

Van Gogh is my favorite artist because he took his agony and turned it into beauty. Take any one of his self portraits. It is just a face. The light flickers over it, defining blue shadows and prickly, orange and white hairs. The eyes are anxious, fearful. Light lines swirl in them like koi in a glassy pond. Green furrows and blue lines describe pained creases in the skin, contrasting with the paleness of his cheeks, but nowhere do I see blackness. Even his dark is full of light. When Vincent painted *Night*, he painted it *Starry*.

My dad gave us kids Shelley's "Ozymandias" to memorize when I was eight. We were tired after a long day, unimpressed by the Rosetta Stone in the British Museum, but the queer rhythm of this poem caught our imaginations. Since then, I've memorized Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" halfway and imagined the "noises in a swound," but nothing resounds with me like Shelley. Shelley is my favorite poet, because he describes the world in a beautiful way.

There's a grit, a terrifying insanity to the Joker in the Batman film *The Dark Knight*. "You'll pardon my appearance." With a bright smile, he combs his stringy hair down with his fingers. "But I am what I am, and I'll smile 'til I'm damned, and I don't give a hoot – say, d'you know how I got these scars?" Not a beautiful picture. Not beautiful prose, either. Through the same techniques that cause readers of Harry Potter to hate the sadistic bureaucrat Dolores Umbridge, Heath Ledger's portrayal of an insane clown inspires watchers with genuine fear. In defiance of its trope-filled genre, Heath Ledger's Joker manages to break through the screen to reality. The pure skill of this is beautiful.

I'm afraid I had to take a break. I haven't expounded on my love for Dilbert, thrift shopping, or Allan Bloom (that beautiful Chicago mind!), but as I am writing the first draft something just happened that trumps those other things.

Allow me to explain myself. My little sister Faith just offered up a dainty, farm-patterned plate stacked with pink macaroons. The smell of almond in the air overpowered my concentration, and I set down my pencil. Right now, when I crunch the sugar shell and taste the tang of raspberry buttercream, I know my heart lies here – not in hedonism, not in sugar, but in heart.

My favorite people are ones who make no pretension to greatness but who love, because, action by action, bit by bit, they make the world more beautiful. Most tastes of good things – victory, beauty, happiness – agitate the greedy, grasping desire for more, more, more, only to deny satisfaction. Take the “Aha!” feeling you get at a new discovery: it is sweet because of its spontaneity, and a willful attempt to recapture the sensation spoils it. When Faith offers me one of a batch of sticky, pink macaroons, I know I’ve been given the lasting gift of her love, the type of goodness you don’t hunger for later, because you know it will never disappear.