

# *Van Gogh*

THE LIFE

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*Gregory White Smith*

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PROLOGUE

## *A Fanatic Heart*

**T**HEO IMAGINED THE WORST. THE MESSAGE SAID ONLY THAT VINCENT HAD “wounded himself.” As Theo rushed to the station to catch the next train to Auvers, his mind raced both backward and forward. The last time he received a dire message like this one, it was a telegram from Paul Gauguin informing him that Vincent was “gravely ill.” Theo had arrived in the southern city of Arles to find his brother in the fever ward of a hospital, his head swathed in bandages and his mind completely unmoored.

What would he find at the end of this train ride?

At times like these—and there had been many of them—Theo’s mind wandered to the Vincent he had known once: an older brother of passion and restlessness, but also of boisterous jokes, infinite sympathy, and indefatigable wonder. On their childhood hikes in the fields and woods around the Dutch town of Zundert, where they were born, Vincent had introduced him to the beauties and mysteries of nature. In the winter, Vincent tutored him in skating and sledding. In summer, he showed him how to build castles in the sandy paths. In church on Sundays and at home by the parlor piano, he sang with a clear, confident voice. In the attic room that they shared, he talked until late at night, inspiring in his younger brother a bond that their siblings teasingly called “worship,” but Theo proudly acknowledged, even decades later, as “adoration.”

This was the Vincent that Theo had grown up with: adventurous guide, inspiration and scold, encyclopedic enthusiast, droll critic, playful companion, transfixing eye. How could *this* Vincent, his Vincent, have turned into such a tormented soul?

Theo thought he knew the answer: Vincent was the victim of his own fanatic heart. “There’s something in the way he talks that makes people either love him or hate him,” he tried to explain. “He spares nothing and no one.”

Long after others had put away the breathless manias of youth, Vincent still lived by their unsparing rules. Titanic, unappeasable passions swept through his life. “I am a fanatic!” Vincent declared in 1881. “I feel a power within me . . . a fire that I may not quench, but must keep ablaze.” Whether catching beetles on the Zundert creekbank, collecting and cataloguing prints, preaching the Christian gospel, consuming Shakespeare or Balzac in great fevers of reading, or mastering the interactions of color, he did everything with the urgent, blinding single-mindedness of a child. He even read the newspaper “in a fury.”

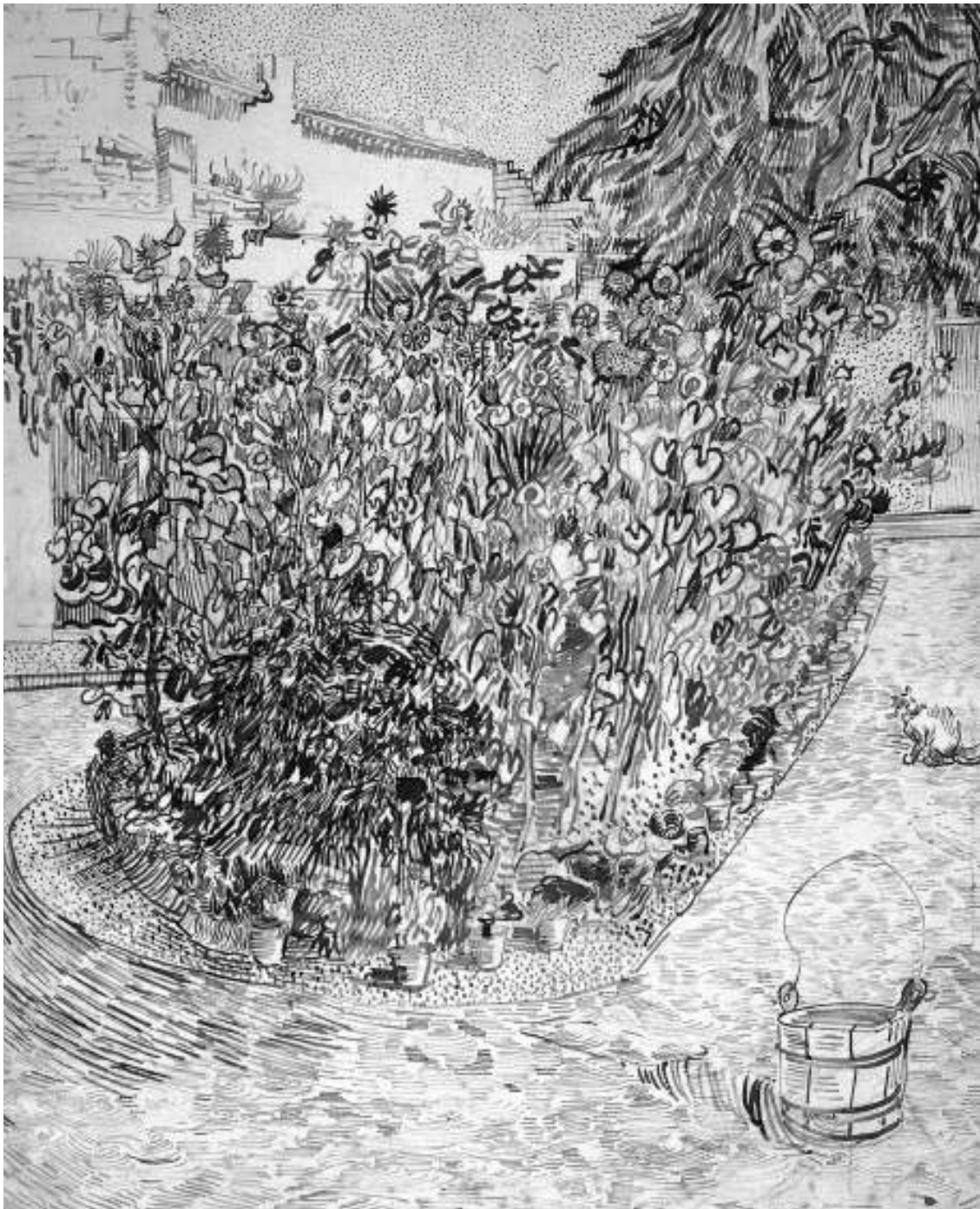
These storms of zeal had transformed a boy of inexplicable fierceness into a wayward, battered soul: a stranger in the world, an exile in his own family, and an enemy to himself. No one knew better than Theo—who had followed his brother’s tortured path through almost a thousand letters—the unbending demands that Vincent placed on himself, and others, and the unending problems he reaped as a consequence. No one understood better the price Vincent paid in loneliness and disappointment for his self-defeating, take-no-prisoners assaults on life; and no one knew better the futility of warning him against himself. “I get very cross when people tell me that it is dangerous to put out to sea,” Vincent told Theo once when he tried to intervene. “There is safety in the very heart of danger.”

How could anybody be surprised that such a fanatic heart produced such a fanatic art? Theo had heard the whispers and rumors about his brother. “*C’est un fou*,” they said. Even before the events in Arles eighteen months earlier, before the stints in hospitals and asylums, people dismissed Vincent’s art as the work of a madman. One critic described its distorted forms and shocking colors as the “product of a sick mind.” Theo himself had spent years trying, unsuccessfully, to tame the excesses of his brother’s brush. If only he would use less paint—not slather it on so thickly. If only he would slow down—not slash out so many works so quickly. (“I have sometimes worked excessively fast,” Vincent countered defiantly. “Is it a fault? I can’t help it.”) Collectors wanted care and finish, Theo told him again and again, not endless, furious, convulsive studies—what Vincent called “*pictures full of painting*.”

With every lurch of the train that bore him to the scene of the latest catastrophe, Theo could hear the years of scorn and ridicule. For a long time, out of family pride or fraternal affection, Theo had resisted the accusations of madness. Vincent was merely “an exceptional person”—a Quixote-like tilter at windmills—a noble eccentric, perhaps—not a madman. But the events in Arles had changed all that. “Many painters have gone insane yet nevertheless started to produce true art,” Theo wrote afterward. “Genius roams along such mysterious paths.”

And no one had roamed a more mysterious path than Vincent: a brief, failed start as an art dealer, a misbegotten attempt to enter the clergy, a wandering

evangelical mission, a foray into magazine illustration, and, finally, a blazingly short career as a painter. Nowhere did Vincent's volcanic, defiant temperament show itself more spectacularly than in the sheer number of images that continued to pour forth from his ragged existence even as they piled up, hardly seen, in the closets, attics, and spare rooms of family, friends, and creditors.



*Garden of a Bathhouse*, PENCIL AND INK ON PAPER,  
AUGUST 1888, 23<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> X 19<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> IN.

Only by tracing this temperament and the trail of tears it left, Theo believed, could anyone truly understand his brother's stubbornly inner-driven art. This

was his answer to all those who dismissed Vincent's paintings—or his letters—as the rantings of the wretched, as most still did. Only by knowing Vincent “from the inside,” he insisted, could anyone hope to see his art as Vincent saw it, or feel it as Vincent felt it. Just a few months before his fateful train trip, Theo had sent a grateful note to the first critic who dared to praise his brother's work: “You have read these pictures, and by doing so you very clearly saw the man.”

Like Theo, the art world of the late nineteenth century was preoccupied with the role of biography in art. Émile Zola had opened the gates with his call for an art “of flesh and blood,” in which painting and painter merged. “What I look for in a picture before anything else,” Zola wrote, “is the man.” No one believed in the importance of biography more fervently than Vincent van Gogh. “[Zola] says something beautiful about art,” he wrote in 1885: “‘In the picture (the work of art), I look for, I love the man—the artist.’” No one collected artists' biographies more avidly than Vincent—everything from voluminous texts to “legends” and “chats” and scraps of rumor. Taking Zola at his word, he culled every painting for signs of “what kind of *man* stands *behind* the canvas.” At the dawn of his career as an artist, in 1881, he told a friend: “In general, and more especially with artists, I pay as much attention to the man who does the work as to the work itself.”

To Vincent, his art was a record of his life more true, more revealing (“how deep—how infinitely deep”) even than the storm of letters that always accompanied it. Every wave of “serenity and happiness,” as well as every shudder of pain and despair, he believed, found its way into paint; every heartbreak into heartbreaking imagery; every picture into self-portraiture. “I want to paint what I feel,” he said, “and feel what I paint.”

It was a conviction that guided him until his death—only hours after Theo arrived in Auvers. No one could truly see his paintings without knowing his story. “As my work is,” he declared, “so am I.”



PART ONE

*The Early Years*  
1853—1880

## *Dams and Dikes*



**O**F THE THOUSANDS OF STORIES THAT VINCENT VAN GOGH CONSUMED in a lifetime of voracious reading, one stood out in his imagination: Hans Christian Andersen's "The Story of a Mother." Whenever he found himself with children, he told and retold Andersen's dark tale of a loving mother who chooses to let her child die rather than expose him to the risk of an unhappy life. Vincent knew the story by heart and could tell it in several languages, including a heavily accented English. For him, whose own life was filled with unhappiness, and who forever sought himself in literature and art, Andersen's tale of maternal love gone awry possessed a unique power, and his obsessive retellings protested both a unique longing and a unique injury.

Vincent's own mother, Anna, never understood her eldest son. His eccentricities, even from an early age, challenged her deeply conventional worldview. His roving intellect defied her limited range of insight and inquiry. He seemed to her filled with strange and "starry-eyed" notions; she seemed to him narrow-minded and unsympathetic. As time passed, she liked him less and less. Incomprehension gave way to impatience, impatience to shame, and shame to anger. By the time he was an adult, she had all but given up hope for him. She dismissed his religious and artistic ambitions as "futureless wanderings" and compared his errant life to a death in the family. She accused him of intentionally inflicting "pain and misery" on his parents. She systematically discarded any paintings and drawings that he left at home as if disposing of rubbish (she had already thrown out virtually all his childhood memorabilia), and treated works that he subsequently gave her with little regard.

After her death, only a few of the letters and works of art Vincent had sent her were found in her possession. In the final years of his life (she outlived him by seventeen years), she wrote to him less and less often, and, when he was hos-

pitalized toward the end, she never came to visit, despite frequent travels to see other family members. Even after his death, when fame belatedly found him, she never regretted or amended her verdict that his art was “ridiculous.”

Vincent never understood his mother’s rejection. At times, he lashed out angrily against it, calling her a “hard-hearted” woman “of a soured love.” At times, he blamed himself for being a “half-strange, half-tiresome person . . . who brings only sorrow and loss.” But he never stopped bidding for her approval. At the end of his life, he painted her portrait (from a photograph) and appended a poem with the plaintive question: “Who is the maid my spirits seek / Through cold reproof and slanders blight?”



ANNA CARBENTUS

ANNA CORNELIA CARBENTUS married the Reverend Theodorus van Gogh on a cloudless day in May 1851 in The Hague, home of the Dutch monarchy and, by one account, “the most pleasant place in the world.” Reclaimed from sea-bottom mud containing the perfect mix of sand and clay for growing flowers, The Hague in May was a veritable Eden: flowers bloomed in unrivaled abun-

dance on roadsides and canal banks, in parks and gardens, on balconies and verandas, in window boxes and doorstep pots, even on the barges that glided by. Perpetual moisture from tree-shaded ponds and canals “seemed every morning to paint with a newer and more intense green,” wrote one enchanted visitor.

On the wedding day, Anna’s family sprinkled flower petals in the newlyweds’ path and festooned every stop on their route with garlands of greenery and blossoms. The bride made her way from the Carbentus house on Prinsengracht to the Kloosterkerk, a fifteenth-century jewel box on an avenue lined with linden trees and surrounded by magnificent townhouses in the royal heart of the city. Her carriage passed through streets that were the envy of a filthy continent: every windowpane freshly cleaned, every door recently painted or varnished, every copper pot on every stoop buffed, every lance on every bell tower newly gilded. “The roofs themselves seem to be washed each day,” marveled one foreigner, and the streets were “clean as any chamber floor.” Such a place, wrote another visitor, “may make all men envy the happiness of those who live in it.”

Gratitude for idyllic days like these, in idyllic places like this—and the fear that they could all be lost in a moment—shaped Anna Carbentus’s life. She knew that it had not always been this way, either for her family or for her country.

In 1697, the fate of the Carbentus clan hung by a single thread: Gerrit Carbentus, the only member of the family to come through the wars, floods, fires, and plagues of the previous hundred and fifty years alive. Gerrit’s predecessors had been swept up in the panoramic bloodletting of the Eighty Years’ War, a revolt by the Seventeen Provinces of the Low Countries against their brutal Spanish rulers. It began, according to one account, in 1568 when Protestant citizens in towns like The Hague rebelled “in a cataclysm of hysterical rage and destruction.” Victims were tied together and heaved from high windows, drowned, decapitated, and burned. The Spanish Inquisition responded by condemning every man, woman, and child in the Netherlands, all three million of them, to death as heretics.

For eighty years, back and forth across the placid Dutch landscape, army fought army, religion fought religion, class fought class, militia fought militia, neighbor fought neighbor, idea fought idea. A visitor to Haarlem saw “many people hanging from trees, gallows and other horizontal beams in various places.” Houses everywhere were burned to the ground, whole families burned at the stake, and the roads strewn with corpses.

Now and then the chaos subsided (as when the Dutch provinces declared their independence from the Spanish king in 1648 and the war was declared over), but soon enough a new wave of violence would wash over the land. In 1672, the so-called Rampjaar (Year of Catastrophe), little more than a generation after the end of the Eighty Years’ War, another fury boiled up from the tran-

quilt and impeccable streets of The Hague as crowds swept into the city center, hunted down the country's former leaders, and butchered them to pieces in the shadow of the same Kloosterkerk where Anna Carbentus would later celebrate her marriage.

But neither war nor these paroxysms of communal rage posed the greatest danger to the Carbentus family. Like many of his countrymen, Gerrit Carbentus lived his entire life on the edge of extinction by flood. It had been that way since the end of the Ice Age, when the lagoon at the mouth of the Rhine began to fill up with rich, silty soil that proved irresistible to the first settlers. Gradually, the settlers built dikes to keep the sea at bay and dug canals to drain the bogs behind the dikes. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the invention of the windmill made it possible to drain vast areas, truly large-scale land reclamation began. Between 1590 and 1740, even as Dutch merchants conquered the world of commerce and established rich colonies in distant hemispheres, even as Dutch artists and scientists created a Golden Age to rival the Italian Renaissance, more than three hundred thousand acres were added to the Netherlands, increasing its arable landmass by almost a third.

But nothing stopped the sea. Despite a thousand years of stupendous effort—and in some cases because of it—floods remained as inevitable as death. With terrifying unpredictability, the waves would top the dikes or the dikes would crumble beneath the waves, or both, and the water would rush far inland across the flat countryside. Sometimes the sea would simply open up and take back the land. On a single night in 1530, twenty villages sank into the abyss, leaving only the tips of church spires and the carcasses of livestock visible on the surface of the water.

It was a precarious life, and Gerrit Carbentus, like all his countrymen, inherited an acute sense, a sailor's sense, of the imminence of disaster. Among the thousands who died in the battle with the sea in the last quarter of the seventeenth century was Gerrit Carbentus's uncle, who drowned in the River Lek. He joined Gerrit's father, mother, siblings, nieces, nephews, and first wife and her family, all of whom perished before Gerrit turned thirty.

Gerrit Carbentus had been born at the end of one cataclysmic upheaval; his grandson, also named Gerrit, arrived at the beginning of another. Starting in the middle of the eighteenth century, across the Continent, revolutionary demands for free elections, an expanded franchise, and the abolition of unfair taxes merged with the utopian spirit of the Enlightenment to create a force as unstoppable as war or wave.

It was only a matter of time before the revolutionary fervor hit the Carbentus family. When troops of the new French Republic entered Holland in 1795, they came as liberators. But they stayed as conquerors. Soldiers were billeted in every household (including the Carbentuses'); goods and capital (such as the

family's gold and silver coins) were confiscated; trade withered; profits disappeared; businesses closed; prices soared. Gerrit Carbentus, a leatherworker and father of three, lost his livelihood. But worse was yet to come. On the morning of January 23, 1797, Gerrit left his house in The Hague for work in a nearby town. At seven that evening he was found lying on the side of the road to Rijswijk, robbed, beaten, and dying. By the time he was carried home, he was dead. His mother "insanely hugged the lifeless body and let a stream of tears flow over him," according to the Carbentus family chronicle, a clan diary kept by generations of chroniclers. "This was the end of our dear son, who was a miracle in his own right."

Gerrit Carbentus left behind a pregnant wife and three small children. One of these was five-year-old Willem, grandfather of the painter Vincent Willem van Gogh.

In the first decades of the 1800s, as the Napoleonic tide receded, the Dutch emerged to repair the dikes of statehood. So widely shared was the fear of slipping back into the maelstrom that moderation became the rule of the day: in politics, in religion, in science, and in the arts. "Fear of revolution gave rise to growing reactionary sentiments," wrote one chronicler, and "self-satisfaction and national conceit" became the defining characteristics of the era.

Just as his country was emerging from the shadow of rebellion and upheaval, Willem Carbentus was rebuilding his life from the wreckage of personal tragedy. He married at twenty-three and fathered nine children over the next twelve years—amazingly, without a stillborn among them. Political stability and "national conceit" had other benefits as well. A sudden wave of interest in all things Dutch created a booming demand for books. From Amsterdam to the smallest village, groups were formed to promote the reading of everything from classics to instruction manuals. Seizing the opportunity, Willem turned his leatherworking skills to the art of binding books and opened a shop on the Spuistraat, in The Hague's main shopping district. Over the next three decades, he built the shop into a flourishing business, raising his large family in the rooms overhead. In 1840, when the government sought a binder for the latest version of the long-disputed constitution, it turned to Willem Carbentus, who thereafter advertised himself as "Royal Bookbinder."

Recovery through moderation and conformity worked for the country and for Willem, but not for everybody. Of Willem's children, the second, Clara, was considered "epileptic" at a time when that word was used to cover a dark universe of mental and emotional afflictions. Never married, she lived in the limbo of denial mandated by family dignity, her illness acknowledged only much later by her nephew, the painter Vincent van Gogh. Willem's son, Johannus, "did not follow the common road in life," his sister wrote cryptically, and later committed suicide. In the end, even Willem himself, despite his success, succumbed.

In 1845, at the age of fifty-three, he died “of a mental disease,” says the family chronicle in a rare acknowledgment. The official record lists the cause of death more circumspectly as “catarrhal fever,” a bovine plague that periodically affected livestock in rural areas but never spread to humans. Its symptoms, perhaps the basis for the official diagnosis, were overexcitement, followed by spasms, foaming at the mouth, and death.

Surrounded by lessons like these, Willem’s middle daughter Anna grew up with a dark and fearful view of life. Everywhere forces threatened to cast the family back into the chaos from which it had just recently emerged, as suddenly and finally as the sea swallowing up a village. The result was a childhood hedged by fear and fatalism: by a sense that both life and happiness were precarious, and therefore could not be trusted. By her own telling, Anna’s world was “a place full of troubles and worries [that] are inherent to it”; a place where “disappointments will never cease” and only the foolish “make heavy demands” on life. Instead, one must simply “learn to endure,” she said, “realize that no one is perfect,” that “there are always imperfections in the fulfillment of one’s wishes,” and that people must be loved “despite their shortcomings.” Human nature especially was too chaotic to be trusted, forever in danger of running amok. “If we could do whatever we wanted,” she warned her children, “unharmful, unseen, untroubled—wouldn’t we stray further and further from the right path?”

Anna carried this dark vision into adulthood. Unremittingly humorless in her dealings with both family and friends, she grew melancholy easily and brooded ceaselessly over small matters, finding hazard or gloom at the end of every rainbow. Love was likely to disappear; loved ones to die. When left alone by her husband, even for short periods, she tormented herself with thoughts of his death. In Anna’s own account of her wedding celebrations, amid descriptions of flower arrangements and carriage rides in the woods, her thoughts return again and again to a sick relative who could not attend. “The wedding days,” she concluded, “were accompanied by a lot of sadness.”

To hold the forces of darkness at bay, Anna kept herself frenetically busy. She learned to knit at an early age, and for the rest of her life, worked the needles with “terrifying speed,” according to the family chronicle. She was an “indefatigable” writer whose letters—filled with hastily jumbled syntax and multiple insertions—betray the same headlong rush to nowhere. She played the piano. She read because “it keeps you busy [and] turns the mind in a different direction,” she said. As a mother, she was obsessed with the benefits of preoccupation and urged it on her children at every opportunity. “Force your mind to keep itself occupied with other things,” she advised one of them as a cure for being “down-hearted.” (It was a lesson that her son Vincent, perhaps the most depressed and incandescently productive artist in history, learned almost too well.) When all else failed, Anna would clean furiously. “That dearest Ma is busy

cleaning,” her husband wrote, casting doubt on the effectiveness of all her strategies, “but thinks about and worries about all.”

Anna’s busy hands also turned to art. Together with at least one of her sisters, Cornelia, she learned to draw and paint with watercolor, pastimes that had been taken up by the new bourgeois class as both a benefit and a badge of leisure. Her favorite subject was the common one for parlor artists at the time: flowers—nosegays of violets, pea blossoms, hyacinths, forget-me-nots. In this conventional pursuit, the Carventus sisters may have been encouraged by their eccentric uncle, Hermanus, who, at one time at least, advertised himself as a painter. They also enjoyed the support and example of a very unconventional artistic family, the Bakhuyzens. Anna’s visits to the Bakhuyzen house were immersions in the world of art. Father Hendrik, a respected landscape painter, gave lessons not only to his own children (two of whom went on to become prominent artists), and perhaps to the Carventus sisters, but also to a changing cast of students who later founded a new, emphatically Dutch art movement, the Hague School. Thirty-five years after Anna’s visits, the same movement would provide her son a port from which to launch his brief, tempest-tossed career as an artist.

As a fearful child, Anna was drawn naturally to religion.

Except for marriages and baptisms, religion makes a relatively late appearance in the Carventus family record: When the French army arrived in The Hague in 1795, the chronicler blamed “God’s trying hand” for the depredations of billeted soldiers and confiscated coins. Two years later, when the fury loose in the land found Gerrit Carventus alone on the Rijswijk road, the chronicle suddenly erupts in plaintive piety: “May God grant us mercy to accept His decisions with an obedient heart.” This was the essence of the religious sentiment that emerged from the years of turmoil—both in the Carventus family and in the country: a trembling recognition of the consequences of chaos. Bloodied and exhausted, people turned from a religion that rallied the faithful to one that reassured the fearful. Anna herself summarized the milder goals of the new faith: to “preserve, support, and comfort.”

Later in life, as the storms grew and multiplied, Anna sought refuge in religion with increasing desperation. The slightest sign of disruption in her own life, or errant behavior in her children’s, triggered a rush of pieties. From school exams to job applications, every crisis prompted a sermon invoking His beneficence or His forbearance. “May the good God help you remain honest,” she wrote her son Theo on the occasion of a promotion. She invoked God to shield her children against everything from sexual temptation to bad weather, insomnia, and creditors. But most of all, she invoked Him to shield herself from the dark forces within. Her relentless nostrums—so much like her son Vincent’s more manic variations on both secular and religious themes—suggest a need