

Though he didn’t ask, I volunteered to share my story. And while he didn’t say ‘no,’ he also didn’t take notes. And as I talked he sat there with a look that said he wished my tale was accompanied by a much-needed late afternoon Pernod.

Most museum-goers gave my painting only a casual look, I explained. Some paused for an extra few seconds, but most quickly moved on to absorb the rest of the Musee d'Orsay's remarkable Impressionist collection. I, however, was transfixed by my very first glance — frozen like a man who spies a naked woman in a window across the way and fears that his slightest movement might cause her to notice and relieve him of the vision.

Only when the museum closed six hours later did I move. A thin museum guard with long, boney fingers, tapped my shoulder. But I'd sunk thick roots down through the nerves of my feet, deep into the smooth limestone floor. Her first couple tries must not have been successful, for she called out in French as she pecked insistently at the nape of my neck. Like someone being pulled from deep beneath the water, I felt as if I was being thrust to the surface too quickly and experienced a sort of reality-dosing equivalent of the bends. I wandered the city that night in a tunnel-visions daze, finally stopping for the comfort of a harsh Kronenberg in a neighborhood bar I could never find again.

When the museum opened the next morning, I was there. For ten straight hours I stared at that painting, without the slightest regard for the needs of my bladder. Several times, the guards asked if I would like to sit, but I stayed standing, barely acknowledging their kindness.

The following day, despite my aching back and the soreness surrounding my knees and the pads of my heels, I was in front of my painting again.

On my way to the museum on the fourth day, I considered inquiring about a guard position, since I planned to be there anyway. Also, I had lost my waiting job the day before, having neglected to show up for three consecutive lunches. But my constant and focused presence must have begun to register concern among the staff. As I entered the museum that morning I was politely pulled aside, frisked and my bag searched.

The point I must make clear is that I truly tried to satisfy my increasing desires at each step. But after a time, each new sense I employed lost its potency. There came a time when I needed to do more than just look, but to touch. When I ached for more than just a touch, but a smell. When I needed to go beyond the understanding of smell. When, on the twenty-third day, I needed to run my tongue along those thick, textured ridges that were once so soft and unctuous and heavy, they surely remained gooey long after other parts had dried. When I needed to have them inside me, to know what those globules felt like pressed by my tongue against the soft back of my palette.

Standing there that morning, the choice overwhelmed me. Which part of this world should I consume? The oxen? One of the sleeping workers? Should I eat a bale of wheat? Or a chunk of sky? (I remembered a birthday cake. A *Star Wars* birthday cake at a friend's party. And I remembered crying because I had quietly prayed for a piece of Luke Skywalker, but ended up with Darth Vader's helmet.)

As I waited, I considered. After nearly two hours, when the guards had gotten used to my presence for the day, I dug out the small Japanese knife I'd carefully hidden beneath the cardboard bottom of my pack. When the guards changed, I clipped open the sweet blade, stepped past the imaginary boundary that was the accepted plane of viewing and pressured the instrument's razor tip to the canvas. At first, it created only a slight depression. Then I applied more and more pressure until I heard the tight pop of the tip's intrusion and felt the give of the canvas as the blade tore through it, at first textured and resistant, then increasingly smooth. I watched as the knife's shaft disappeared down to the dark burlwood handle.

A breath — quick and high in my chest. Then another cut upward and a sharp cut to the left. It echoed through the room like an unexpected tear in a pair of old Levi's. Then my other hand grabbing for it and pulling down at the flap like a sow's ear, the tear meeting the final horizontal stroke of my knife. Voila. A piece of Van Gogh lay in the flat of my hand, it's Yang counterpart a new square of emptiness in the bottom right hand corner of the painting.

It was more mealy than I'd anticipated. Without water (or even better, one of those four-year-old Cabernets the French love to parade around with), the canvas or the paste shellacking the back of it — I'm unsure which — coated my tongue with a cornmeal-like substance that tasted of stale apricot and the smell of dog's dander after a rain (if you could taste that smell, it would be very close.) The guard who removed the piece from my mouth did not know that the cottage cheese-like paste on his fingers was from the painting. He was so put off by the sight of the yellow crumbles that he jumped back from me in fear and disgust, as if I had just exposed him to some rare contagion.

When the painting was unveiled in the courtroom, there were gasps. As if a man's severed hand had been exposed to the room.

The prosecution exhibited four pieces of evidence. The majority of the canvas, the two pieces that were taken from my mouth each stretched out on a small canvas of its own, and the small elegant Japanese folding knife I'd purchased at the Sunday flea market.

My lawyer did his best to persuade the Judge toward the unique power and expression of my attraction.

"Surely, we have all been irresistibly drawn to things — to certain people, or foods, or drink," he said slowly, trying to finish by making the leap as smoothly as he could.

"And art, the love of art, is as visceral a love, as consuming a passion for some, as one's love for the world's great cuisines or for a fine LaFite. Albeit not a recent LaFite, but a LaFite born, say, in the fine vintage years of the mid 70's."

My lawyer, pleased with his analogy, bowed to all and slid back onto the hard wooden bench beside me.

“You make me sound like a painting eater!” I whispered too loudly for him, “I’m not a painting eater! It’s just one painting. It’s just *that* painting!”

He smiled back at me the way French men do when they don’t want to deal with you. It’s a mollifying smile, followed by the slightest of shrugs, as if to say “these words, sadly, I do not understand.” It is a technique they employ almost exclusively on Americans and their own teenage daughters.

“Please tell him,” I tried again. “Tell him I’ve never eaten anything but food ever before. I never even went through that dirt and coin eating phase so popular with children.”

My lawyer just tapped his pinkie gently to his slightly puckered lips to quiet me. I was displeasing him, upsetting his small moment of triumph.

When I was pronounced guilty (which, under the circumstances, did not surprise me) my lawyer informed me of my good fortune. Had I ingested anything by Monet — who was in particular vogue at the time — I would certainly have been dealt a much harsher sentence.

I received five years, with parole possible after six months. Plus one year of mandatory community service. The defense offered no argument. My lawyer seemed antsy to move on and I didn’t push it. Having already tasted a few days of French incarceration, I knew the experience would not be like the unpleasant ones Americans experience in Indonesia when they’re caught with heroin hidden in their various interiors. And, it helps me to remember how cold and dreary the flat I’d rented behind the Marais was, and how the hot water came on with a loud groaning shudder, followed mostly by spasms of rusted brown spittle.

Yesterday, a woman who’d been a sort of girlfriend to me during those first weeks in Paris brought me a postcard of ‘La Siete d’Apres Millet.’ I feel it now in the front pocket of my gray prison shirt. Each time I lean forward, the sharp rigid plain of it gives slightly against the bottom of my breast. I spent last night gently tapping my teeth up and down along the card’s light plastic coating. It gave off a pleasurable almost metallic sound that no one but myself could hear. Toward morning, I found myself nibbling lightly at the corners— small little tugs that pulled minute pieces away like taffy. I tried not to do this, but it was fairly uncontrollable.

But here’s the fantastic thing about “uncontrollable.” It leads you down a path of knowing, that controllable never finds. I now know what a priceless painting tastes like. My experience is, I would say, more rare than not. The ability to experience the linked connection of the senses, to satisfy the desire to know how a cello smells around its echo hole when it plays a Chopin Sonata; to know how the rise and fall of a soprano’s diaphragm feels against the lightest touch of your fingertips as she sings an aria from La Traviata; or to

experience the skin-splitting feel of your palm and fingers along the brittle edge of a 35 mm print of “The 400 Blows” as its images speed their way toward the projector’s lens.

In my head, I try my best to imagine these experiences. I close my eyes and I try. The thoughts fill my chest, my tongue and mouth, my nostrils with joy. But they also make me anxious. Except for the olive-green radio issued to me by this institution and an art calendar (last year’s) which I’d brought with me, there is little in my small quarters to help me realize these imaginings. A doctor employed by this facility believes my obsessive fantasies (his term, not mine) have created a sort of panic disorder in me that is not healthy. I would not disagree with his assessment, for I have been experiencing, especially at night, shortened breath and a feeling of pressure on my chest. And on his recommendation, I have vowed to deal with these fantasies — or as many as I can, at least— as soon as I am once again able.