“There is hardly any activity, any enterprise, which is started with such tremendous hopes and expectations, and yet, which fails so regularly, as love,” the humanistic philosopher and psychologist Erich Fromm wrote in his classic on the art of loving. In some sense, no love ever fails, for no experience is ever wasted — even the most harrowing becomes compost for our growth, fodder for our combinatorial creativity. But in another, it is indeed astonishing how often we get love wrong — how, over and over, it stokes our hopes and breaks our hearts and hurls us onto the cold hard baseboards of our being, flattened by defeat and despair, and how, over and over, we rise again and hurl ourselves back at the dream of it, the delirium of it, the everlasting wonder of it.

How to go on doing it undefeated is what British philosopher Gillian Rose (September 29, 1947–December 9, 1995) examines in her part-memoir, part-reckoning Love’s Work (public library), written in the final years of her prolific and passionate life, and published just before her untimely death of ovarian cancer.

Art by Sophie Blackall from Things to Look Forward to

In a startling inversion of the iconic opening sentence of Anna Karenina, Rose writes:

Happy love is happy after its own fashion: it discovers the store of wonders untold, for it is the intercourse of power with love and of might with grace. Nothing is foreign to it: it tarries with the negative; it dallies with the mundane, and it is ready for the unexpected. All unhappy loves are alike. I can tell the story of one former unhappy love to cover all my other unhappy loves... The unhappiest love is a happy love that has now become unhappy.

In a passage that calls to mind Ursula K. Le Guin’s parallel between writing and falling in love and Italo Calvino’s reflection on how literature is like love, Rose considers the singular allure of love above all of life’s other satisfactions:

However satisfying writing is — that mix of discipline and miracle, which leaves you in control, even when what appears on the page has emerged from regions beyond your control — it is a very poor substitute indeed for the joy and the agony of loving. Of there being someone who loves and desires you, and he glories in his love and desire, and you glory in his ever-strange being, which comes up against you, and disappears, again and
again, surprising you with difficulties and with bounty.

Illustration from An ABZ of Love

Most of life’s difficulties have to do with its relationship to power — to the desire for power, to the fear of it. An epoch after Bertrand Russell insisted that “the touchstone of any love that is valuable” lies in relinquishing the desire for power over the love object, Rose writes:

In personal life, people have absolute power over each other, whereas in professional life, beyond the terms of the contract, people have authority, the power to make one another comply in ways which may be perceived as legitimate or illegitimate. In personal life, regardless of any covenant, one party may initiate a unilateral and fundamental change in the terms of relating without renegotiating them, and further, refusing even to acknowledge the change... There is no democracy in any love relation: only mercy. To be at someone’s mercy is dialectical damage: they may be merciful and they may be merciless. Yet each party, woman, man, the child in each, and their child, is absolute power as well as absolute vulnerability. You may be less powerful than the whole world, but you are always more powerful than yourself. Love in the submission of power.

[...]

Exceptional, edgeless love effaces the risk of relation: that mix of exposure and reserve, of revelation and reticence. It commands the complete unveiling of the eyes, the transparency of the body. It denies that there is no love without power; that we are at the mercy of others and that we have others in our mercy.

Mercy, of course, would be unnecessary, irrelevant, even nonexistent without its object: fear. We yearn for mercy only when we are and because we are afraid. In consonance with Hannah Arendt’s observation that “fearlessness is what love seeks,” Rose considers why such fearlessness is the most difficult and counter-natural achievement in the gauntlet of the heart:

Lover and Beloved are equally at the mercy of emotions which each fears will overwhelm and destroy their singularity. For the Lover, these are the frightening feelings roused by the love: for the Beloved, these are the frightening feelings trusted to love, but now sent back against her.

[...]

You may be weaker than the whole world but you are always stronger than yourself. Let me send my power against my power... Let me discover what it is that I want and fear from love. Power and love, might and grace.
Nearly a century after Rilke contemplated the precarious balance of intimacy and independence and Kahlil Gibran urged lovers to “love one another but make not a bond of love: let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls,” Rose considers the difficult, necessary spaciousness that safeguards the union of love against failure:

If the Lover retires too far, the light of love is extinguished and the Beloved dies; if the Lover approaches too near the Beloved, she is effaced by the love and ceases to have an independent existence. The Lovers must leave a distance, a boundary, for love: then they approach and retire so that love may suspire.

We might know all this, and yet we keep getting it wrong, miscalibrating the optimal distance, miscalibrating our own capacity for love. But getting it wrong might be precisely what keeps us trying, keeps us hoping, keeps us living. After meeting a woman who was diagnosed with cancer at sixteen and survived to be vivacious at ninety-six, Rose marvels:

How can that be — that someone with cancer since she was sixteen exudes well-being at ninety-six? Could it be because she has lived sceptically? Sceptical equally of science and of faith, of politics and of love? She has certainly not lived a perfected life. She has not been exceptional. She has not loved herself or others unconditionally. She has been able to go on getting it all more or less wrong, more or less all the time, all the nine and a half decades of the present century plus three years of the century before.

Looking back on her own life, perched on the precipice of death, she reflects:

A crisis of illness, bereavement, separation, natural disaster, could be the opportunity to make contact with deeper levels of the errors of the soul, to loose and to bind, to bind and to loose. A soul which is not bound is as mad as one with cemented boundaries. To grow in love-ability is to accept the boundaries of oneself and others, while remaining vulnerable, woundable, around the bounds. Acknowledgement of conditionality is the only unconditionality of human love.

Complement Love’s Work with French philosopher Alain Badiou on how we fall and stay in love and Hannah Arendt on how to live with the fundamental fear of loss in love, then revisit Van Gogh on fear, taking risks, and how inspired mistakes propel us forward.