

# Vincent's Room

by Hall Gardner

Translated from French by Anne Gayet-Turner



Today, National Translation Month continues with a new poem translated from French. We're delighted to share "**Vincent's Room,**" a long poem by **Hall Gardner** translated by **Anne Gayet-Turner**. We love its lively language that addresses Vincent Van Gogh directly, and we're including the original as well as a translator's note to give you a measure of the craft.

**We'd love to hear from you!** Follow us on Twitter [#TranslationMonth](#), join our mailing list, submit a translation month event, or like our [Facebook](#) page. We hope you'll join us and celebrate your favorite translations of writers from all over the world in September and beyond.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

## Vincent's Room

by Hall Gardner

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*Je ne suis resté à Paris que trois jours, et le bruit, etc...a eu un effet si néfaste sur moi que j'ai pensé plus sage de m'enfuir à la campagne.*

—*Lettre de Vincent Van Gogh à Paul Gauguin, Auvers-sur-Oise, 17 juin 1890*

### La Chambre de Vincent

I

Une araignée géante déambule  
doucement sur la toile,  
Dessinait un rectangle,  
Sur lequel tu es penché,  
De ton chevalet à ton carnet de croquis,  
Cette sculpture de Zadkine  
Qui t'immortalisa en chasseur de couleurs

Accoutré comme un taulard  
Ton pinceau souple,  
Tenu entre pouce et index,  
Ta paume lourde,  
Hésitante, tremble

II

Offensé, après une nouvelle querelle  
Qui fit des étincelles  
Entre toi le fou rouquin  
A l'oreille bien entaillée  
Et l'ami Paul Gauguin.  
Menaçait-il de décamper?  
La même fille convoitée?  
La peur que Théo, fiancé  
Ne coupe tes indemnités?  
Ou bien, de verre en verre d'absinthe,  
Entre vous deux,  
Trop de "Fée verte"?

III

Une année entière à l'asile de Saint Rémy  
Baladé entre crises d'épilepsie  
Et nuits constellées de rêves hallucinés  
Avant de t'évader  
Pour le salut de ton âme  
A Auvers et sa campagne

Loin des cafés parisiens  
Car leur vacarme incessant  
Était devenu ton tourment.

#### IV

Un si curieux olibrius  
Arpentant les rues, solitaire  
Beaucoup préférant te voir interné  
Peut-être pour l'éternité...  
Personne n'appréciait ton Art  
Cette Adeline été déçue par son portrait,  
« Symphonie en Bleu. »  
Ce n'était pas  
Le tableau que la postérité  
Encenserait.

A cette époque prisonnière  
D'un réalisme de salon  
Personne n'envisageait la Beauté,  
Par l'évolution de la peinture  
-Pensée alors à l'aune de la sculpture-  
Vers la couleur et par-dessus tout  
Vers la musique et l'émotion.

#### V

On dit que tu t'es tiré dessus  
Dans le poitrail avec ton pistolet  
Que tu portais à la ceinture  
Afin d'effrayer les corbeaux ...  
Peut-être était-ce accidentel,  
Peut-être était-ce intentionnel,  
Peut-être encore étais-tu malmené  
Par de jeunes voyous du village  
Qui faisaient de toi leur souffre douleur  
A cause de ton oreille coupée  
A cause de tes cheveux de feu

Vous n'aviez absolument pas le droit  
De vous suicider  
Déplora le gendarme de faction  
Vous auriez répondu brièvement :  
N'aurais je pas le droit de faire  
De mon enveloppe charnelle  
Ce que je veux ?  
Ne serait-ce pas de loin moins grave  
De se donner la mort  
Que de supporter autant de tourments  
Cent fois criés en vain à la face du monde ?  
Ne serait-ce pas de loin plus sain ?

#### VI

Sur cette chaise de bois

Avec sa peinture écaillée,  
Se tenant debout, gauchement,  
Et semblant te défier  
Théo, saisi de remords  
Assiste à ta lente agonie,  
Des heures durant,  
Infiniment....

Au pied de ton cercueil  
Il a placé tes pinceaux et ta palette  
Et disposé tes tableaux récents  
Avant d'offrir certaines  
De tes toiles étincelantes... télépathiques...  
A ceux qui avaient pris soin de toi  
Du moins le croyait-il  
Combien de jours avais-tu attendu l'instant  
Où tu pourrais montrer au Monde entier  
ton œuvre si peu estimée  
A la faveur d'une exposition dans un petit café ?

Cadres extra-terrestres:  
[Le jardin d'Aubigny]  
[L'enfant avec une orange]  
[Iris]  
[L'Eglise d'Auvers]  
[Portrait d'Adeline]

VII  
Six mois plus tard, Théo à son tour  
Se fanerait comme tes Tournesols  
Consumé par son propre malheur  
Plus personne pour nourrir son Ame.

Une limace glisse sur les feuilles de lierre,  
Qui couvre [les tombes jumelles] où vous reposez,  
Au dessus des roses sauvages ....  
Symbole d'un amour rare...  
Fraternel  
Un envol d'oies sauvages salue en formation V  
pour Vincent... pour Victoire.

## Vincent's Room

*"I stayed in Paris only three days, and the noise, etc., of Paris had such a bad effect on me that I thought it wise for my head's sake to fly to the country..."*

*—Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Paul Gauguin, Auvers-sur-Oise, c. 17 June 1890*

### I

A wolf spider ambles  
gently down its web [rectangular]  
stretching from your easel  
to your sketchbook

upon your back arching...  
So Zadkin's sculpture  
has portrayed you:  
A hunter of colors

in a jailbird's uniform,  
your paintbrush held loosely  
between your forefinger and thumb,  
your palm... limp... wavering...

### II

Outraged, after yet another  
of your "electric" quarrels with Gauguin,  
you, the "fou roux," razored off  
a large portion of your ear.

Was it his threat to move out???  
A fight over a girl??? Fear that Theo,  
engaged, might cut your stipend???  
Or many too many shots of Green Fairy???

### III

A year in the Saint-Rémy asylum,  
you wandered in epileptic fits  
and Starry Night hallucinations  
before escaping

for your "head's sake"  
to the Auvers countryside  
far from Parisian cafés. The noise  
had been much too much for you...

### IV

Such a strange individual  
wandering the streets alone: Many  
preferred you to be interned...  
perhaps indefinitely...

No one appreciated your Art.  
A disappointed Adeline  
saw no resemblance. Her portrait—  
a “Symphony in Blue”—

was, to her, not the great painting  
the future would esteem.  
In that era of sterile realism  
no one envisioned Beauty

in the transformation  
of painting [then seen as sculpture]  
into color—and above all—  
music and emotion.

V

It is said you shot yourself  
in the gut with a pistol  
strapped to your belt  
you had used for scaring crows...

But perhaps accidentally... not willfully???  
Or perhaps you were scared  
by some village teens who thought  
it would be a riot to rough up

the earless red-head freak???  
“You have absolutely no right  
to commit suicide!!!”  
rebuked the gendarme.

Your curt retort: “Shouldn't  
I be permitted to do  
with my body as I please???”  
And would it not be

far less problematic  
for all concerned to proclaim  
Death by one's own hand???  
And perhaps even more Sane???

VI

Upon that wooden chair,  
with its paint, chipped,  
now standing awkward,  
yet defiant...

Upon wooden floorboards,  
warped... Theo witnessed

your agony in remorse  
for hours... endless...

At the foot of your coffin  
he placed your brushes and palette  
and displayed your artwork  
before offering a few

of your canvasses... scintillant...  
telepathic... to those whom [he believed]  
had cared the most for you.  
How you had waited

for the day you could  
display the work that the World  
had so poorly appraised—  
in just a run-of-the-mill café!

Alien Frames: [The Garden of Daubigny]  
[The Child with an Orange],  
[Irises], [The Church of Auvers],  
[Portrait of Adeline].

VII

Only six months later, so too Theo  
would wither like your sunflowers  
from his own misfortune:  
No one left to nourish his Soul.

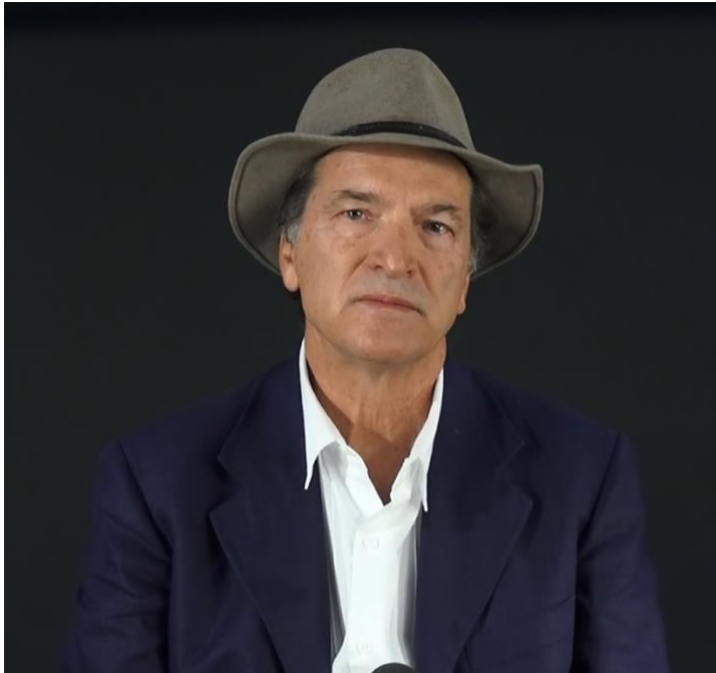
A slug slithers upon leaves of ivy  
that cover your [double grave]:  
Wild roses of rare Love.... brotherly.  
A flock of geese salute in V-formation.

### **Translator's note**

After reading the text aloud, I did a very literal first translation in order to immerse myself in the tone and spirit of the poem. Then I reread the context of the life and work of Van Gogh through an online bio. I let the poem soak, reading in the meantime Léo Ferré, Baudelaire, and Dylan Thomas. Then, I re-worked the translation, without respecting the order of the stanzas, always referring to the original text. I read this new translation aloud, in order to harmonize it all, until I felt the rhythm was established, varying in echo of the descriptions, or the emotions of the original.

— *Anne Gayet-Turner, translator*

## About the author



Over the years, **Hall Gardner** has published many poems in small press magazines in the US and overseas. These include the *Peace or Perish Crisis Anthology*, edited by Robert Bly and *Fire Readings*, with a foreword by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. His short story "Laundromat Reflections (14th of July)" first appeared in *The Paris Times*; the full-length story appeared on-line on the *Nthposition* web magazine in March 2006 (London). He has published poems in *Chanticleer*; *Catalyst*; *Working Cultures*; *Hoo-Doo 7*; *The Unrealist*; *Visions*; *Ultramarino*; *Three Sisters* (Georgetown University); *Sol* (Howard

University), plus dozens of poems in the *Paris Atlantic* in the decade 1990-2000 (American University of Paris), and most recently in [Paris/Atlantic n. 47 2020](#), which just published "Vincent's Room." His book, *The Wake-Up Blast*, with selections of over 30 years of poetry, was published by Narcissus Press in Reinbeck, NY in 2008. Over the past 2 years, his essays and poetry have been featured monthly in the online journal [Wall Street International Magazine](#). He has an [Amazon author's page](#) and his website is [www.hallgardner.com](http://www.hallgardner.com).

## About the translator



**Anne Gayet-Turner** is a freelance translator and writer. She completed her Master's Degree in Philosophy at Paris I Sorbonne and her DEA in the Semiology of Audio-visual media at Paris II. She has worked as a consultant in plurilingualism and intercultural relations at the European Commission in 2014, and as translator for a script on the life of Camus, 1998, American production; for the French journal, *Géopolitiques*, Académie de géopolitique de Paris, 2009-2018; and for the

Protestant Institute of Theology in Paris, 2010. Her translations include: *Malaysia Air Race*, Bilingue, 1990; *La ronde des fourmis/ The circle*, bilingual play, 1992, UNESCO, translated in Arabic and in Spanish 1992; *Les gens d'air*, Méréal, 1999. As an author, she wrote *Ferry Story*, Denoël, 1989.