

## IN THAT WHICH LIES BEYOND, WILL THERE BE WINGS?

—after Vincent Van Gogh's sketch and painting "Giant Peacock Moth" (St. Rémy, 1889)

by Janet Ruth

Vincent called it a death's head moth in his letter to brother Theo, although it was really a giant peacock moth (*Saturnia pyri*)—easily identified in his accurate rendering. He found it in the gardens of the Saint-Paul Asylum while recovering from the episode with his severed ear.

Perhaps the misidentification was a simple error—both species are found in southern France. Or was he thinking about dying? Perhaps. And yet, in his letter, he told Theo that he drew the moth because *to paint it would have meant killing it, which was a pity with such a beautiful creature*. He created the painting later, from memory and his chalk and ink sketch—keeping it alive. A composition full of lift and wing-shapes—luminous arum flowers, leaves in olive-green and the moth. Those four glowing eye-spots.

blue shadows  
with an edge of moonlight  
what arises from the dark

\* the italicized phrase is from Vincent's letter to his brother Theo (22 May 1889); found in *Van Gogh's Letters: the Mind of the Artist in Paintings, Drawings and Words, 1875-1890*

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