**Love Letters to Vincent**

poems

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inspired by

the music of Kayleen Asbo

& the paintings of Vincent van Gogh

version for performance

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**More Love, More Love**

*Sorrow is how we learn to love.*

*—Rita Mae Brown,* Riding Shotgun

If sorrow is how we learn to love,

then let us learn.

Already enough sorrow’s been sown

for whole continents to erupt

into astonishing tenderness.

Let us learn. Let compassion grow rampant,

like sunflowers along the highway.

Let each act of kindness replant itself

into acres and acres of widespread devotion.

Let us choose love as if our lives depend on it.

The sorrow is great. Let us learn to love greater—

riotous love, expansive love,

love so rooted, so common

we almost forget

the world could look any other way.

**The Invitation of the Old Church Tower**

*Inspired by Vincent van Gogh’s painting* [*“The Peasants’ Churchyard”*](https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0002V1962) *(1885) and Kayleen Asbo’s piano composition “Old Tower”*

Can you hear them, too,

the bells that don’t ring

in the missing steeple

of the ruined church?

Can you hear them, the stifled

sobs of the mothers

not kneeling beside

the old graves?

And the crows as they circle

the crumbling tower,

can you make out their dissonant

caws?

I hear them, the bells,

like a summoning.

*Come listen,* they say.

*Come stand in this field*

*until you can hear the shouts*

*of the men who once tilled here,*

*hear the prayers once prayed here,*

*the hymns once sung.*

*Come listen until you can hear*

*the story of the boy who grew up here*

*a boy who wanted to work for the church*

*then turned his passion toward painting.*

*Come stand here and listen*

*’til even the shadows sing,*

*listen until*

*you can hear yourself*

*listening.*

**Thinking of Vincent Painting “Winter”**

*inspired by the painting “Winter (The Vicarage Garden Under Snow)” by Vincent Van Gogh and the piano composition “Winter Fields” by Kayleen Asbo*

While he painted the world in browns and grays,

Vincent van Gogh did not yet know

of the throbbing vibrance that would someday

emerge from inside him. He did not yet know

how these somber scenes—like a man alone

shoveling the dim weight of winter—

would give way to an ecstasy of gold,

an elation of blue, rapturous green.

God, I am drawn to these grim, gritty paintings

with their muted schemes and tangled branches,

searching for notes of what will happen—

how he will travel to the warmth of Provence,

will come to share through thick stroke and bright hue

“the terrible passions of humanity.”

How he will give everything, everything to his art—

how his talent will grow as the world breaks his heart,

how he will be devoted to beauty,

how he will be wrestled by melancholy.

I imagine him sitting in the bleak Dutch cold,

painting the dreary, dissonant snow,

becoming the painter he’s destined to be,

living into the losses, the gifts he does not yet know.

**On a Day When Life Feels Black and White**

*Inspired by* [*“Impasse des Deus Frères”*](https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0014V1962) *by Vincent van Gogh and Kayleen Asbo’s musical response, “Moulins de Gallette.”*

Some days, like today, I long for rain,

long for the muted, grey kind of day

that unfolded in the oils of van Gogh,

when he’d stroll through the flat

and quiet daytime streets of Montmartre,

those dreamy hours when the world

is not too bright, not too exultant,

not too sure of its gaiety,

a day when the wind is the only thing

that feels it needs to move,

when I don’t need to know anything

about anything, can notice how

the world resists resolution,

how the barest scrap of color

can change the whole scene,

can let myself be content to be gray,

can let myself be a student of windmills,

notice how it’s the invisible forces

like silent love, like persistent wind,

that make the whole world spin.

**Seascape Near Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer**

*inspired by* [*“Seascape near Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer”*](https://www.vincentvangogh.org/seascape-near-les-saintes-maries-de-la-mer.jsp) *by Vincent van Gogh and music by Kayleen Asbo, “Les Bateaux de Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer”*

Dear Vincent, I wish I could speak of grief

as well as you articulate the colors of the sea,

naming all the hues as they change in the light—

noting the deep ultramarine near the shore

even as it tends toward pale russet, toward violet.

*It’s always changing,* you wrote to Theo.

*You can’t even tell if it’s blue because*

*a second later the changing light*

*has taken on a pink or gray tinge.*

The same is true of shades of loss—

the moment I identify a deep feeling of sorrow,

I notice pale hints of trust, nuances of awe.

The moment I name it tenderness,

it shifts into pain, ferocity, exhaustion.

Tonight I stared into the seascape you painted

on the shores of the Mediterranean,

and I knew myself not as the water

with its capricious tones, but as the boat

that sails upon it, something transported

by all this change. I tried to see the sea

with the same perspective you had:

*It wasn't very cheery but neither was it sad*

*it was beautiful.*

Oh, those blue depths with their emerald, their white.

I let myself be carried by that beauty.

**Longing to Be Seen**

*after the painting “The Bedroom” by Vincent van Gogh and the piano composition “Yellow Bed” by Kayleen Asbo*

In the tilted room with the yellow bed,

hope waltzes on the wooden floor—

one, two, three, one, two, three—

not that you see it there,

it’s not obvious like the windows,

the paintings, the mirror, the pitcher, the chairs.

Hope is what you don’t see.

But it is there, beside the water glasses,

beside the long towel.

Hope sways so keenly

to snatches of melody

the whole room seems to sway.

And it’s one, two, three,

one, two, three; *Who*, hope says,

*will dance with me?* It promises

friendship. It promises rest.

*Will you dance?* it asks, a dizzy mess.

It promises community. It promises fame.

*Will you dance?* it asks, but it smells

of paint and faraway dreams.

It smells of madness and longing to be seen.

*Will you dance?* it says, its arms flung out.

Here is where Vincent said yes.

Some see a still life, but others see

the whirling, the twirling, the beautiful

spinning of hope, reeling hope,

fragile hope.

**Van Gogh Talks About** [***The Night Café***](https://www.vincentvangogh.org/the-night-cafe.jsp)

inspired by the painting, his letters, and the piano composition “Red Café” by Kayleen Asbo

It can’t all be sunflowers

and haystacks and fishing boats.

It can’t all be seascapes

and still lifes with quince.

Sometimes the rooms

I paint are blood red,

ugly rooms filled with violence

and loneliness.

And the people who come here

are drunkards and derelicts.

They huddle in blue despair.

They’re down-and-outs

and prostitutes,

they’re “sleeping hooligans

in dreary rooms.”

They slouch

and they steal.

They drink some more.

And the gas lights stare

like sour yellow eyes.

The floor seems to ripple

and the tables seem to weave.

And I enter in headlong

though I try to leave.

And I try to leave,

but the chairs are empty

and they call me in

saying, *Here is a place*

*where you can ruin yourself.*

*Come, give in to ruin.*

*Go mad. Come go mad.*

*Come sin. Won’t you sin?*

*Won’t you come in?*

*Come in. Come in.*

And when it crashes,

oh, it crashes,

and it all falls down.

But I tasted it,

sweet chaos,

ardent decay,

and now that I know it,

it never goes away.

**Something Worth Sharing**

*inspired by* [Eternity’s Gate](https://www.vincentvangogh.org/at-eternitys-gate.jsp) *by Vincent van Gogh and a piano composition by the same name by Kayleen Asbo, with quotes from van Gogh’s writings about the painting*

Perhaps you, too, have sat

in the corner of a room,

back bent like winter grass,

elbows on your knees,

head weighty in your hands.

Unsure how to live

another minute.

This is perhaps

the moment

we least want to be seen,

but if we are lucky,

perhaps an artist

with an eye for eternity

will feel it his *duty*

to find in our ruin

*something precious,*

*something noble,*

so we know ourselves

part of infinity,

our life a brief song,

unbearably beautiful,

a masterpiece,

dark and descending

though it is.

**The Big Conversation**

*inspired by* [*Pietà*](https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/collezione-d_arte-contemporanea/sala-2--van-gogh--gauguin--medardo-rosso/vincent-van-gogh--pieta.html) *by Vincent van Gogh and a piano composition by the same name by Kayleen Asbo*

When Chopin wrote his prelude in E minor,

its melody descending like sundown in a field,

he could never have guessed how

Eugène Delacroix would listen to the song relentlessly

when he painted his *Pietà*, how the haunting notes

would infuse themselves into the twilight

of the Virgin Mary’s blue dress,

into her outstretched hands and her oddly angled neck

as she held the dead body of her son.

And Delacroix could not have known

how, two years later, Anna van Gogh

would give birth to Vincent Willem,

his heart unbeating, his lungs unbreathing—

how Anna would long to mourn like the Virgin

and hold her own dead child, but her husband

would forbid her to even speak of the loss,

calling her grief a sin.

And Anna could not have known

how a year to the day when her first son died

she would deliver another boy

and name him Vincent Willem van Gogh,

and he would grow up seeing his own name

and birthday carved into a gravestone.

No surprise then, perhaps, that when Vincent

painted his own version of Delacroix’s *Pietà*,

he painted the dead son in the likeness of himself—

his own slender shoulders, his own red beard.

In Virgin Mary’s eyes, he painted dusk.

And van Gogh could not have known

how over a hundred years later

a woman named Kayleen, inspired

by Chopin and the agony in Vincent’s painting,

would write a song for piano, a song infused

with heartache and beauty, eventide and gloaming.

And Kayleen could not have known how,

months later, another woman would hear

in the slow rolling bass of the minor key

a mirror for her brokenness,

the spilling of her own golds and blues,

how she would seek out Vincent’s *Pietà*

and see in the painting

her own empty hands, her own dead son.

She would understand in an instant

she was not alone

in meeting the darkling swell of unbearable loss

and the light of bearing it anyway—

**Starry Nights**

*inspired by “Starry Night over the Rhone” and “The Starry Night” by Vincent van Gogh and the piano composition “Starry Nights” by Kayleen Asbo*   
   
*Anything will give up its secrets if you love it enough.*  
*―George Washington Carver*  
   
   
You teach us how to meet the night,  
the quiet shadowed pools of night,  
the night outside the glow of home,  
the night beyond the sleep-warm bed.  
   
You teach us how to fall in love with night,  
the violet night, deep fields of night,  
the swirling, churning curves of night,  
the whirling, sweeping waves of night—  
   
and oh the stars in their spiraling  
you share their gold and pink and green,  
a twinkling, a burst of shine,  
a firmament in which to dream—  
   
but there’s no way to see stars  
if you don’t first befriend the dark.  
You teach us how to love the dark,  
the verdant, fertile wholesome dark.  
   
Oh, to love what frightens us—  
to meet dark with curiousness,  
Though it’s mighty, tumultuous,  
you teach us the dark is generous.  
   
Vincent, you didn’t paint your asylum’s window bars.  
You showed us only night. And stars.

**Almond Blossoms**

*inspired by* [Almond Blossoms](https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/art-and-stories/stories/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-van-goghs-almond-blossom) *by Vincent van Gogh and music by Kayleen Asbo by the same name*

I want to hang a painting

of almond blossoms

above your bed

so when you wake

the first thing you see

are delicate white petals

and a sky a thousand shades of blue.

I want you to wake every morning

into an ever-emerging sense of spring—

wake into sunshine,

wake to a world of splendor

and extravagant blossoming.

Of course, the fall.

Of course, the struggle.

Of course, the difficult days.

And of course, the almond blossoms,

painted in creams, pinks and greens

each one an insistent grace note

that lingers beyond its season,

promising something improbable

and utterly necessary,

like ever-blooming beauty,

like the light and airy perfume of hope.

**Looking at Van Gogh’s “Wheat Field with Cypresses”**

while listening to Kayleen Asbo’s “Cypresses”

The wind, that knows itself only by what

it touches, does not whip your hair

as it churns through the wide golden wheat fields,

does not steal your hat as it tosses

the clouds into frothy white and violet whorls,

does not slap your face as you stare

at the silver-green branches of olive trees

upswept into turbulent curves. You’re just looking.

Until you realize the wind has breached the frame

and touched you the way it touches all that it loves,

and your heart knows what it perhaps wishes

it did not know—that all is changed and rearranged,

all gets stirred up and remade, even the cypress,

even the mountains, even the stubbornest heart.

**Learning from “The Sower”**

*inspired by the painting* [*“The Sower”*](https://krollermuller.nl/en/vincent-van-gogh-the-sower) *by Vincent van Gogh and piano composition by the same name by Kayleen Asbo*

Forever, the farmer depicted in oils

strides across the field throwing seeds

in an eternal ostinato sowing.

Forever, the sun behind his back

pulses radiant, golden, glowing.

Forever, the worker is caught mid-step

as he swings back his arm in the blue-ish light,

Forever his work is never done.

Forever there are mouths to feed

and grain to grow and the need

for one who unstintingly sows—

and there are thousands of ways to sow.

It is said the only thing necessary

for evil to triumph

is for good people to do nothing.

And so like van Gogh’s sower,

it is our work to keep sowing.

Though forever loss.

Though forever the poor.

Though forever depression.

Though forever war.

Though forever the crows descend

to follow the sower and eat the seed,

the sower sows despite.

The sower sows because—

The sower sows forever,

for that is what a sower does.

**First Steps**

*inspired by* [*“First Steps” (after Millet)*](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436526) *by Vincent Van Gogh and a song by the same name by Kayleen Asbo*

Precious as the first pale green of spring

those first awkward steps of a child.

How we cheer their innocent tottering.

How we celebrate the very thing

that will lead our child away

from the safety of our arms.

Memory is like a Dutch painter

who insists on portraying

a child’s first steps

in only the loveliest hues,

and the frame contains

only lyrical hope,

and each brush stroke

is dipped in tenderness,

and we don’t yet know

how hard it will be to let go,

how the sweetest songs end

long before the heart is ready.

**Looking at *Landscape at Auvers in the Rain***

inspired by [*Landscape at Auvers in the Rain*](http://art-vangogh.com/auvers_63.html) by Vincent van Gogh and *Rain at Auvers* by Kayleen Asbo

Sometimes when it rains

I forget it will ever stop raining.

The rain, it falls,

it falls for days, it falls,

and the rain becomes

a metric imperative,

insistent as a stop watch,

familiar as the pulsing

of blood in the heart,

a throbbing, a beat so adamant

I forget any other tune.

Did you forget, Vincent,

the rain would stop?

Did you feel inside you

a storm as urgent, as bold,

as the rain you painted

in long diagonal strokes?

I can’t look at your painting

without feeling inside me the rain,

the rain, feel it slant across my world

in thick dark lines.

I can’t look at the purples

and yellows of Auvers

without remembering how days

after you painted these hues,

you would take your life.

But how could I vilify the storm

even knowing what I do?

You found in the tumult

light.

You fueled the dampened, darkened world

with ecstatic gold.

didn’t push the storm away, Vincent.

You let it drench you.

You shared with us all

how struggle, too,

is so terribly, terribly

beautiful.

**In the “Wheat Field with Crows”**

*inspired by* [*“Wheat Field with Crows”*](https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0149v1962) *painted by Vincent van Gogh and “Blackbirds” composed by Kayleen Asbo*

Oh Vincent, I long to pause with you

where the three paths converge in the wheat field.

We can stand there beneath the sullen sky

like two piano notes side by side,

which, when played at the same time,

rub against each other

in an awkward, uncomfortable music.

Sometimes what unsettles us

is so unbearably beautiful.

I want to meet you in this moment

before you return to a wheat field

with not a brush, but a gun,

want to meet you in this moment

before the choice, before the shot,

this moment when there are still three paths,

all of them leading beyond the frame.

Let’s linger here, Vincent,

beneath the dark arpeggios of crows,

linger here while everything is still possible.

The storm is coming, I see it, too,

turbulent and full of change

while in the honest wheat, look,

you’ve shared so much light, so much gold.

**Roots**

each line taken separately from his letters or speech  
 inspired by his unfinished painting [*“Tree Roots,”*](https://www.vincentvangogh.org/tree-roots.jsp) which was first hung upside down,   
and by Kayleen Asbo’s piano composition “Roots”  
   
  
   
the root of everything—

you will find beauty everywhere,  
and the sadness will last forever  
   
\*  
   
the sadness will last forever,  
and you will find beauty everywhere

the root of everything—  
 

**Love Letter to Vincent**

Oh Vincent,

There is in my heart

a small yellow room

with a small wooden table

with a dull yellow cloth

and a rounded clay vase

with your name scrawled in blue,

and it’s bursting with sunflowers,

all of them open, all of them turning,

turning toward the light,

which is to say the flowers face every which way.

There is light everywhere we dare to turn.

Consider this a love letter, Vincent,

a letter sent back in time,

a letter that impossibly arrives

just when you despair,

just when you believe no one cares about your art,

the letter that reaches you to say you are loved

in that exact moment you feel unlovable.

Let this be the letter in which you see

the sunflowers you sowed a hundred thirty years ago

have re-seeded themselves in me

and now grow rampant in my days,

golden petalled and flagrantly lovely.

And your stars, swirling, your wheat fields goldening,

your cypress reaching, your church bells unsinging,

you will find them all in my words.

This is how love replants itself—

more love, old friend, more love.

Because you were so truly you,

so full of hope, so full of fear,

because you risked your everything,

I, too, will risk, will dare.

Consider this a love letter, Vincent,

the one that helps you see

how your life is linked to eternity.

Let this be a letter that says thank you, Vincent,

for teaching us new ways to see beauty.

Perhaps this letter will arrive

when you are in the yellow room,

or perhaps the asylum, perhaps in Neuwen,

and you, surprised to find it addressed to you,

will receive it and let the words in,

then hear your own startled voice saying,

*It matters?* as you pick up your brush

and begin again.