

This Massive Darkness

by Maxine Mayer

(from Phoenix 1)

"This massive darkness"

by Rainer Maria Rilke:

It's possible I am pushing through solid rock
in flintlike layers, as the ore lies, alone;
I am such a long way in I see no way through,
and no space; everything is close to my face,
and everything close to my face is stone.
I don't have much knowledge yet in grief -
so this massive darkness makes me small.
You be the master; make yourself fierce, break in;
then your great transforming will happen to me,
and my great grief cry will happen to you.

She asked me for this. "A gift," she said. Diana said, "As a gift." First I asked her what she wished for, that I could give, for her birthday. I'd left much time - two months - in the event there was something I could find, prepare, earn towards, make.

She looked at me for a long time, a stiff twist to her long neck. She appeared more like herself than often she does. Not my ruffle-feathered red robin, soft, fuzzy. But... a stiff-necked, proud crane. I think that is the bird whose moves and posture I envision, when I see her.

Suddenly, I realized the enormity of my offer, my gesture. I saw it through her eyes, in those long minutes. The thought of my journal came unbidden to my mind. It seemed right. She would ask to read my journals. My heart hurt then because much of my journals, my words, are concerned with people, feelings, times, that she knows nothing about; and even concerning those times since we met... my words would not please her, I think. They would not please her. They are not pleasant.

I saw her eyes shift, dart, to my journal. Then away. "Write me your story - your story," Diana said.

I misunderstood. "Yes," I replied, "you may read them, all of them, if you wish it."

"No - not your journals. Too personal. I want the now of it - how you see it, looking back. Bird's eye view. From - " Then Diana stopped.

"Yes. From - when?" I thought I knew the answer - she would wish to know my childhood: her interest in my little stories about my earliest memories always amazes me.

"From - when you brought Jacob home."

She asked it - the impossible. I am immersed in the now and it is the now she wishes me to step away from, to view as I might the life of a stranger - and I am too close, too tenderly concerned, to do that.

Diana asked it. The story of my life, since we met, really. And as it is for her, and she is very dear, I will try.

A year ago Catherine died. In my arms. She was truly and really dead. I would sometimes imagine dream lives - where she lived and I died in her place. Elliot is the only one who knows this. And now - Diana. But - these stories did not serve. They increased my pain, drove it home. Deeply into the heart. To be a poet and a dreamer is wonderful. To deny reality is – not.

Then came a time when I lost myself again. It was after I knew Diana. The rage, fueled by loss of hope, that consumed me... led me to a red and black darkness from which I could not awaken. I was in a prison. Loss, hopelessness, fear, as well. I wished only to die. Even my son, our son, could not call to me. I was lost.

But Diana knew. She found me. With such cruel and honest words - with such brutality - I cannot now conceive how her gentle heart could say and do that, how she had no fear – she hurled the truth at me on that dark, empty street. Brought me back. With reason. Love, disguised as reason. I think that was the first time I knew that they were identical. Love and reason, I mean. Not two but one. I'm still hearing the echoes of that night, and the flames fly red in my mind's eye sometimes, still.

Perhaps because God is love and truth. Perhaps that is why. I know that our logic, our rudimentary glimpses of truth, reveal so little of the glory inherent in things. They do not touch the surface of infinite truth or love. I know, "Now, we see through a glass, darkly; then, face to face."

Yet I believe something of divine mercy was revealed to me that night. We stood five feet apart, Diana and I. And I was grabbed by mercy. Saved from perdition. In a moment's conversation. Blunt words. Jerky movements. A breathless beauty bare of adornment, bare of flowers, isolated, pushed to the limit of endurance - yet seemingly of limitless endurance. A gift of mercy - for me.

I do not yet know why. Why Diana loves me. Perhaps I shall never know, never understand. The habits of the heart, of the judgment, of a lifetime, may never be sufficiently unlearned to permit that. I know Diana loves me. She wants me to understand how, why. So I try. But I fear she will be disappointed in that desire. I look at myself and I'm lost in the mystery of their otherness, the otherness of those who love me.

I remember the Naming Ceremony for my Jacob. Catherine's and my child. I remember looking at him – looking.

It is an awful thing that I feel. But I must speak, for I promised Diana this story. I feel - it is they who are strange, other, not me.

I am here, within myself. Within my body, my mind, my dreams and memories, my heart's loving and my fear. And I know me. It is the others I do not know.

And I looked at my Jacob that night, and all the happy others, and felt them as such – other.

But not you, Diana. No - I must not speak to you here. I must speak about you. A narrative. That is the gift you asked. Not a journal, a narrative. Not a question, an answer.

Not her, then: not Diana. She had offered me divine mercy on a cold dark street, and her face was on fire with the fire of the fire I had set behind me. She burned with that fire I'd set. I saw her flesh burned away. Only her bones and her eyes, her eyes, and a nervous shaking - shaking for me - remained of her. Bones and flakes of black ash. Mercy. On some level I spoke to Diana. And on some level she spoke to me. And I was spared from the perdition I sought as surely as I sought only death.

So Diana has not been other to me since that time.

I think she would wish to hear from me many details, many explanations, for acts of mine that hurt her, bewildered her. Knowing as she must, after that night, that we were not strangers, she accepted the task of being a stranger at my unspoken request, nevertheless. Did she think I was frightened – for myself, for my self-regard? Or for her?

It is not my place to investigate what Diana thought. Only – I promised to share with her what I thought, think. So I must. She did not call me to her. Never but once, when she came to me. She did not call me to her, as did my Catherine. Or – perhaps Diana called, too, but I could not hear. As I saw it then, Diana did not call me to her. I came because - I wished to come.

There was a certain duality I felt. I mean, after Jacob was found and brought home through her unimaginable, self-sacrificing, loving efforts. I felt, with my mind, that I must reluctantly relinquish this woman who gave so much, so careless of her own life, her safety. She had done enough, risked enough, for me. Now she must walk for herself again.

But. But. There was a large but. But - I needed her, still. I needed her. I was lost, Below. I believe, were it not for Jacob, I'd have remained in exile though there was no longer a need. No one hunted me, endangered my people, the ones I love, any longer.

I needed... the answer to that, what I needed, what I needed - Diana - leapt unbidden to mind, to lips, to my heart. I voiced the name. I voiced the need. To myself. And I acted on it.

I always held to the formal ways. Father's lessons, writ large in me, never found so detailed and all-encompassing expression as in my ways with Diana.

Even when I faltered, slipped, I exercised those skills and held myself from seeming, appearing, to falter, slip. Every word - selected. Every gesture - choreographed. Every look – masked.

It can only be blind lovers who believe me to be the soul of truth. In fact, I've known no one as inclined, as schooled, as deliberate as I in prevarication. Lies. Lying. With every word and gesture and look - I lie. I hide. I distort. I fear. I protect myself.

Somehow, to Diana, it didn't seem to matter. I withheld the truth - that I needed her. Desperately. But she knew it anyway. It was as though I'd chosen to play a game at which I was the amateur, she

the master. She parried. And - lunged. Straight to the heart. For the kill. Truly, I believe I had no chance against true honesty, true purity of motive, true mercy, true generosity. Against Diana, a straw man could not stand.

Yet she leaves me some ground upon which to manoeuvre. Always. Delicacy. Maybe she is afraid of me. I am a very large animal, as well as a man. She does not appear to be afraid. But she is never blind to my - potentialities. Never "blinded by love," as she terms my comments on her beauty. That's another story.

Do you know what it is like to be free to stare at the sun, through thick blocks of glass!

No, not a journal. Diana asked me for my story - how I understand my life, our life, since we brought Jacob home, since she saved Jacob. And me. And I promised to try. A birthday gift. I fear she will find my attempt unsatisfactory - poetry. She wants meat and potatoes. I give elusive wisps of fragments. I wish not to disappoint her. I must try harder.

What do I think, what do I understand, of my life, of Diana? Understand? Nothing.

Feel. Yes. I feel. I feel joy. I know this is to be impossible. The anguish of Catherine's death, the loss of her - is an unending physical pain. My loins ache with it; my body burns with it, that loss. It burns my heart, it bites into my belly. There is no end and no beginning to it. It simply is. Loss. Catherine. It obscures reason.

And yet the sun comes through blocks of glass in Diana's home, and I am there, and it warms me. And she is very quiet, my Diana. And I take pleasure in her pleasure at my pleasure. And the rhythm of that giving/receiving/peace/joy/quiet, the rhythm of our love - yes, our love. Diana's for me, still more, mine for her - is so real, and I am happy.

I am happy. The tea tastes sweet when her strawberry and raspberry jam, tablespoons full sweeten it. The tea is sweet. The breeze on her rooftop, helplessly smothered by August heat, feels brave. The breeze on her rooftop in August reminds me of sailing. Of a sailboat, and the sea. How can this be? I must make clear that I do not understand, that I understand nothing of this. And that I die daily of the loss of my Catherine. It does not go away. It does not soften. It is - barely endured.

Yet... the sun shines into Diana's home, and the tea is sweetened, there, with jam; and the breeze on her rooftop reminds me of sailing. I cannot hope to understand.

It is in my own chamber that the difficulties emerge. Diana. Diana is not... at home, in my chamber. No. Not even when she is playing with Jacob. Or playing chess with me. It is not like that in Father's chamber; there, there exists an accommodation, a pleasantness.

In my chamber... something is wrong. I do not see clearly what it is. Once, when she slept atop my quilt, with another quilt laid over her for warmth, it was not like that. She is good when she sleeps. I mean - Diana - goodness is all, when she sleeps, even in my chamber. But, when she is awake, I think it is she herself who does it. Now that I reflect with care upon this. I see: it is Diana who does it. She... withholds the truth, in my chamber.

I do believe Diana is afraid of ghosts. She need not fear Catherine's ghost. Not in my chamber.

I must not be bitter. I must remember, we shared all we could, when we could, as we could, while she lived. We had our time. I must not be bitter.

Diana - I understand I must instruct you in how not to be afraid of ghosts.

I must thank you for the lessons of this story, Diana, when I give this to you. I must not forget, neglect, to tell you my thanks.

Diana showed me how to use her computer. I might have one - a gift; right here in my chamber - were I to say the word. The electricity would be dear, but not suspiciously so, to our city above. I prefer my pen and paper. It is what I know. It is my past, which I carry with me always, wish to bring with me into my future.

I see a future. Hope. I see - Diana. I see Diana and my child. I see Diana - and myself. I see us together. But I do not wish to lose my past. I remember Lisa told me I have too great a reverence for the past. She had too little, I think. And knew nothing of me.

Diana treads lightly. Fearful of a misstep, that she might alienate me, drive me away.

I've kept my secret well. I should be proud of myself for that. I'm not. Not proud. I've kept my secret well: that I need her, that I love her. That is all I understand of this year since she gave me hope, in the form of my son's return, and jam-laced tea, and breezes again, and sunlight.

And I understand a little better why she wanted this story of me. She's kept no secret. I've kept one, one that is too important to be hidden if the two of us, as one, are to survive.

Diana must hear my secret. That I need her - past caring if it is prudent or fair. That I love her - past caring if it is seemly or a betrayal. But indeed, I know it is not that, not that, not a betrayal. Neither of Catherine nor of Diana herself. Nor of me. It is a trust. A trust was given me. To love again.

Why I was chosen to receive such a trust, I will never know. But I was, and I've been given this great trust. Let me not diminish or destroy it with lies and secrets and false faces.

Diana is not other. She feels to me to be - myself. I am at home with her. She has become my home. She and Jacob, together - where they are, is home. And there I will be.

It is a wonder and a privilege, a grace, a gift. That my child is, and loves me. That Diana is, and loves me. That I love him, and her.

It is all I see, all I feel, now. The leaden pain of Catherine's death, the loss of her, lives within me as well. That, too, is all I see, all I feel. So, Diana must accept this, too. I am both - the total loss, the risen, rising, beautiful hope. Perhaps that is life. A sweet pain, an unaccountable joy.

I must not drift. I must hold tight to the task of writing this gift for Diana; her birthday approaches. She will perhaps wish to know what I think about her valiant attempts to listen to the music I love, and stay awake! I think her attempts are more endearing even than her habit of ignoring me, forgetting I am there, when she works. It is hard to imagine two more endearing facets of our life than those. To be so at home with me that she forgets I am there, in her home. To be so in love

with me that she will torture herself, try to love all that I love, for my sake. She must be pleased - I insist - she must be told all these secrets I've kept.

Not on paper. From my own lips. I must tell her. And... I must touch her, as she has touched me. I must touch her, as she would be touched, by me. Another secret: as I wish to touch her.

The body is a strange and wonderful thing, I think. I find my body repulsive. Others do not. But... they are other.

Sometimes when desire surges through me, I do not find my body ugly. I find it - me. A me of me that I might use gracefully, totally, and I know that I would find it makes me happy, were I to use my body thus. I find my caging, the restraints insupportable.

More than that, I find them - purposeless. At such times I feel like a fool. And I cannot remember the reason for my foolishness. Sometimes.

When the fluorescent lights go out in Diana's home, and all that is light is a small incandescent lamp, scarcely a candle's worth in the deep drowsy-making shadows, I forget why I've come to my conclusions, I forget my reasons, my reasoning, I forget my fears. All I know is those times is that I yearn to kiss a lock of red hair and to run my large right thumb down a curve of white cheek and place my large left thumb at a bony hip, at a crossroads, and touch cold skin, skin I know will feel like cornstarch. Silky, unbelievably silky, to my touch. My body clamors to be within Diana's radiant center, to be fired with her fire, burning with her fire, burning my own fire, consuming me. And I forget my ugliness; and all my reasons and reasonings forsake me. And all memory of learned wisdom, judgment, even fear, leaves me.

Diana will wish to know exact times, a date, from whence she can date this development - as she might term it. If I say - If I tell her the truth - If I tell myself that truth - the when of this - I believe Diana might be shocked. Even Diana might be shocked.

I must have no secrets, not here. Diana, you were in my Catherine's apartment. I heard the key in the door - my heart jumped, raced. I was frightened. I fled to Catherine's balcony - but did not leave. I watched you. You spoke to a police officer. Then you closed the door of my Catherine's apartment. You shut the officer out. And you shut off the light. You made yourself a darkness, that you might know better what you were there to learn.

And again, later, it came upon me with great force, and I stood up against it. I stood up to you, fought - like a lion, I fought. I told you to remember me as you would a dream. I fled. Wrapped in the secrets of my passions and my pride, I fled from you. But I called to you with my heart. In my heart, I called to you. I begged you to remember me - not as a dream. You did. It was well for me that you did. That you have never fled me. That you loved me. Well for me. I am - not too proud to know this. I am lost without you, Diana.

There is a kind of mud, a cement, we use to fill in the cracks, below. To prevent further erosion. To hold things together. We put it in the cracks. We smooth it in between crumbling bricks. It is a very useful mud mixture. When this moist, muddy mixture dries in the cracks, between the bricks - there are no longer cracks, or broken bricks. They are neat - seams. We say then, good as new. And it is true. Good as new.

Love, mercy, truth, compassion, forgiveness, generosity – even kindness - are a muddy mixture. When the mix is right, and we close the cracks, mend the broken bricks of our lives with that sweet mixture, and it sets - we are good as new.

The work of a mason is skilled labor, Diana. It is bought at great cost. Like a carpenter, a mason may pick and choose where he wishes to work. Such skills are sought after as the rare gifts they are. I've got a lot of work for a skilled mason. For you, my Diana.

But - I must tell you what I understand, not talk to you. Not a journal, not a letter. But - only what I understand. It is hard.

Do you remember walking with me one night, down by the docks, by the harbor? It is a walk I've often taken over the last fifteen years of my life. Alone. Never once did I dream I would share that dangerous dark walk with anyone, much less a woman. It is not a romantic walk. The streets are lined with abandoned buildings; the broken lives and bodies of derelicts face one at every turn; it is a dirty part of our city, my Diana. Even the great beauty of the lights of night on the river does not repay for the long dark walk through alleys littered with filth.

Why I shared those secrets with you, I did not know, until I had. And then I knew, I understood. They came alive for me. I saw - not disgust, not even soul-deep fear, although you showed some apprehension. In your eyes I saw - love. So much love - for just those streets, that part of our city. I could not believe I saw it in your eyes - love, for those streets, those people, that face of our city. It fused with my own love, my own caring, for our city - all of it, all of our city. You gave me great joy that night, Diana. Greater than you could know or dream. I was not alone. In my foolish love for our city, its people, its tragedy, its ugly beauty, its despair, and its joy. I was not alone, my Diana.

Back and forth. I weave back and forth. Narrative becomes journal becomes speech. Perhaps you will forgive me, that I lose track, digress, do not fulfill my promise. Ah, I know you will.

What then was it you asked me for when you asked me for a record, a written expression - notes, as you called it - of my year, our year? That I might tell the truth, even were I never to give you this birthday gift? That I might learn the truth? Do you believe I do not know - that I need you, that I love you? That I - desire you? That, too. I know. And you know.

There remains only – act.

So, what is the birthday present I will give you. It will be your birthday, not mine. Yet I will give the gift to myself. You will give me the gift of yourself. We will gift each other, as we have always done. It is "our move."

Vincent

Diana read what I wrote. I did not wait for her birthday to give my narrative to her. She claims I have done nothing of what she asked, that I have - danced around her request.

Yet she seemed pleased with what I gave her, my words. There was no "give" to her posture, no

outreaching to me. But I heard a singing, a singing from her heart. She was not disappointed, not - sorry.

"That's not it," Diana says. "That's not it." Not what she meant. "A story," she says, "tell me a story." She gestures, a choppy movement, dismissal and inclusion at once. She glances at me, turns away. My Diana has become shy, my words have made her shy. I touched a tendril by her cheek, leaned forward, leaned into her space. She moved her hand as though to brush mine away. She stopped herself just in time. I felt her fear, that she had offended me, that I would somehow know. I sustained serenity, a placid smile, and the moment passed. Her burst of relief, that I had not realized she would have pushed my hand away, was as forceful as steam from a teakettle's spout.

Only my greatest effort to maintain myself quietly, unmoving, on her couch, kept me there. I am grateful at such moments for quickness and presence of mind, gifts I use most often as barriers to others rather than for their sake's.

I play over and over again the Vivaldi work, The Four Seasons, in my memory. It is a most wondrous work. I think on the seasons of my life and remember the cycles of nature, and I am happy. Full of hope.

My Diana became shy when she read my words. I believe she is unused to being... the hunted one. She is by nature a huntress: inquisitive, daring, purposeful, accomplished. I believe no one has ever sought her, thirsted for her, hunted her. And she is unused to it. No one has wanted her, who she is, as her skills for flight are – underdeveloped.

I have always been a hunter.

I hold my prey in the palm of my left hand, she is in my hand, but full of unrest, dismay. Were I to claim her, my prey, lift her gently with my teeth, shake her, taken in the grip of my teeth, were I to do that, claim my prey, oh how frightened she would be. How frightened.

Now images come unbidden to mind - animal images: forests, trees, stalking, the blue of Diana, naked, flying at great speed, flying before me, fleeing me, a quick frightened stare, a glance behind - have I gained on her? I, languid, powerful, on all fours, an animal within the body of an enormous animal, an alert, intelligent animal, lope after her. I hear bird chirps, stop to listen for her, smell her scent, continue. I hunt the huntress. I am happy in my pursuit. I see - me. All animal, very big cat, yet - still - me. I am Vincent. Now I know what I am.

Vincent

My illness after my last entry was to be predicted. I became terrified by the force I felt emerging. To know I am an animal is tolerable; to experience it in my body terrifies me. I hid again. I see I cannot step aside. This becomes journal, fight as I do to make it story.

I found my way home.

When I came to myself, I saw Catherine's face through the haze. I nearly murmured Catherine's name. Almost. Almost did that. Almost - broke her heart. Almost - drove her from me. But we were

blessedly spared that. I knew the hovering image was not my Catherine, but Diana. Perhaps I smelled her. My sense of smell is very keen. Perhaps the smell of her fear for me pierced the haze where light could not, and I uttered no name. I lifted one paw, my right paw, and it was grabbed so quickly, squeezed so tightly, it hurt. And it was my Diana. And I had not spoken my Catherine's name. I thank her. Catherine watches over me, protects me, still - from myself.

I wrote - paw. I am not disturbed to know, to understand, that I see my body, my limbs, my hands, my teeth, so differently now. Only surprised.

My paw, claws. It is right. It is not ugly, not repulsive. It is me. I am Vincent.

I am Vincent. My Catherine protects me, always: protects me, still. My Catherine loves me, gentles my sobbing, shuddering body, cries with me, gives me her neck to kiss, to cry into. My Catherine does not allow me to pull away, to look away. When I try, she kisses my throat, pulls me back. Catherine loves me. But when I am with her, I do not know who I am, what I am. When I am with her, I am not Vincent. I am only Vincent. Her Vincent. I am not all that I am.

My Catherine fears me. I know that now. She loves me and fears me. And hunts me, like a lioness. Hunts me. But - not me. Only - her Vincent. When she finds me, I am not Vincent. I am only - her Vincent.

My illness was predictable. How I am, now, was not. I have lost my balance.

Sometimes, when a cat's tail is damaged - as in a fire – its balance is lost. With a cat, this loss is permanent. It walks along a ledge, but not with the steady careless grace of its nature. It is that which it must not be - unsteady. Such a loss can be compensated for. Intelligent cats learn the extents, the limits. Walk with assurance. They learn what is new: limits. Corners, edges, height, depth. Tentativeness. Caution. Wariness is replaced, by such intelligent cats, with caution. Am I intelligent? Can I learn to approximate balance, can I relearn - grace? Do I want to?

I have lost my balance. That is to say, I have lost myself.

Now the dreams of Catherine come crashing down on me, tumbling down, like books bumping their way down a steep staircase. Some fall off - there is no railing. I sleep only to dream of my Catherine, the old dream, the white gauze gown through which I see her naked body; the beckoning arms; the smile; the unknowable; the unattainable. I pursue my Catherine in my dreams.

But I do not hunt her. I do not hunt her. In my dreams, I am Catherine's Vincent. I am not me. I am not Vincent. I am Catherine's Vincent in my dreams. I do not hunt. I am not an animal. I am - not purely me. I am - a lie. The lie of a man whose only flaw is a lion's face, teeth, claws, fur. I am - flawed - in my dreams.

I must not frighten my Diana. She must not see my fear. Terror, really. I am in terror. I shake, inside. I must not let her see, not my terror. Not give her my pain.

But - if I do not give her my pain - I will be truly lost.

I can tell by the way the tree beat,

*after so many dull days,
on my worried windowpanes
that a storm is coming,
and I hear the far-off fields say things
I can't bear without a friend,
I cannot love without a sister.
The storm, the shifter of shapes, drives on...*

How could Rilke know? That there are - things - I cannot love without a sister? It is - myself - I cannot love without a sister. If I do not let go, let free, let go my pain - if I clench it in tight fists, hug it to me, as I always have, always, as far as memory reaches, I will never love myself. I am Vincent. I hunt. I hunt Diana. I am - perfect hunter. I am happy. I have hope. No cat hopes or is happy. Therefore – I am Vincent. I am man.

I have lost my balance. But not - the way. The way lies straight before me - calls me. I smell my prey. I am close to it. To her. She is close by. I glimpse her naked running form, a blur that moves at great speed. I am gaining in my prey. I am gaining on her. She is a woman. Her name is Diana. I hunt her. I am not a cat - because I am afraid. I am a man. Because I know fear. I taste fear. I am clear-headed, clear-eyed. I know purpose as well as immediacy.

Diana will not be pleased with my story. Forgive me, Diana.

Vincent

Diana is dissatisfied with my story. Again. "Don'tcha remember anything - have ya got amnesia?" No, Diana, I have not got amnesia. I remember - everything. I must try again. Diana's birthday fast approaches. I must try harder.

I have not spoken of Father, nor of our community, nor of my beloved friends, in this story of my year, as I understand it, as I know it, now.

Perhaps the only words I can say are those that repeat themselves in my mind, in my heart - have repeated for a very long time. That I am not a domestic animal. Once, I called my home, my "tomb." I felt it so, then. It is my only place; for me there is no other place. I believed.

I have found another place. I am at home in one other place - Diana's home.

Yet even there I am caged. By the sun. I am caged, by day. I am "let out," like a cat, at night. Yes - bitter. Bitter. Forgive me, Father, friends. I am - bitter. Have been so, for a long time. But I did not know this.

Why am I permitted to know now? I feel that I am diminished by my bitterness. Yet it is not true. I am given great freedom by it. I am free, now, to know myself. Perhaps - to grow. Yet it feels like - diminishment. To be dissatisfied with one's fate, one's destiny - is - small. But - I am dissatisfied.

So - so - perhaps I have another destiny than the one I've accepted for much of my life, the destiny Father saw for the infant he - nourished - with a mother's love, with tenderness, with such great

care. Another life. Is this possible?

I've accepted my limits for so long. Can it be that there are no limits for me - can this be? "There is no life without limits." Catherine says. When I refused to allow her to embrace mine, my own limits. Is that true? Yes, it is true.

But what are those limits? I remember - love. Limitless, radiant, unending love. That I was never to know, never to share, with a woman, with anyone. Yet - I shared it, with my Catherine. It happened. To me. And I said it was meant to be. But after the fact.

So - what are my limits?

I've said, "Anything is possible." But I've meant - for you. For you. Whoever I spoke with - for him, for her. For Lena, for Catherine, for Elliot, for Devin, for Michael. Even for Father, or Mary. For everyone but me. Yet it is I who loved Catherine and was loved by her; am still loved by her, still love her.

What are my limits?

I remember a lake in the mountains, where Catherine spent her summers as a child. That lake, those mountains, were beyond my limits. I knew it in my heart. I tried, for my Catherine, to know a different truth. But in the end, I could not. Could not know, could not try. That lake was my limit.

Yet ten weeks ago, I saw that very lake, those mountains. I asked no one, told no one, needed no one's consent, encouragement, approbation. Diana borrowed a motorcycle - one she called "heavy duty." I knew the name, Harley-Davidson, the best, the biggest, a bike with brawn, to carry a very large person and a slim wisp of a girl. She borrowed a motorcycle. She gave me a black helmet, smoked plastic visor, and the leather motorcycle jacket and gloves of an old friend of hers from the police force, a man larger than I. And without fanfare, tears, or leave-taking, Diana kick-started that heavy duty machine, I clung tight to her waist, and we went to that lake in the mountains. Spent two nights and two days there, returned on Sunday evening. Nobody knew we'd been away.

Nobody cared. Or worried. That their heart had left them. So it hurt no one. Harmed no one. Not even me.

I've ridden on top of subway cars. Railroad cars. Alone. At the end of such journeys would be - death.

At the end of this journey, there were trees, some with buds I could touch with my claws, the bark rough to my palms. There was a cold light - sunlight. Fighting its way through opaque clouds, on the Saturday. Gloriously bright and wildly hot, on the Sunday. Diana, my dear kind Diana, repeated, like an incantation, "Please, God - don't rain, don't rain." As if rain would be unwelcome, spoil something, for me - always, for me. Ah - the light!

Do you know how wonderful it is to watch the sunrise from the window of an unfamiliar room, Diana?

The agitated chirping of birds - a music somehow different because so sharp against the silence of

trafficless air and space. It cannot be described, only loved.

Do you know what it is, to feel the steady thunder of motorcycle motor in my bones, and kiss your shoulder, and listen to you curse traffic and scream the words of "Bat Out of Hell" against the wind, and kiss your shoulder again, and smell the leather of a jacket I wear that is not my cloak?

("What is that song - she must play it for me," I thought. You have, since.) And never once worry that someone might see me, cage me. And never once be alone?

The children have often spoken to me about the fast-food places. Where I might never go. All the world has eaten in one or another of those places, Diana: I've read they have such establishments now in Japan, in Russia, in Paris. But I have never eaten there, nor could I. I had found my limit in my life of limits.

Yet I have eaten there: stepped up to a counter, with a woman by my side, and told a fresh-faced beautiful child my order, and been given that order, very fast, Diana, truly - fast! And taken it with me to a table, on a large tray. A table in a far corner. My back to the diners, true. But - my helmet off. Ten weeks ago, I ate in such a place. Not a dream. Sipped a soft drink. Refused to order tea.

My hair draped much of my face, true. Hid me – well enough, to my own satisfaction. Many were the hedges around my appearance. But I saw you, oh you of shining eyes, and the smile you couldn't contain, not eating, from the excitement of it, for me - always - for me.

How could I fear death, now? I've known no greater moment of danger, Diana, then those terrifying fifteen minutes in a fast-food place. No bank robber's "high," no jewel thief's "kick" could ever match those fifteen minutes, my Diana! A great gift. I thank you. I can die happy now; I've eaten in a fast-food place. I've tasted every danger man's ingenuity can devise. I fear - nothing! One is hard put to name my limits. Are there none?

I am limited only by love.

I think I shall never read again. I wish no longer to know of life only from words in books. I wish to test and taste my possibilities for myself. Through my own perceptions, my eyes - and yours.

No doubt I come closer now to giving you the gift you wish, Diana. I hope so. A story. My last year, ours, as I see it, understand it.

The tunnels are my home now only if I choose them. Except for the battered, abused, abandoned children (like me), all who remain Below and make their life in our community, do so after a period of healing, by choice. Some leave. Even some of the children. Some stay for a short time, then leave again, when they are well, to live another life. Those who stay choose to stay. Except for me.

Until this last year.

When I could no longer find it in my heart to call the tunnels "home." When I called my home of a lifetime, my "tomb." When I exiled myself. Would have kept to that exile, had I dared, were it not for you, Diana. Called your home, "home."

If I return Below someday to more than my duties, and sleep, it will be because I choose the tunnel community, call it "home," know it for "home," for me, again. Until that moment I have no home save yours, save Jacob and you. "Person" must stand for "home" until that time, for me.

I am not a domestic animal, Diana. Cats aren't. Cats cannot be tamed, though they love and permit love. That in me that is other than man, that is - cat - wishes to come when called. But cannot always do that. Sometimes I am... away... elsewhere.

Sometimes I am not to be distracted from the hunt, from... other things. Sometimes I do not come, not even for nourishment. Sometimes sustenance is not enough, nor important, to me. Animal concerns concern me.

I think it will be a long while before I read again.

Vincent

At first I did not understand what was happening, the threat to this world, my old world, that would follow from my experiences since before Catherine died. I believed in my soul that only I was affected by my struggles, my loss, my despair, my pain. I saw the illness I suffered before Catherine was kidnapped merely as something happening to me. Assuredly, this illness threatened my friends, my Father, my Catherine - but in a concrete manner. Should I lose myself, my control, I might harm them. That is all I saw. And took pains to protect them from - myself. But I believed, when I was well again, all would be well again. These.... interruptions would pass. And all would be as before. I would be as before.

That is not what happened.

How profoundly that was not what happened! I sit in my chamber and know at last that something more happened. I changed. The threat to my world, to Catherine, to Father, implied by that, was fundamental. I did not know it then. No one wished to know it, least of all Catherine, Father.

But Catherine could not help but know. Because for the first time in our time together, she could not speak to... her Vincent. However she understood that, she understood it, acted on that knowledge. She could not speak to her Vincent, and dared not speak to - me.

The crack in the rock became something not to be ignored. Not to be named by another name. Nor to be turned from. The crack in the rock let in "this massive darkness" - not her Vincent. Catherine felt it. She loved me. But... she no longer trusted me with herself. She did not speak of our child.

I do not know if I would have healed, after a time, had Catherine not been kidnapped, thereby forcing the crack wider, until I was lost, and found, but no longer - her Vincent.

But I do know. Our life together, those years, led Catherine to the moment when she would act in such a way - something must happen. Something must happen. Our life together split the rock, allowed the darkness, called me forth - but not, her Vincent.

I had no concept, no dream, that I was no longer safe. I spoke the words but I believed they were

bound by limits; my illness, time, threats from without, dangerous events, accidents, other people. I believed I was not safe... for now.

I did not dream I was not - me. This stranger, this other, of whom I spoke to Father, to myself, as though he existed separately, an entity I could disavow, seemed to have no connection with me.

Father called me a scholar. Catherine loved my heart, rejoiced in my compassion, my poetry, my wisdom. That is who I believed myself to be, before my illness. The other I believed to be - evil. When the other's feelings, passions, rage spoke to me, through me, overpowering the me I accepted - I felt confronted, invaded, threatened. I saw no likeness in me with - him. He was ugly. I might be - beautiful - in some way. He was - incarnate ugliness.

Never did I look, truly look, at him. A glimpse was threat enough. I fought, flailing my arms, thrashing about like a drowning man. I fought, throwing everything I was, body and soul, into the battle.

I felt no kinship with him. He was the enemy. Were it not for my love for Catherine, I should never have protected her from myself, so truly did I believe that he who was not safe, was not me. When first I realized I was losing... at that moment, I saw. And took myself away from all those I loved and told them what cost me much to know: that I was protecting them from - myself.

And still I did not truly know. Still I believed this would end, if not in my death, in my healing. And I would be well again and return to them. To my Catherine.

And still I did not truly know. And sought for Catherine, wished her to come to who I thought I was, asked Father to bring Catherine.

I remembered - remembered! - that Catherine was the woman I loved. He loved her too. He loved her too.

I was not certain, but I knew I'd lost. Lost the bond. At first, that was all I could know, or mourn. Only later, when Catherine died and I met him everywhere - Below, Above, in exile, in fire, in pain, in loss - did I know the truth. I'd lost myself to him.

And still I did not know, could fear. I feared I would lose my love for life, my wonder, my spirit. I feared he would take over and I would never slip through the crack in the rock again, and return. I was right to fear it, though my fear was wrongly conceived. The crack in the rock is myself. The "massive darkness" is me. I am he. There are not two, but one. He is not my adversary. He is myself.

And - he is very much more an animal than I have ever wished to know myself to be. Not flawed; animal. Animal. And - man.

Thus I am a given with no exemplar, no pattern. I do not regret what I am. Only - I am afraid. And it is hard. Hard.

At every turn I am confronted by what once I thought was another being but now I know to be - only me. Only me. A large, hulking, rough-edged, ungentle creature who slips in and out of himself

as he might slip in and out of a silk robe. Whose tastes change, moment by moment. Who seems to have no center, no theme, no footing. Who has lost his balance.

That a woman should be my only footing now, my only foundation, my rock, supporting the cracked rock that is my soul, is an irony which makes everything, even my fear, my despair, sweet. Even my despair seems sweet when I know in my heart that the essence of who I am - remains. Because I love a woman - I am still – Vincent.

That woman's name is Diana.

Were I to write a story and seek to find two people for that story who seemed least likely of any two people in the world to find themselves together, I would seek no farther for my models than Diana and myself.

Blunt, graceless, ruthless, all angles and abruptness of movement, all quickness, straightness - Diana. All thought, lithe and ponderous at once, all veiled, cloaked, opaque, dignified, distant, convoluted – myself.

Prose. Prosaic acts. Twentieth-century devices. American dreams. Casual, hot dogs and sodas. Against such tangible truths, a straw man cannot stand.

So perhaps "this massive darkness" that I am is not, after all, a true romantic, in the end. Animals are not romantics. Animals are realistic.

Neither are animals – monstrous.

My Diana's smiles are tremulous. When I come to her as might a cat - appear suddenly, without warning - she trembles. She loves me. She almost cannot show it, she is so frightened for me.

But she shrugs it away, shrugs away her trepidation and her fantasies, and offers me the mundane, on a scale undreamed of in its grandeur, its detail, its resonance. In the tunnels, all is vision, transforming and transmuting the mundane, the shopworn, the old, the broken, the real - into dreams. Diana offers instead the real, broken, shopworn, down-to-earth, like a treasure. Lovingly, tenderly, gently. To be loved. For itself. What can I know of such acceptance - of everything? I, whose knowledge of life comes from words, poetry, large music, from Father, philosophy, theory. It is a wonder to me to see so large an acceptance of life.

Whoever I am, now, welcomes this... peace, a peace that requires no explanations, no revisions, no philosophy. A peace, an acceptance of what is. And an acceptance of whoever I am, now. Who I am, now, includes my love for Diana, permits me to love Diana, and myself, should I come that far.

Displeased. Diana will be displeased. No story. I will try again, I promised. There are many memories to tell of this year of our lives. Many. Do not think I shall ever forget your kindness, Diana.

Vincent

I can hardly swallow. All my terror and sadness, my aloneness, is in my throat. I cannot speak. I held our son in my arms today, Catherine, and cried - cried until there were no tears left, just my mindless sobbing. Weak as a babe, I dried my face with my sleeve, kissed Jacob's sweet hair, and brought him into Father's chamber, to my father.

Father looked at me fast, looked up to see me, coming to him. It has been a long time, Catherine. Much has happened, many days and nights and weeks have passed without my coming to him, as son to father. For love, for his love and comfort.

But Catherine, I felt so little, so young, like a child. And I needed him. I needed my father, I was still his child. And Catherine, if not you - who? If not you - who? Only Father.

I didn't want eyes that see - I didn't want eyes that see - all of me. I wanted sheltering arms and no angles at all, Catherine. Only Father is left, only he remains, who still believes in me, in his Vincent.

Diana doesn't. The children do not.

I cried and cried, today, and missed you so, longed for you so - the taste of my own blood and tears filled my mouth; the presence of my loss, losing you, closed my throat. I was alone. Lost. Lost and alone. Catherine.

Yes. I brought this on myself. I went to your grave last night, again. For the first time in many weeks. I wanted - I do not know for certain what it was I wanted. To be with you. To let you be with me. With whoever I am, now. I touched the stone of your grave monument, lightly. Felt its roughness, felt its coldness, its ungiving substance - by nature, ungiving. Not by intention. It is stone. It gives nothing.

And I needed you, Catherine. I needed all that is not stone, is not hard, is not to be braced against. All that is soft and warm and giving. Tenderness. I wanted you, Catherine, last night. So badly, I could not endure it. The pain, the loss - I almost lost consciousness, it hurt so badly. Catherine. Catherine. How shall I live? Who shall live for me, in my place? Because without you, I am lost to myself.

And yet - it is my life.

Our child is a beautiful boy now, my Catherine. He gives no sign that he is troubled by any such conflicts as I endure. He is - perfect. Beautiful, happy - like you, Catherine. Until you met me.

Until I found you. Until we loved.

I huddle within myself now, shrink away from the imagined advances of Diana, from her touch. But she will not come for me now, touch me now. She knows, Catherine. She knows. That I am - away - now. To that "nameless river" that you once feared. Do you remember, Catherine? Diana will not approach me now. I need not run from her. I need not haunt the farthest downreaches of my world to escape from her. That is well, for my footing is unsure, my balance is lost. I am not all-animal, nor all-man, not any longer. The.... being I've become is not so certain, so agile, so swift, neither as animal or man.

Oh, Catherine – I am so lost, so lonely. I miss you so. I have been asleep since you left me, asleep. And I've awakened only to find you gone. And I don't know what to do, how to be. Catherine – we are both gone, you, and your Vincent. And I am left alone, with our son and a life I cannot understand, endure, and possibilities I feel no desire to embrace. A life, another life. I find myself in another life. The avenues and alleys, the nights and days, of another life call to me... but I do not wish to hear. I want only to die, and be done. To die and be done with all of it. Catherine – not to think, not to feel, not to long, not to endure. That is my desire, at this moment. To die. That it might, at last, be over.

But... it's not over.

Even as I write these words, I feel him - me – gazing impatiently at myself, my weakness. I feel his - my - restlessness, his anxiousness. Rising in me. His inability to concentrate. His restless movements - in this one thing so uncatlike: he cannot keep still, Catherine. Hateful, hateful. I am hateful to myself now, Catherine.

Diana suffers now, greatly. She fears for me. I feel it. She fears for me. She knows how abhorrent I am to myself. She knows I now am close to death, by my own hand, Catherine. Her faith is great - although she would never acknowledge it as that, as faith. Her faith, her unquenchable thirst for life, in all its forms, every face, is great. But for me, she fears. I am responsible for this suffering my Diana endures. Forgive me, oh my Diana, forgive me. I will come to you. I can, now. I will come to you.

Vincent

When the bird has known no life but a cage, it will not easily fly free. Diana has acquired five birds, tiny, no bigger than sparrows, smaller. Finches. Males, every one, marked as males by splendid spots of red on their cheeks, to the sides of their beaks. They belonged to a friend, a fellow police officer, who was killed in the line of duty this week. Her name was Justine. Diana says they were rookies together, although not partners. It seems the New York Police Department is loath to team two women. Apparently Diana believes there is no discrimination intended, although two men are teamed without question. Diana says it's merely a question of brawn. Perhaps.

Her friend, Justine, bequeathed these finches to Diana in her will. Diana had written a will too, a document she prepared several years ago, when she (Diana) was twenty-three years old. While she was what she calls a "beat cop". She claims she ought to revise it, that it is in need of revision. Several of those among her friends to whom she left personal items are already dead. This, from a woman not yet thirty.

Diana bought finch seed for the birds, whose chirp sounds in my ear like nothing more than the squeezing noise made by a child's rubber toy. But the birds are very beautiful. Diana begged me to remind her to feed them and change their water every day. Solemnly, I assume this responsibility. It is a sobering thought that, should I die, five helpless caged creatures will surely die with me: Diana has no memory for such things.

The finches scatter frantically when I near their cage. They smell cat. I cannot assist Diana with this chore, for the birds' hearts beat to bursting when I approach. I can only remind her of them and

watch from a far corner when she feeds them.

The corner of Diana's home where the cage hangs is barred to me now. It is - was - my favorite place. Near her kitchen area, where the sun comes in most strongly, blindingly. Diana has not yet noticed that I do not go into her kitchen. She must make the tea - I am forced to request tea, and food, that she might eat and drink. I can no longer serve her, quietly, in this way.

It is impossible to believe such a small and unimportant loss brings with it so much pain, and so many memories.

I am again the small boy forced to remain behind when my friends leave the tunnels to play in the park. I am again behind an invisible, but very real, line. I am again swallowing my anguish, that no one might know and pity me. It is again something so small that I feel small to mind. Yet I mind, dreadfully, just the same.

These four days since Diana inherited Justine's finches have been an agony for me. Tonight I will not go to Diana. I cannot.

Of course, she will notice soon. She will notice and feel for the source of my distress. And stare, unbelieving, at the birds, the birdcage. She might even assume it is the fact of the cage which troubles me. I am so perverse, I take pleasure in watching her work it out. And I wait for the moment when the clues will come together in my Diana's mind. For the day when the finches' cage disappears from the hook in her kitchen, and from her home.

Why do I say nothing? Why? Why do I not ask her to give the finches away? Why do I not tell her what I am feeling, thinking, suffering, in this instance? I do not know why not, only that I cannot. The lessons of a lifetime, of the heart, learned so well, prevail. With a difference; I recognize now how all of this works, how it comes together - creates my pain.

Diana has the right to know this too. Without her home, I would not have discovered the unsuspected country that I am, I would not have known at all. Not even the source of my unrest. Surely, not the perversity of my... sacrifice.

"Love... someone else."

It is the same. The same. This is a sickness unto death, I think. I fear. It is too late to save me. This - animal - who I am, this - Vincent - has too little of man in him. The mind of a man, perhaps. The organs of a man. The sexual appetites - of an animal. The heart of an animal.

I had no way of knowing how much of me was him. No way of knowing. Forgive me, Diana.

A gentle thought comes to comfort me. That perhaps after all it is only the newness of this Vincent that I am that is so frightening. I am unused to such starkness. Such uncompromising ruthless perversity. Therefore I am shocked anew with each instance of its revelation. Perhaps, in time, I will grow... accustomed to him. To me.

She kissed me goodnight, gently, carefully, quickly - the other evening. Dawn, really. I did not respond. My heart stopped, only that. Then I left. The following evening I returned as early as I

could - virtually still in daylight - that she should have as little time as possible in which to imagine the impossible - that she had offended me, that I might never return. Or that I'd been frightened.

I could feel her relief. It nearly - unmanned me. I came close to raping her, in that moment. I wish I knew what held me back. I wish I'd raped her.

Of course, Diana - even she - would romanticize such a thing, were I to do it. Call it love. Even she, I think. I know.

I refrain not for any reasons of romance. I would take her, also not from any reasons of romance. Whoever I am now – she deserves better, better. Anyone, anyone at all - a tramp in the street - would be better than what I am now.

And I cannot even hope that there will be - a bettering - of me. Because I grow worse. The longer I am - this new being – the worse I become. Less human. Less and less human. More and more animal.

I would rape her. I die daily.

I've read nothing. For weeks now. I've listened to no music. I spend less and less time with Jacob. I've not spoken to Father, even casually, for months. The children avoid me. Pascal is clearheaded enough to be angry with me. He told me so. He told me to stay away from the pipe chamber. Mouse is lost; he knows I am not as I once was, but he cannot believe it. Yet he cannot help knowing it. Has there ever been such a disaster in these tunnels, Catherine? Only the machinations of Paracelsus came as close to destroying us all. But of course, then, they had their Vincent.

Now, they do not have their Vincent. A stranger walks abroad among them, and they know it, and they are afraid.

And I am afraid. Very much so, Catherine. Can you not help me?

If I could bring myself to request of Diana that she remove the finches from her home - if I could do that, before she understands and acts without my request - all would be well again.

I have even become superstitious. I make bargains with Providence, talk to the dead, ask favors of my dead lover, my Catherine, create promises I cannot keep - "I'll be good, I'll be good, God, if you'll only save me from the dragon, just this time," I am like a child who fears the bogeyman.

And the bogeyman is me.

I cannot even appreciate the quiet hum of her computer. I've grown jaded, old. I now grow restless when Diana works and forgets I am there, in her home. I drop things, turn pages loudly, bump into furniture - anything to refocus her attention on me, I do. It is shameful - pagan, nearly. It is despicable. Unspeakably so.

I am lost.

Sometimes I summon up sufficient patience to get through the day, Below. Play my game, make

my rounds. Wait - until dark. Most days. I leave the tunnels while it is still light, heedless of the risks, the dangers, uncaring. And walk through her alley, bang open the outer door of her loft, lean on her buzzer, startle her by my entrance from the street rather than her skylight. I barely contain my impatience for the few moments I spend riding in her elevator. And then, when I arrive and Diana pulls me into her home, holds me tightly, looks at me oddly - I am as restless as ever, again. Having arrived, I do not know what to do.

I force myself to wait until night truly falls. Then I grab her arm and pull her into the streets with me. We walk for hours. Diana - jogs - along beside me. I walk too quickly, I know. I try to measure my pace in the old way, but that lasts only a few moments. I lose concentration. I walk too fast once again.

In truth, I do not know what I am doing. I do not know why I do it. I do not understand. Can this truly be - better than before? Better than - not knowing how gravely ill I am? How serious my illness? Better then - hiding him? Can this truly be better?

Still, there is good sense in what I do, as well. In the end, I admit, reason prevails. I do not go to her over roofs - because my footing is unsteady. I pull her away from her loft - that I might not destroy it in my rage. And - always - the selfish sense - the selfish reason; when we walk, she is with me, she is not working. So she cannot forget about me, feel at home with me, forget what I might do, what I am - not for a moment. In a strange and unfriendly way, I protect her. Unhomed, she is safe. The taste of her flesh, conjured in my imagination, from that moment I wished to rape her, is with me now. It will not leave me. And I do not wish it to leave me. I am shaking with the taste of her flesh and with my rapacious desire for her. Diana. Forgive me, Diana. You deserve better.

I would cut out my tongue, first, before I'd utter those words again, aloud; "Love...someone else."

May I die before I ever am such a liar as once I was, if ever I say such words to the woman I love again. Forgive me, Catherine. If you can. Please forgive me.

My child, our child, Catherine, deserves a different father.

Forgive me, Catherine.

Father deserves a different son.

And Diana - Diana treads lightly because she fears for me. For my life.

Vincent

Overwhelmed by the mystery of the workings of Providence, I must write. I must try to understand, somehow, the wonders of patterns so large I cannot glimpse them; so intricate, I cannot imagine them; yet so detailed, I cannot fail to find them. I find them in every moment of each day, in every person I love who loves me as well, even in myself.

Sometimes they're present in the terrible things that happen to us, as well. For me, such gifts as were beyond my dreams have come to me in the wake of tragic events. Many times in my life this

has been true. Of late, I am compelled to question all definitions, all descriptions, all appellations for things. Because what I have called "terrible" has been only... the other face of glory.

At no time was this truer than when I found my Catherine. And Jacob. Until these last days, when it has come true once more, for me.

I must begin at the beginning. I came to Diana's and found her crying. But the Vincent who arrived on her roof, entered her loft, was not the Vincent who writes now. Or so I thought. I thought I was - the animal, the other, the darkness. It seemed I'd somehow appeared to... merge him with the me I used to be. It seemed so, to the others. They'd begun to accept me again. Again, they'd begun to allow themselves to love me. They felt safe again. But I knew better, knew they were mistaken, knew the animal within the Vincent they forgave, unquestioningly forgave, time after time. I knew he was there - always. I knew he was not me, not safe, not to be trusted.

Diana was crying. Sobs, great sobs - they broke my heart. I went to her, held her. It was the first time I held her. She never reproached me, but she never believed in my love, nor my words. Never spoke of her love for me, though it was as clear to an unbiased eye as any natural fact could be: a bird, a tree, the sun, a stone, flowers... I thought I knew it, that she loved me. I thought I believed. But... I never held her.

This Vincent, then, this would-be rapist, this slaughtering monstrous being, went to Diana and dared to hold her, comfort her. Sought to learn what hurt her so badly. It was her mother. She'd lost her mother. My Diana never spoke of her mother to me, but I know she grieves deeply. I feel it. The loss of a parent, no matter how estranged, is an awful thing to bear. It can be unendurable, when there has been an estrangement.

Diana and I talked for a short while. She seemed so much to enjoy the comfort of my embrace - I thought it could do no harm. Many of the women and children Below turn to me for solace when they grieve. They believe I am safe. Once, I was.

But even though I was no longer truly safe, I trusted that surely in such a moment Diana would be safe in my arms - I wanted only to share her sorrow as she'd shared mine for so long.

After a time, she cried herself to sleep in my arms. And I felt her trust - limpid, fearless, sweet - like cool water from a pure stream. I felt it - her trust - as I held her in my arms. I felt... "give" in her, for the first time. There was no mistaking it. It enveloped me.

No one knows me as Diana does - no one living. She's seen no Vincent but the me I now am. She knows no poet, no scholar, no philosopher. Only me. Only Vincent. And she trusted me, slept in my arms.

It was then I believed she loved me. Only then. I do not think I believed it before. And, knowing she loved me, I knew as well that she... wanted me. I felt it in her body as she slept. She... searched, with her body, her arms, her face, to come closer to me. She searched for me. Whoever I was. And I was... all that I am. There was nothing hidden. Nothing caged. Nothing restrained. All of me was there holding Diana in my arms, feeling her body seek mine, while she slept. She wanted me. Whoever I was, I was all that she wanted.

I couldn't breathe.

I touched her hair, very gently. She murmured, moaned, in her sleep.

I touched her arm. She clung to me tightly.

Desire flamed in every part of me at once, but in no way did it overwhelm love. Desire breathed a trail of flame through me, straight to my loins. And I was surprised - by tenderness. My own. I'd never before felt so great a tenderness toward anyone - not even for my Catherine; I dared not, with Catherine - as I felt for Diana as she slept in my arms, safe. Safe in the burning torch of my passion.

I restrained nothing. I caged no emotion, no physical impulse. Yet she was safe. How this could be, I did not know. I knew only that I must kiss her - waken her, with a kiss. I knew only that she would not wish to sleep while I loved her. That she would wish very much to wake to my passion. That she would wish to wake to my tenderness, as well. And to know that I believed in her trust, and her love, and my own. Truly believed, at last.

Many things might have happened then, my Diana. Any one of those things would have been wondrous, unimaginably delightful, to me, to you. The instant was so full, so rich. I think I believed that a kiss, a single kiss, would have satisfied my soul forever. That a kiss alone was enough. Perhaps... yes, perhaps it would have been enough. I smile to think so; it is so old-fashioned a thought. I am filled with nostalgia for the boy I once was, who truly believed such things. Perhaps he was right. For him, then, such things were true.

For me, now, I am glad there is more.

I am sorry, as well, my sweet Diana, that your memory of such great loss was also the moment when I was able to give you my love, all my love, and accept yours, for the first time.

But I rejoice in the gifts. I am glad there is more. I want there to be more. Diana, I am glad there is you. I am rich indeed, poor son of a poor doctor that I am. I am rich indeed.

I love you, Diana.

Vincent

I want you, my love. I love you, Diana.

I've written it now - not as a question, nor as an inexplicable dream. Not in rage, nor anxious concern.

In peace. A fact. The tower of my love for Diana rises before me, overshadowing my future, blessing it. I am at peace in the beneficent darkness of my love for her. Because around and above the dark tower, the glory of the sun, its light and warmth, shines. I am as close to creating love poetry as I have ever come, will ever come. The fragments of poets' words seem to me inadequate, profane, for they do not approach this love.

I have a partner and a friend. And I love her.

I would write music if I could. I feel a longing to be able to sing. I wish that I were God, that I might create a new flower and bring it to Diana.

Simplified. Quiet. Attentive to the sounds of the night and its silence on her rooftop, I await her return. I feel her nearing, but only as a conceit - because I long for her so. I know she will soon return home - it is her time. She will step from a bus, look back, smile at the driver. He will be stunned by her beauty. She will pass a greengrocer, touch the grapefruits and the avocados with barely pressuring fingertips. She will stop, turn into the shop, purchase a fruit, a vegetable - she is very fond of such foods. She will smile at the grocer - and he will be taken aback by her beauty. She will rush up her street, search her pocket for her keys, hurry into her inner lobby, wait with great impatience for her freight elevator, and return home.

Why will her beauty strike with such awe the bus driver, the grocer? - because she is in love. My Diana is in love. With me.

She does not expect me to be here, waiting for her - it is early, dusk. She will be surprised, happy. She will rush to me. For the first time, she will not stop short, hesitate - for once, she will throw her arms around me without concerning herself for my safety, or my mood, or my fears. She is so in love, she will be unable to think - or unwilling.

And I... I will embrace her - I will embrace her - and tell her that I love her - and kiss her.

And I will neither rape her, nor refrain from raping her; where there is consent, there is no rape. Only love. And the flesh I will feel, petal smooth, petal smell, against my skin, taste in my mouth, will be real flesh - no conjured fiction, no image with most hideous memories, no faceless flesh - but hers, her own. Sweet - so sweet - her love, her hair, her arms, her soul - all the same - spirit and body - all the same, all one. No distinction, no dichotomy, no heresy, no betrayal. Presence. Person. She is my love. I love her. Diana.

And she is in love with me. A friend, a partner, yes. And more than a friend, more than a partner. She is my love.

I, Vincent, come together for the first time - perhaps, forever; perhaps only for this one moment - and love her. And she loves me. I am the new flower I bring to her, opening in her warmth, breathing of sweetness.

There is a "singing in the blood" of which the poets speak. Blood - singing - how beautiful. Blood - singing.

She will know that it is I, Vincent, with whom she collides, by the singing in the blood. She will know that it is I, Vincent, with whom she shares herself, by the burning in our flesh.

I seek but this one moment - I do not seek tomorrow. I love forever, in this now.

My journal is with me here, in her home. Down from the roof, within her home, where the finches chirp in the aviary I built and need no longer approach, all secure within our separate freedoms. I

like the finches, which fly beautifully and keep alive Diana's memory of her friend. There is no fear here at all.

I brought my journal here, because her home is mine. I also brought my son. Down from the roof, through the welcoming door. He smiles and plays with the largest of a series of nesting wooden dolls from Russia. He places it in his mouth; I gently remove it and say, "No, no." He smiles and waits until I turn again to these my words, then calmly puts it in his mouth again. It is our game. I cannot help smiling.

She comes. I hear the elevator creak, perhaps the most welcome music I have ever known. I rise, I stand in the center of her home, I am small and large in the wide center of her home. She alights from her elevator, sees me here, drops her grocery bag, her keys, runs to me. I smell her hair. I love her. I am happy. She is happy. How do I know these things will be? Because they've come, and been, and are. And she sleeps quietly now, on her own bed, and my son is cradled in her arms.

While I write.

Sometimes the world is too beautiful to hear, so we cry of it, laugh of it, are confused, cannot decide what to do. Right now is such a time, for me.

It came so swiftly, sooner than I dared hope. It came so surely, I must admire its workmanship - my soul. What one day was a cracked black mended rock is smooth as marble now. Like marble, it is fragile. Like marble, it is shot through with strange and unexpected patterns. Like marble, it cries out for an artist, a craftsman, a lover, to approach more closely, work on it, love it.

One wrong blow might fracture it, forever.

One right blow will surely fashion something wondrous and eternal from it.

I love Diana. A right blow. No other lover of this marble that is my soul comes near it - that is well.

I am happy. Jacob is happy. Diana sleeps. She too is happy. No longer need she tread so very lightly, so very cautiously. She can love me aloud now. Her joy fills me with joy.

I too can love aloud now. Love her. There is a singing in the blood for which there are no words, only music. I want her always, always, beside me. Looking forward, looking in the same direction, looking with clear eyes and unobscured vision, and with a large acceptance. I love her. I love her.

Diana.

Vincent

The strangest, most wondrous thing happened to me today. I am unsure whether it will yield to words or defy exposition. I will try.

Suddenly, I knew what it was Diana was truly after when she asked me for the gift of this, our year,

in words. A lightness came with the understanding and I smiled.

Some time before she made her request, I'd told Diana I'd not written in my journal for months. I'd stopped writing, not abruptly, but surely. At first it was merely that I wrote less frequently. Not every evening. I found myself too weary at dawn to write, some nights. I told myself that. Soon three or four days passed without a word. What was my greatest comfort, in former days - I almost wrote, former lives - had become tedious, wearisome – a chore, a duty. I did not wish to write. As soon as I realized this, I ceased writing. Since I wrote only for myself, there was no point (I believed) in writing now.

Then, as with reading and music, I did not miss the writing or the thinking, the filtering and balancing, the turning of my experiences, the angling, the peering; I did not miss this, not at all. In the end, I felt only relief; I need not do this one thing, this one additional - duty. I was relieved.

Diana made a casual remark that I'd best be on my way, that she knew I was tired and would not sleep until I'd written in my journal. And I responded that I no longer did that. She glanced at me sharply, frowned. Then held her tongue. And the moment passed. She already knew I did not read nor listen to music. Sometimes I'd request that she turn off her stereo, when I was in her home. And she always played the kinds of music I - once loved.

Shortly thereafter it occurred to me that I might give her something for her birthday. It occurred to me. I cannot now remember what surrounded that moment. Only, suddenly, today, I knew it had been Diana's idea, not mine. And I smiled.

These weeks of writing, wrenched from me because I'd promised, extorted from me as a present, a gift, have pushed me farther long in the exorcising of my own ghosts and my fears, pushed me farther along in the... acceptance of my new - being - than I could have dreamed. Those weeks of distaste for all of my life, and myself, signaled and symbolized by my weariness with writing, reading, and music, were static. I learned nothing. I grew not at all. I was in constant, unavailing motion, without purpose.

Since then, since I began by writing, trying to write, my story, ended by writing journal entries, although not in my journal, my spirit had hurled itself through many changes. Perhaps those changes were unpleasant, painful, dread full.

But – changes.

Things change. People, too. Some people, some times. A bittersweet and vivid memory.

Changes.

For the first time in a year, I feel that I begin to know myself and am not displeased with what I am, who I have come to be. At least, the knowledge is real. It is not an elaborate construct, a delusion - separate entities, linked only by a body. And even that body viewed differently by the two separate parts of – Vincent.

I feel as though I'd been engaged in some great labor, a grand construction project. Building a grand edifice, as Elliot did. But that I'd been very occupied with the preliminary tasks; dynamiting,

hauling rocks, shoveling sand and earth and gravel. But that now the dust had settled.

The dust having settled, damped down by the water of tears, I might now look about me. See how far my work had come. Examine the site. Decide if the groundwork for my – edifice - might be laid.

I feel, still, a bit unsure of foot. That, first of all. My footing is not secure. But then I stand on chunks of rock, not on smooth flooring. I feel it is simply a matter of time, and great care, before I once again will stand on solid ground - however uneven.

And - in the most strange and beautiful way - I know my edifice will search out light, daylight, sunlight, electric light and starlight. Not candlelight. My edifice will pierce the sky, not bury itself beneath the earth.

Yet without a deep and secure foundation, no such great edifice can stand, withstand.

My edifice simply goes deeper than most. My Father. My community. These are the foundations for it. And my love for Catherine and my son.

I stand and stare, awestruck, by the height and breadth and depth of my edifice - and I am not alone. Diana stands by my side, and swings my hand with hers, and smiles gaily up at me. And I smile too.

How far I have come, how far I have come! Were it not for Diana's graciousness, her easy gentle patience, I would still be splitting the rock. Would the dust ever have settled? I think not.

She believes I would be frightened if I knew how much she loves me. I believe she would be frightened were she ever to glimpse how deeply and completely I love her. There is such a joy in knowing there can be no end to surprises and excitement for her. I need only open my heart wider and wider, and my arms, and she will be surprised again.

In the end, love and truth are one. Mercy and music. In the end, I bravely open my arms, embrace myself, and hold tight to my Diana. And am "good as new."

Above. From the moment I found you, my Catherine, I knew my life would forever be above. But I did not know how. How this could be. I still know but little. "Now, I see through a glass darkly; then, face to face." We know the face of love absolute is everywhere, in everyone, in every smallest thing, in every grand and terrible thing. Yet we know only in part. We yearn and struggle and are filled with impatience, a restless grasping after certainty, finality. While all the time, we know with absolute faith that - there is no end. That in the end, there is no end. It is beautiful - life, and my life, and my son's, and Father's, and my friends' lives. And... Diana's life. Very beautiful.

And - in the end - I am not ugly at all. Thank you.

Vincent