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THE CALL
CARAVAGGIO, THE CALLING OF ST. MATTHEW, 1599–1600

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Like God the Father in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel
who searches Adam's face, stretching his right arm
out to touch and awaken him to life, so here
in Caravaggio's painting above the altar of King
Louis there in Rome, it is Jesus this time round reaching

out his arm toward the tax collector Matthew, who
in turn points his own hand toward himself, stunned
at being singled out like this. In the meantime, two
young tax collectors, startled as if they too have been
uncovered, look up for an instant, while another two,

one who's clearly been in the money-laundering
business a long time now, keep their heads down,
preoccupied with the pile of silver coins aglitter there
on the coarse-grained table half hidden in the shadows.
The preternatural light—let's call it that—that struggles

with the dark seems to catch the drama of it all: a gift
offered in that instant that could satisfy a hungry heart.
And—look!—there's Christ's hand held out again, ten years
on, Caravaggio pointing out the truth again, as the dead man

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Lazarus is jolted back once more into the light, his arms flailing

as life begins to flow back into his limbs. He was a brawler, no doubt, this Caravaggio. And just how many he maimed or killed or conned must be left for scholars to figure out. But a many few at least. First he fled Milan, then Rome, then in time it was on to Naples. Then on again, this time

to seek protection from those Knights in Malta. Then finally it was down to Sicily, before he headed back to Rome, sailing up the coast, hoping once again to be pardoned, this time by no less than the pope himself, in exchange of course for those final priceless paintings only Caravaggio

himself could execute. Among the three there's one of Saint Ursula at the very instant the mad Hun's arrow penetrates her breast, as now she gazes down at what's just happened, her eyes those of a contemplative, accepting of the end she's reached, while the artist,

who surely knew his share of sharps and gangsters, reveals himself as one more member of the gang, staring down now in disbelief at what his brushstrokes have revealed about himself, even as the scene screams before his eyes. Brother, sister, he was much like one of us, I fear.

Someone no doubt who felt unworthy to be singled out, yet someone who could paint far better than his rivals, as well he knew himself. Someone too who saw deeper than most of us, as his paintings likewise clearly show. Yes, there was a price upon his head, for sure. But how much only God can know.

WHEAT FIELD WITH CYPRESSES
VINCENT VAN GOGH, LATE JUNE 1889

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“I have a canvas of cypresses with a few ears of wheat,”
Van Gogh writes his brother Theo back in Paris. There are
poppies in it, and a blue sky impastoed “like a multicolored
Scotch plaid.” And below those mottled clouds beckons

that “wheat field in the sun,” its rich thick yellow baking
in the dense summer heat. To the right are two tall
cypresses, reaching skyward to catch the eye’s attention.
It’s late July, 1889, and Vincent’s here at the mental

asylum in Saint-Rémy, suffering his dark night
of the soul. He’s thirty-six and has just ten months left
to live before that bullet takes his life. In the time
he has, he will paint another dozen wheat fields

when the doctors let him walk about and paint
en plein air. And just now the wheat is ripe for harvest.
But it’s those mottled paint-daubed clouds that catch
his eye, like those Father Hopkins, dead just three weeks

now at forty-four, caught sailing over Dublin the year before.
“Cloud-puffballs,” he named them, as they glittered across
the skies. And once again you feel it: the wind, the Spirit,
as life springs once more back to life and dark gives way

to light. A farmer went out to sow his seed. Some
the birds ate. Some bleached and burned among
the brambles. And some fell on good soil, to produce
in time fields of golden wheat like this. Fresh winds

still shook the banks and brakes as spring came round,
Father Hopkins saw. And, look, once more birds

were busy building nests. Though just not him,
at least not now, what with sickness coming on.

And yet, both men got up again, again, and did what
they could with words or paint and soldiered on.
Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear, Christ urged,
as now another storm sweeps down the darkening fields.

SUPPER AT EMMAUS

SUPPER AT EMMAUS BY CARAVAGGIO, 1605–1606

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And there's that hand again, reaching out this time
to bless the bread that's been set before him on the table.
It's a small loaf, really, just a roll, and it's been broken,
much as his body was three days before. To his left
there's a pewter pitcher with black lines striped across
it and a glass half hidden, filled with bloodred wine.

He must be real, this Nazarene, because you can see
his shadow on the worn leather jacket the old innkeeper's
wearing, who's gazing down at this stranger as he wonders
what's going on. In the foreground, seated, are two disciples:
one is Cleophas, the other, strangely, looks like Peter, at least
from other portraits Caravaggio painted of the man.

The same disciple who denied Christ three times out there
in the courtyard, and who now seems to inch his right hand
close and closer to Christ's wrist, as if to check if this could
really be the Man. In the upper right stands an old woman,
bent and weary from the daily chores she's done so long
that nothing seems to faze her anymore, so that as the Man

breaks bread as an offering of himself, we cannot read

what it is she's thinking. And here's the thing: there's another version of this same scene, which Caravaggio painted five years earlier. In this one Christ appears clean-shaven and is so much younger, which may be why the men failed at first to recognize this stranger who had walked beside them.

But look at what the painter's rendered. There's a glass carafe of wine, a bowl of fruit and a roasted capon on the table, a Sunday feast for sure. And once again an innkeeper stands looking down, puzzled as this stranger blesses the bread then breaks it, even as those two disciples are clearly shaken—perhaps like us as well—by what is really happening here before our eyes.