

THE NAME GAME / VINCENT VAN GOGH

I once read that Vincent Van Gogh owed his first name to a brother who had died stillborn exactly one year before his own day of birth. This macabre twinship and eponymy seems to have haunted the artist's entire life, which was deeply marked by his relationship to another brother. In his letters to Theo, he mentioned the problem he had in signing paintings with his unwieldy last name, and in fact he signed very few of them. In a letter from the summer of 1888, he wrote: "I began signing the pictures, but soon stopped; it just seemed so silly." He eventually got around to signing some and even to using simply "his" first name, Vincent, which rhymes more or less well with Rembrandt, the name of another famous Dutch painter. Looking at the Wheatfield with crows (1890), one of his very last paintings, I can't help seeing the ductus of his signature: a large underscored "V" formed by the roads in the foreground and a lot of flying black "V"s. *Hey, this is getting kind of eerie.*

