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Matisse's Self Portrait

by CHARLES L. MEE

[An artist's studio,
filled with junk,
junk everywhere
a total wreck of easels and canvases
and pottery and drawings
and architect's tables
and tubes of paint.]

Henri wanders in,
holding a cup of tea.]

HENRI

This is what I do every morning
I get a cup of tea
and I step through the door into my studio
and whatever catches my attention
that's what I do.
I go to that, whatever it is.
I look at it and see if it needs a little more red somewhere
or a little blue on the top
and I do that
until something else in the studio catches my eye
something else that might need a little blue
or another tree painted in
or a sailboat sailing up in the sky.
This is what I do,

and this is a perfect life,
and I love it.

I go from painting to painting
and sometimes to a piece of pottery
that I was painting the other day
or over on the other side of the studio
to the architect's drawing table
where a piece of paper needs a little more pen and ink.
I wander.

Taken from place to place by whatever catches my eye
whatever feels good.

And

usually

by the time I get to the far end of my studio
it's time for lunch

so I open the door at that end of the studio
and step out onto the little terrace
where there is a small table and a few chairs
overlooking the vineyards
and my wife will join me for lunch.

Well, let's be honest,

she will usually bring lunch out onto the terrace,
and we will have lunch together
and then
we will make love in the afternoon.

[Singers step out and sing.

All the rubble of the studio,
all the canvases and tables and pots and junk
slide away to the side
or ascend to the flies.

And a nude woman is revealed,
reclining on a chaise longue
in front of a window

And, when the singers finish singing,
all the stuff of the studio slides back in
and descends from heaven,
and the nude model disappears again.]

HENRI

I don't know if anyone can plan to have a life like this.
It just happens
when you're not thinking.
And then you see if you can just be resourceful enough
not to reduce it to rubble.

[A fully clothed woman comes in
and sits in a chair.
She wears a fabulous hat.]

THE MODEL

Is the hat you think ok?

HENRI

Oh, yes, I like the hat.
Very nice.
Or you could wear something more
possibly red.

THE MODEL [very agreeably]

Yes.

[she reaches out, take a red hat from a table,
puts it on]

HENRI

That's nice.
Very pretty.
Or perhaps you could even have something
even a little bit extravagant
with some feathers perhaps.

THE MODEL

Yes.

[she takes off the red hat,
puts on a black hat with feathers]

HENRI

I like that!

I could do with the feathers.

Unless, possibly,
something simple and direct
dramatic

not something to distract from the essence of the vision

which is

after all:

you.

And so, perhaps,
just the red hat is perfect.

THE MODEL

Or the hat I had at first?

HENRI

Yes. Yes.

I think really

yes.

The first instinct was the best.

[She puts on the hat she had on at first
and he returns to painting her.

Silence for a while.]

THE MODEL

You know

this motif—

the woman in the hat—

I wonder:
is there a limit to the number of these hat paintings
that can be sold?

HENRI
I don't know.

THE MODEL
Well, I mean,
should you stop doing it?

HENRI
This is what I love to do.

THE MODEL
I don't think you can sell three hundred paintings
of a woman in a hat.

HENRI
Different hats.

THE MODEL
Different hats!
But still,
do you possibly have to think a little bit
what someone else might like?

HENRI
I don't know what someone else might like.
I think they will have to decide that for themselves.
So, I just do what I love,
that's all.
And since I am the world's leading expert on what I love,
I can't be wrong.
And since I'm not from Mars,
it could be two or three other people will like it, too.

THE MODEL
Two or three other people.

And,
when the music ends,
they take seats in a café and are joined by three or four men.
All the men are artists,
and they talk about art
while Henri just paints them.
And the women join in the conversation with the men, too,
because they are also artists,
so they are all talking about art.

AN ARTIST

Art
is like a border of flowers along the course of civilization.

ANOTHER ARTIST

What was any art but a mould
in which to imprison for a moment
the shining elusive element which is life itself—
life hurrying past us and running away,
too strong to stop,
too sweet to lose.

ANOTHER ARTIST

What art offers is space—
a certain breathing room for the spirit.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Artistry is an innate distrust of the theory of reality
concocted by the five senses.

ANOTHER ARTIST

The artist
does not see things as they are,
but as he is.

ANOTHER ARTIST

A great artist is always before his time
or behind it.

ANOTHER ARTIST

An artist never really finishes his work;
he merely abandons it.

ANOTHER ARTIST

God is really only another artist.
He invented the giraffe, the elephant and the cat.
He has no real style.
He just goes on trying other things.

ANOTHER ARTIST

If Michelangelo had been straight,
the Sistine Chapel would have been wallpapered.

ANOTHER ARTIST

The buttocks
are the most aesthetically pleasing part of the body
because they are non-functional.
Although they conceal an essential orifice,
these pointless globes are as near as the human form can ever come
to abstract art.

ANOTHER ARTIST

The question of common sense is always
what is it good for? —
a question which would abolish the rose
and be answered triumphantly by the cabbage.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Listen carefully to the first criticisms made of your work.
Note just what it is about your work that critics don't like —
then cultivate it.
That's the only part of your work that's individual
and worth keeping.

ANOTHER ARTIST

When my daughter was about seven years old,
she asked me one day what I did at work.
I told her I worked at the college —

that my job was to teach people how to draw.
She stared at me,
incredulous,
and said,
"You mean they forget?"

ANOTHER ARTIST

Lying in bed
would be an altogether perfect and supreme experience
if only one had a colored pencil long enough to draw on the ceiling.
[And then they all push the tables to the side,
take off their clothes,
and lie down on the grass
and have a picnic,
while Henri goes on painting,
and he talks from time to time while he paints.]

[Note:
all the nudes in this piece
can be dressed in full skin-tight body suits
with genitals painted on the body suits.]

HENRI

I always thought the main thing was to practice.
And so, when no one else was interested,
I just painted my own portrait over and over and over again.
And then my wife.
And she didn't seem to mind
if I asked her to take off her clothes.

At first
when you start out
you worry if you can make a living
or how you will pay the rent if you never make a living
and so
as time goes on
sometimes even for a year or two
you are awakened early every morning
at 4:30 or 5 o'clock

by anxiety about money
and you have to talk yourself back to sleep
because you know
if you don't get your sleep
you won't be able to do anything useful
you worry about money
and fame
you think if you were famous you would have money
and even if you didn't have much money
you would have fame
and that would make you feel good
although
in time
finally
all you worry about is immortality
what's the use?
what was the point?
will it all have been worth anything at all?
will it just disappear when you do?
or will it last?
and this is the sort of thing
that drives most people,
at last,
to believe in god and heaven.
Because, if this life is meaningless,
at least you can count on heaven.
Never mind fame and fortune and immortality
meaning and significance
never mind even having any point at all to your life
if you are aiming for heaven
and you have some small chance of getting there,
that's all you need.
Until you think
if I attach myself to god and heaven
does this mean I've just given up on my own life on earth?
And so
you are sent back once again
to thinking:
never mind about money or fame or immortality

or heaven
I will do what I love.
I will do what I love.
And that will be a rich and wonderful
and glorious life.
That's all I can hope for.

[Two old men come out,
sit at a table
and drink coffee or wine
or play cards—
and take their time speaking—
as Henri continues to paint,
standing back from his canvas from time to time
to see what he has done,
and then resuming painting.]

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail...
failure is his world and to shrink from it desertion....

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

Most of my conscious efforts have ended in embarrassing failure...

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

The only real failure is trying to second-guess the taste of an audience. Nothing
comes out of that except a kind of inward humiliation.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

An artist can fail many times,
but he isn't a failure until he gives up.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

You fail only if you stop...

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

Failure is always hurtful, humiliating and embarrassing,
but it's the price to pay for daring to get what we want out of life.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

It is better to be a failure at something you love
than to be a success at something you hate.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

The only people who never fail are those who never, never try.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

When we are flat on our backs
there is no way to look but up.
[in the middle of this conversation,
another artist enters the café,
sits down at a table with his drink in his hand,
puts his drink on the table,
and slowly lowers his head
until his head is on the table,
and he has passed out]

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

An artist cannot fail;
it is a success to be one.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

Success is the ability to go from failure to failure
without losing your enthusiasm.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

The very things I used to be told off for—
daydreaming, exaggerating, making mistakes, wild guessing,
contradicting, spying, being obsessive, being reckless—
for these, suddenly, I am being praised.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

As for myself,
I met with as much success as I could ever have wanted.
In other words,
I was enthusiastically run-down by every critic of the period.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

Success seems to be largely a matter of hanging on
after others have let go.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

The talent of success
is nothing more than doing what you can do well,
and doing well whatever you do without thought of fame.
If it comes at all it will come because it is deserved,
not because it is sought after.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

You never achieve success unless you like what you are doing.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

True success is overcoming the fear of being unsuccessful.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

Success is a kind of peace of mind.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

It takes twenty years to make an overnight success.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

A man is a success if he gets up in the morning
and gets to bed at night,
and in between he does what he wants to.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

You've achieved success in your field
when you don't know whether what you're doing
is work or play.

[Music.

A ballet dancer enters and dances.

Music.

A ballet dancer enters and dances.

And Henri draws her as she dances.]

HENRI'S WIFE

Henri!

HENRI

Yes?

HENRI'S WIFE

Have you painted the children again?

HENRI

Oh,

yes.

Yes, I did.

HENRI'S WIFE

Henri, please.

We've spoken about this.

HENRI

I know.

I'm sorry.

I couldn't help myself.

HENRI'S WIFE

You can help yourself.

You need to make the effort.

Do you want them to grow up
and become painters, too?

HENRI

No.

No, of course not.

HENRI'S WIFE

Or sculptors?

HENRI

No, no, certainly not.

HENRI'S WIFE

Or poets or dramatists or....

HENRI

No.

No, I don't.

I'm sorry.

HENRI'S WIFE

We need to spend time with them
talking about other things of interest in life.
about farming
and mass transit
and natural resources
and foreign trade.

HENRI

I know.

HENRI'S WIFE

It's not funny.

HENRI

No.

HENRI'S WIFE

It's not a joke.

HENRI

No.

HENRI'S WIFE

We need to take care of our own children
so that they don't end up
late in life
impoverished
their teeth falling out
no place to live
no heat in the winter.
I mean it.

HENRI

I mean it, too.
We love our children.
We wish the best for them.
We can't be giving them a false model for their lives.

HENRI'S WIFE

No.

HENRI

I can't imagine a more rewarding life
than to spend all my days painting.
But I know
even though this is what I believe

that there is no better way to spend a life—
to have a life in the arts—
that I musn't say this to the children.
I musn't give them this impression.

HENRI'S WIFE

Thank you, Henri.

HENRI

No.

Thank you for reminding me.

[And now

darkness

and deep sorrow

bleak music

and a naked man writhing on the floor

and Henri is not painting this.
Rather, he is pacing back and forth
and wandering around the studio lost and hopeless

looking occasionally at the writhing man
and then turning away,
upset,
pacing again,
upset and lost,

and, finally,
a model enters wearing a crow's head—
well, really,
a crow's upper body including the head
and sits.

And, when Henri pauses, and calms down,
and looks at the crowhead model,
finally he goes to his paints,
and begins to paint the crowhead model.

CROWHEAD

Still,
you have to wonder sometimes:
what is the point?
Is there a meaning?
To spend a life this way.
Day after day.
Alone for the most part.
Making pointless things
that have a point only if they are important in some way.
But in what way?
Trees in the meadow.
A field.
A vineyard.
A nude
and then
a nude
and then

another nude.

What do you tell yourself
that is persuasive?

That settles your doubts.

You will do these things
and then you will die,
and everything you have done will be forgotten.

Or, even if it is not forgotten at once,
in time it will turn to dust,
and then

what was the point?

Or does nothing have a point
but others who are doing pointless things
are too busy just getting things done to agonize over the question
how they are spending their lives.

[If the despondent artists have gone away,
now they return to their café table.]

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

And yet
the only time I feel alive is when I'm painting.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

When I go out into the countryside and see the sun
and the green and everything flowering,
I say to myself
"Yes indeed, all that belongs to me!".

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

I just wanted to find out where the boundaries were.
I've found out there aren't any.
I wanted to be stopped but no one will stop me.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

I constantly have to negotiate with my doubts.
You are lost the instant you know what the result will be.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes.
Art is knowing which ones to keep.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

A lot of it's experimental, spontaneous.
It's about knocking about in the studio and bumping into things.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone,
and because I am the person I know best.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

You're sitting there with your muse
and your muse is telling you something and you're following it,
and you end up the next day looking at it and thinking
"what the hell was the muse saying to me?"

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

I tell young people
that the greatest paintings in museums
are made with minerals mixed in oil smeared on cloth
with the hair from the back of a pig's ear.
It's that simple.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

My whole life has been spent walking by the side of a bottomless chasm, jumping
from stone to stone.
Sometimes I try to leave my narrow path
and join the swirling mainstream of life,
but I always find myself drawn inexorably back towards the chasm's edge, and
there I shall walk
until the day I finally fall into the abyss.

[And now
all the other members of the chorus,
men and women—
all dressed now in fabulous clothes by fabulous designers
of the eighteenth or nineteenth or 21st century—
gather around and speak:]

AN ARTIST

The charm of fame is so great
that we like every object to which it is attached,
even death.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Fame is like a shaved pig with a greased tail,
and it is only after it has slipped through the hands of some thousands,
that some fellow,
by mere chance,
holds on to it!

ANOTHER ARTIST

Fame will go by and, so long, I've had you, fame.
If it goes by, I've always known it was fickle.
So at least it's something I experience, but that's not where I live.

ANOTHER ARTIST

The fact that my 15 minutes of fame has extended
a little longer than 15 minutes
is somewhat surprising to me and completely baffling to my wife.

ANOTHER ARTIST

If I became a philosopher,
if I have so keenly sought this fame for which I'm still waiting,
it's all been to seduce women basically.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Fame often makes an artist vain,
but seldom makes him proud.

ANOTHER ARTIST

If you live through the initial stage of fame and get past it,
and remember that's not who you are.

If you live past that,
then you have a hope of maybe learning how to spell the word artist.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Worldly fame is but a breath of wind that blows now this way,
and now that,

and changes name as it changes direction.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Some of the most famous paintings are the least worth looking at.

Their fame was due to their having done something
that needed to be doing in their day.

The work is done and the virtue of the painting has expired.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Fame is a bitch.

ANOTHER ARTIST

There is not in the world so toilsome a trade as the pursuit of fame;
life concludes before you have so much as sketched your work.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Of present fame think little, and of future less;
the praises that we receive after we are buried,
like the flowers that are strewed over our grave,
may be gratifying to the living,
but they are nothing to the dead.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Ambition has but one reward:
A little power, a transient fame;
A grave to rest in, and a fading name!

ANOTHER ARTIST

From my rotting body, flowers shall grow
and I am in them and that is eternity.

ANOTHER ARTIST

I would like immortality.

ANOTHER ARTIST

I don't want to achieve immortality through my work...

I want to achieve it by not dying!

ANOTHER ARTIST

The belief in immortality has always seemed cowardly to me.

When very young I learned that all things die,

and all that we wish of good must be won on this earth

or not at all.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Immortality is a long shot, I admit. But somebody has to be first.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Millions long for immortality

who do not know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

ANOTHER ARTIST

I show people how to build their own Immortality Device.

The Immortality Device has been tested and researched

by medical researchers all over the world from time to time.

They email me and told me what they found.

I post their results sometimes on my site.

ANOTHER ARTIST

The only thing wrong with immortality is that it tends to go on forever.

ANOTHER ARTIST

I want to die in my sleep like my friend....

Not screaming and yelling like the passengers in his car.

ANOTHER ARTIST

At least when you are dead you will know what silence truly sounds like.

sings
sings
sings
sings
sings

HENRI'S DEALER
Excuse me, Henri?
Are you busy?

HENRI
Ah, no.
No!

HENRI'S DEALER
How are you?

HENRI
Fine, thank you!

HENRI'S DEALER
Everything going well?
The family?
And I see you're painting.

HENRI
Yes.

HENRI'S DEALER
Good.

I've brought along the critics' reviews of our show!
I thought you might like to hear what they had to say.
Not that critics have the last word, of course!

HENRI
Of course.

HENRI'S DEALER

But, often we like to take these things into account
as we consider what we are doing.
And perhaps what we are going to do.

[Henri stands there
without responding]

So:

"He chooses to daub paint on a canvas
and spread it around with a comb or a toothbrush.
This process produces landscapes, marines, still lifes, portraits...
if he is lucky.
The procedure somewhat recalls the designs
that schoolchildren make
by squeezing the heads of flies between the folds of a sheet of paper.

[pause]

"He is nothing but a lamentable failure.
Perhaps he has ideas,
but he is incapable of expressing them.
He seems not to know even the first principles of his craft.

[pause]

"The impression given
by all these clumsily daubed portraits
is truly painful;
they bear witness to a fatal impotence.

[pause]

"What is this thing with a yellow stomach,
a base model picked up I know not where,
who represents what?

Olympia?
What Olympia?
A courtesan, no doubt.

[pause]

"Olympia can be understood from no point of view,
even if you take it for what it is,
a puny model stretched out on a sheet.
The color of the flesh is dirty,
the modeling nonexistent. . . .
We would still forgive the ugliness, were it only truthful,
carefully studied,
heightened by some splendid effect of color.
The least beautiful woman has bones, muscles, skin,
and some sort of color.
Here there is nothing, we are sorry to say,
but the desire to attract attention at any price.

[pause]

"...false... brutal... mad ...[a] chamber of horrors....

[pause]

"A pot of paint has been flung in the face of the public.

[pause]

"...vile and immoral...
gross, offensive, and indecent...
a desecration...."

"Lately he has expanded his repertory to include expressionist painting—abstract
and representational—
and pasted-on digital prints.
Still, there is an irritating, juvenile quality about what he does.
His work resembles that of a manically industrious undergraduate
with vague conceptual pretensions gleaned from art history courses....

sings
sings
sings
sings
sings
sings

while the artists all fall apart
and the play devolves into total chaos
everyone going off in all directions
stripping off their clothes
painting their own bodies
shooting up with heroin
self-cutting, slashing wrists
ripping drawings out a notebook in despair
and throwing the pages all over the floor
making an installation piece in the shape of an iron lung
and getting in

and anything else the actors and director can think of

the descent to the bottom of the pit of despair

and Henri finally lying down on a couch in despair
and his wife ministering to him
stroking his forehead while he lies there

and, finally,
as the song comes to an end,
all the artists gather themselves up
put themselves back together
and exit one by one
or help each other to leave

[but standing back to let the self-slasher exit by himself]

until Henri is again left alone on stage—
calm once again.]

HENRI

My needs are simple:

1 large tube of vermillion

3 tubes of Prussian blue

2 silver white

1 zinc white

1 Veronese green

1 lemon chrome yellow

6 small tubes of geranium

2 carmine

4 very light cinnabar green

2 large tubes of cobalt

For there are lovely autumn effects to do.

I have no ideas,

except to think that a field of wheat or a cypress
is well worth the trouble of looking at close up._

I have a wheat field, very yellow and very light,
perhaps the lightest canvas I have done.

The cypresses are always occupying my thoughts.

The green has a quality of such distinction.

It is a splash of black in a sunny landscape,
but it is one of the most interesting black notes.

To paint nature here, as everywhere,
you must be in it a long time.

Thus a Monthénard does not give me the true intimate note,
for the light is mysterious,

and Monticelli and Delacroix felt that.

Then Pissarro used to talk very well about it in the old days,
and I am still a long way from being able to do
what he said would have to be done.

There are no vineyards here;

but the olive trees are very characteristic.

They are old silver, sometimes with more blue in them,
sometimes greenish, bronzed,

fading white above a soil

which is yellow, pink, violet-tinted or orange, to dull red ochre.

As a consequence of some of the things Mauve told me,
I have started working with live models again.
Luckily I have been able to get several people to sit here for me,
including Piet Kaufman, the labourer.

Careful study

and the constant and repeated copying of Bague's Exercises au Fusain
have given me a better insight into figure-drawing.

I have learned to measure

and to see and to look for the broad outlines,

so that, thank God, what seemed utterly impossible to me before
is slowly becoming possible now.

I have drawn a man with a spade five times over in a variety of poses,
a sower twice,

a girl with a broom twice.

Then a woman in a white cap peeling potatoes

and a shepherd leaning on his crook.

I have some conté-crayon in wood

(just like pencils),

and I work with them a great deal now.

I have also started to introduce the brush and the stump.

With a little sepia and India ink, and now and then with a little color.

I am definitely not a landscape painter,

when I do landscapes

there will always be something of the figure in them.

What I will do:

I will go on working,

One painting can't contain my entire life.

My life can only be contained in a hundred hundred paintings.

A thousand thousand paintings

and then more and more than that.

That's why I have to go on and on.

And not every painting is a deep, complex, profound
oil painting.

Some of them are just watercolors.

[And then two women enter the bar—
one nude,
one playing a guitar.]

THE NUDE

Do you think
you have already sold your soul to the devil?
Because
it seems
you only have to say I want....
and you have it
I can imagine...
and you have it....
I can see, perhaps....
and there it is
how is this different than if you'd sold your soul to the devil?

HENRI

Yes, it's true.
I imagine something,
and there it is
and then something else crosses my mind
and there it is
for some reason the color blue comes to mind
and there it is.
Whatever I wish:
I have.

[A rowboat enters,
with a couple-dressed in their Sunday best-rowing.]

THE ROWBOAT WOMAN

And what about your family?

HENRI

I try to keep them out of it
they don't want to live with an artist
they want to live with a husband and a father
sometimes, it's true, I forget,

and I paint my wife in the nude
and I paint something my children have told me they think is beautiful
or strange
or wonderful
but I try to respect their privacy
I try not to invade their lives
I try just to be a good husband and father
and leave my work out of it
just as my father
although he loved to play golf
and he played golf all the time
until you might think golf was his whole life
still he didn't make his children play golf with him
he didn't come home and talk all the time about his game
his drive on the fifth hole
his putting on the 16th green
he understood:
we all had our lives
just as he had his life
and we had dinner together when we could.

My only regret
is that I am overcome by sorrow.
Every day
because I love the day
I love to sit in a café and just watch people walk by
I love to see the trees
the sunlight
to hold it in my sight forever
day after day
and even if the landscape barely changes
or a street in the town
with its buildings and rooftops
the doorways and windows
I just like to see them again and again
I can't bear the thought that one day I won't be able to see them any more
even if they are unremarkable
if they are dark
or the door handle has come loose

still it seems unfair that one day I won't be able to see it any longer
I have nothing I want to do with it
only to look at it
to hold it suspended forever in my vision.

I am not harming it in any way
just loving to see it
to see the houses along the street
to see the trees and the clouds in the sky
and the sunlight
I can't keep myself from thinking
that it won't last forever
and I wish I could just live for a hundred years
or another hundred
or another hundred and twenty-five or fifty
or two hundred years
and I can't keep myself from feeling
completely inconsolable.

And I think
what a misfortune it was for Gauguin,
that child falling out of the window and his not being able to be there.
I often think of him,
what misfortunes that man has
in spite of his energy and so many unusual qualities.

And Van Gogh
the year in the mental hospital south of St. Remy
he painted 142 paintings in a year
a new painting every two and a half days
and wonderful they were
so many of them
and then he shot himself.

And I think of Rembrandt
you think he had a happy life
I think he did.
He didn't commit suicide

but there was the time he needed to declare bankruptcy.
And I think of the letter
that Alphonse wrote to me:

"I am just now becoming aware
of the first moves of an illness that is sounding me out,
choosing its ground.
One moment it's my eyes,
floating specks,
double vision;
then objects appear cut in two.
Every evening
a painful spasm in the ribs.
Sometimes, on the sole of the foot,
an incision,
a thin one, hair thin.
Rats gnawing at the toes with very sharp teeth.
A burning feeling in the eyes.
A heightened awareness of sound:
the noise of the shovel
tongs near the hearth
the screech of doorbells
a spider's web on which work begins at four in the morning.
Great flames of pain furrowing the body,
cutting it to pieces
lighting it up.

"No general theory about pain.
Each sufferer discovers his own,
and the nature of pain varies
like a singer's voice
according to the acoustics of the hall.
Pain, like grief, like life itself,
will take the world apart.
Until, finally,
as everyone comes at last to see on their deathbeds,
a life is not so much a narrative
with a beginning and a middle and an end
as it is a constellation of vivid moments.

"Clever
the way death reaps and gathers its harvests.
But what somber harvests.
Whole generations don't fall at once;
That would be too sad, too visible.
But bit by bit.
The meadow is attacked on several sides at the same time.
One day, one will go;
The other, some time after;
One must reflect, glance about oneself,
to notice the empty spaces,
the vast contemporary killing."

[And now,
once again,
if the two despondent artists have gone way,
now they came back and sit at their café table,
heads bent down in defeat,
and speak of death.]

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

All our knowledge
merely helps us to die a more painful death than animals that know nothing.

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

Death is a low chemical trick played on everybody except sequoia trees.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

In this world,
man is a target of death,
an easy prey to calamities,
here every morsel and every draught is liable to choke one,
here one never receives a favour until he loses another instead,
here every additional day in one's life
is a day reduced from the total span of his existence,
when death is the natural outcome of life,
how can we expect immortality?

SECOND DESPONDENT ARTIST

Children are the only form of immortality that we can be sure of.

FIRST DESPONDENT ARTIST

What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us;
what we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal.

[And now they are joined by the rest of the chorus—
all dressed now like impoverished bohemians.]

ANOTHER ARTIST

Life is a warfare and a stranger's sojourn, and after fame is oblivion.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Oblivion is a second death, which great minds dread more than the first.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Oblivion, noun. The state or condition in which the wicked cease from struggling and the dreary are at rest. Fame's eternal dumping ground. Cold storage for high hopes. A place where ambitious authors meet their works without pride and their betters without envy. A dormitory without an alarm clock.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Events are the ephemera of history;
they pass across its stage like fireflies,
hardly glimpsed before they settle back into darkness
and as often as not into oblivion.

ANOTHER ARTIST

The great events of life often leave one unmoved; they pass out of consciousness, and, when one thinks of them, become unreal. Even the scarlet flowers of passion seem to grow in the same meadow as the poppies of oblivion.

ANOTHER ARTIST

Brute force crushes many plants. Yet the plants rise again. The Pyramids will not last a moment compared with the daisy. And before Buddha or Jesus spoke the nightingale sang, and long after the words of Jesus and Buddha are gone into oblivion the nightengale still sings.

ANOTHER ARTIST

In childhood, in our father's house,
we live the happiest life, I think, of all mankind.
But when we have understanding
and have come to youthful vigor,
we are pushed out.
And this,
we must approve
and consider to be happiness.

No man was ever born
but he must suffer.
He buries his children and gets others in their place;
then dies himself.
And yet men bear it hard,
that only give dust to dust!
Life is a harvest that man must reap like ears of corn;
one grows, another falls.
Why should we moan at this,
the path of Nature that we must tread?

Let any man get hold of as much pleasure as he can
as he lives his daily life;
the future will always be unknown.

The best thing is a life free from sickness,
the power each day
to take hold of what one desires.

The time of life is short,
and once a person is hidden beneath the earth
he lies there for all time.

A man is nothing but breath and shadow.

Time makes all things dark
and brings them to oblivion.

A cup without a bottom is not put on the table.

First you will see a crop in flower,
all white;
then a round mulberry
that has turned red;
lastly
old age
of Egyptian blackness
takes over.

[Everyone has sunk into despair
and hopelessness.
They sit immobile, slumped.

Only Henri remains standing—
and, indeed:
painting.
Because it is beautiful.
It may be pointless,
but he relishes its beauty.
Without a thought for meaning or immortality,
he goes on with what he loves.

All the rubble of the studio,
all the canvases and tables and pots and junk
slide away to the side
or ascend to the flies.

And a nude woman is revealed,
reclining on a chaise longue
in front of a window
overlooking the beach
and the beach umbrellas
on the Mediterranean.
The nude model is his wife—we recognize her this time.

And Henri paints her.

puts on a robe,
picks up a tray of food,
and exits
through the door at the far end of the studio.

He sees her go,
and then he puts down his paint brush
and follows her out
as the lights fade to darkness.

THE END

A NOTE:

Some texts for Self Portrait are taken from remarks by Picasso, Chagall, Munch, Bonnard, Breton, Dali, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Matisse, among many other artists—many of whom can be found at <http://www.artquotes.net>, <http://www.constable.net>, <http://www.noteaccess.com>—and other texts from <http://www.brainyquote.com>, <http://www.worldofquotes.com>, and elsewhere.

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