



## DESIRE

by Mairead Case

When you still desire a thing, its time has not yet come. And when you have what you desired, you will have no more desire, instead you will have time. Weak desires protect you from disappointment. But nothing keeps you safer than being a visible ruin.

– Fanny Howe, *Indivisible*

Once I asked my parents for a dictionary. I wanted the boxed kind, navy with a magnifying glass. But Dad doesn't get gratification deferral in that way, so instead I got the kind with two volumes, six columns inside. According to it, desire is both a longing and an absence. It's sexual. And desiree is a kind of potato, pink-skinned with yellow waxy flesh.

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When you're a teenager, which doesn't always mean age, and you don't fully inhabit your body, you don't totally get desire. Or maybe you do, but it's, like, messy and indeterminate and needs a mixtape. It's good to poke at, to carve out what you desire, and then name it like a flower or a country. Keep it like a pet. Of course all kinds of complicated stuff comes afterwards, but first it helps to name. There is no hierarchy until you engage, and no lasting joy if you don't. I'm still learning this.

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Fall 2004 was cold, in Indiana. Of course it's always cold, in Indiana, but that year was bad. I felt a scary fail. A scary hopeless. Six cigarettes, smoked in the yard, then Garber killed himself on a couch. Holding holy cards ironically, wearing an ironic pink. *All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.* "Guess I'm just in love with the world," he'd said. It was the first time I got why people say they could have done something, even when they couldn't really.

Then some girl broke my best friend's heart, yes yes I mean physically. He called one morning to explain this, said he felt the jag in his chest even. At 3am that's never completely wrong. Some other stuff happened too.

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A trickster taught me tarot, said my card was Death (which it is) and suggested the Frankie Albano facsimile. Because of its color. Acid green, mustard, theo blue. Nine is a woman in red and cream, her dress printed with roses and Venus mirrors. There is a bird on her hand, a bird with a tomato-shaped head, and until we saw the glove we didn't know it was a peregrine falcon. Peregrines, explains J.A. Baker in the book where he becomes a bird too, peregrines kill by biting necks, severing the cord, then standing on the body to pluck out the feathers. Eating takes thrice as long as killing. Or longer, depending on size. Afterwards, they fly home.

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So that winter was cold, really cold, and I decided to start teaching. Teaching a weekly zine workshop at the local juvie. You can't have staples or metal fasteners in jail, so I de-spined my library first. Carlos, my roommate's fiance, helped. He was spending October with us, after proposing before she left Chile. (She was there on exchange.) Two weeks after he arrived, they still fucked like bunnies but of course the wedding was off. So she went to class and he spent days on our couch, days smoking cigarettes and reading astronomy textbooks. We got used to him there, like people do a lamp or a throw.

Carlos liked the zines because they had slang that wasn't in books. English words for what he wanted, how he wanted it, and when. Beat the pants off stars. Brought him back to earth. Sometimes the staples skewed and pierced our fingers, left little drops of blood on the page. We drank cheap wine and whined about women, Christians, Christian women. The gray Indiana air.



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In *Cometbus 43*, Aaron says how he doesn't remember his first words, but his mom says once he saw an elephant in the sky. Only he wasn't pointing at a cloud; he meant the blue space in-between. "She couldn't have been happier," he said, "than if I stood up and recited the encyclopedia." Sometimes your desire seems totally nutso, but that's okay. Still you carry it like a hungry baby bear. Still it helps to name.

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Once a lady said she used to go dancing. She'd work all day, work until the bell, then hustle over to the hall, because if was before six o'clock you could still get in for a quarter. She'd have smell in her hair and smoke in her sleeves, poke guys in the ribs when they tried to grab her. Back home, the lady said, back home she felt badly about that. The poking. So she'd scrub and braid and color, put on a fresh skirt and fall asleep that way. Arms at her sides, just in case any of the boys dreamed about her. That way, she'd be ready.

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Patti Smith: "The guys I fell in love with were completely inaccessible. I didn't want any middle-of-the-road creep. I always wanted the toughest guy in school, the guy from South Philly who wore tight pants. Y'know, the guy who carried the umbrella and wore white shirts with real thin black ties . . . But I couldn't make it with guys. I used to dream about getting fucked by the Holy Ghost when I was a kid."

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PJ Harvey has this song about desire. It's also about this guy Joe, Joe who walks past sunset. There's a long cold night, but then Dawn comes, and the great thing is how you don't know if Dawn is mourning or morning or a person. Joe turns to Dawn, they face each other and Joe's no longer scared. Another great thing is how the song is not about peace, rest, or soothing pastel cucumbers. It's about desire. An itch. It's about want, which comes just after who. Who can be you, too.

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My sister and I shared a room for eighteen years, and a bed for eight. Sometimes when she couldn't sleep, she'd lie supine and press fingertips into her eyelids. If a car came around the cul-de-sac, she'd blink quick and the headlight lights would mix with hers. But I was scared of monsters in the bathroom, and wouldn't close my eyes until I had to. For years, I was sure I never slept.

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In workshop, a man said his greatest desire was to be alive on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. "Because this," he said, and that's when he took his sunglasses off, "this is the first time in history that a man of color is nominated for President." Note, please, that he said "to be alive." Nothing about winning. Nothing about November 4<sup>th</sup>.

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Specimen #341 in Klara G. Roman's *Handwriting*, which is about what people's handwriting looks like and what that means, Specimen #341 didn't have any money when he was a kid. So he earned some working as a candy butcher on railway trains. He liked it: rails cutting through wilderness, fancy women, smoke and sugar and how quiet it got at night. Roman says that's why his adult handwriting looks like tracks. 'T's cross like smoking locomotives. Steamlined motion and emotion. My grandfather was an engineer, and I know nothing about that except that he drove with one hand out the window. Tanned it a deep nutty brown, even when the rest of him was white as clams.

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Of course there's danger there, danger in defiance and defining. In Tournier's *The Ogre*, Abel Tiffauge asks what a monster is. "Etymology has a bit of a shock up its sleeve here," he says. "'Monster' comes from *monstrare*, 'to show.' A monster is something that is shown, pointed at, exhibited at fairs, and so on . . . If you don't want to be a monster, you've got to be like your fellow creatures, in conformity with the species. Or



else have progeny that make you the first link in the chain of a new species.” Progeny: babies, dances, stories, songs.

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Once, Mom called to tell me something she’d just seen on Animal Planet. Komodo dragons are always mean and hungry, she said, so their babies are born knowing to roll in poop. That way, Mom said, their mothers don’t try to eat them. Then she laughed.

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From Chris, who is allergic to flowers: “One of the best things for me to do in order to sleep is to fantasize the music career I never had – I go over the sequences of songs that were collected on albums that never existed; and file each b-side to the singles off the full-lengths, and their time lengths, and envision their picture sleeves in the UK and France.

“Before this I would imagine my friends and I were the last people on earth. Everyone else is a soulless zombie-vampire we are free to slaughter if we come across, and we all live in an enormous tank-train with huge amounts of painkillers and military C-rations and canned goods.

“Before all this I basically fantasized about sex before I went to sleep.”

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Alas, I can’t sleep, so you get two haikus. The main one, the one I decided to get out of bed to send, is one of Rexroth’s loose translations, I think, and I want to be able to do it from memory:

I wish I were close  
To you as the wet skirt of  
A salt girl to her body

The other is apparently by Johnny Cooper Clarke:

To express oneself  
In seventeen syllables  
Is very diffic

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There’s this guy, Antonio Gramsci. He says people with power keep their power through force, yes, but also by controlling ideas. Ideas in the media. Screens and magazines. And this other guy, Paulo Freire, says ordinary people limit themselves by rejecting their own experiences and adopting thoughts, wants, structures from the ruling class. Oh, and C.L.R. James, who believes artistic expression and social change are total homeslices. All this is why you keep a pen in your pocket. All this is why you listen.

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From Hazel, and there was glitter inside so when the envelope opened I got a galaxy on my skirt: “Last night we went to the brightest bioluminescent bay in the world. You should look it up if you want a scientific explanation.

“But I remember it like this. They are these little tiny being particles – ones that live off the sun, you know – single cell organisms. And at night, they light up to whatever moves the water. When you move your hand fast through the water, it’s like a flash of light like behind a rocket. When you move it slow, you can see the individual particles clinging to your hand, little glitter pieces. You can bring your hand up slowly, watch them drip off.

“When the Spanish found the bay, they thought it was the work of the devil – of course – so they tried to block the entrance with wood and garbage. But this only made them stronger, because they were trapped in this perfect environment to multiply over and over.”



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I remember a teacher, every day he wore a gray sweatshirt and hood. This teacher studied dragonflies, which are bugs that can live underwater for a really long time and not die. Dragonflies, this teacher said, dragonflies have two penises so they can scoop out the other guy's sperm, make sure they're the baby daddy. Dragonfly penises, they were this guy's special thing. We asked him how his dates reacted to what he did all day, in grad school, and he smiled. That's how we met, he said.

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But isn't *Otherness* unavoidable? Alienation hurts but aren't we all different anyway? Luce Irigaray says yes, of course we're all different, so instead of *loving* someone right away, you *love to* them. (In French, *love to* looks prettier, like breath: *aimer à*.) When you love to another, scary goes out the window, along with its naïve little buddy, codependency as ideal. In Emily Hubley's drawings of Plato's sun, moon, and earth children, each one beloved and loving, though bound, keeps its own arms, legs and face.

"I recognize you," says Irigaray, "thus you are not the whole; otherwise you would be too great and I would be engulfed by your greatness." So being completely engulfed in your lover or the world you want isn't just unrealistic. It's philosophically impossible. Our differences, says Irigaray, are not fences, dissolvable, or failures. *La petite mort* means "little death" means orgasm, and Mom promised that when we break from one thing the next is even more beautiful.

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When I first moved here, I dated a guy I met in a coffeeshop. He had bad eyesight. Sometimes it was hard to see anything at all. The bedroom floor tilted so he propped up his bed with books, and every twice in a while he'd wake up in the middle of the night for a chocolate sandwich. The brown spread on his teeth made them glow. Once it snowed and the morning was cold, full of white light. I pointed outside, then realized he couldn't see my finger or the ground. But I was twenty, which is another kind of blind, so most of this was my fault.

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There's this word: vulnerable. It comes from the Latin *vulnerare*, which means "able to be wounded." You're vulnerable to friends, lovers, listeners, bodies in the room and some other people too. It's encouraging to know that vulnerable is different from naïve, which comes from the Latin *navire*: "newly born." Babies are naïve, blank and mewly. Vulnerable comes later, when you know some things already, have a bit of a shell but are still learning. Starting the frosting. It's you – losing and hearing; wandering, wondering and gaining.

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When Dr. Cookie Mueller was little, she had pets. A turtle named Fidel, a dog named Jip, snakes, tadpoles, and what she thought were opossums but her friends knew were really rats. At eleven, Cookie wrote a 321-page book about the Johnstown, Pennsylvania flood in 1830. She stapled it, wrapped it in butcher paper and Saran Wrap, then left it on a shelf at the Baltimore Public Library.

And in the early eighties, Cookie's friend Mirielle Cervenka died in a car accident while visiting her sister Exene. And Mirielle's husband, Gordon Stevenson, died of AIDS later that year. Before he did, he wrote to Cookie. "I KNOW, I KNOW, I KNOW that somewhere there is a paradise and although I think it's really far away, I KNOW, I KNOW, I KNOW I'm gonna get there, and when I do, you're gonna be one of the first people I'll send a postcard to with complete description of, and map for locating it." A couple years later, Cookie died of AIDS too.

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In jail, I asked everyone to write about the most beautiful thing they'd ever seen. Many couldn't, because that thing had been taken away from them or took them away from themselves. And everyone was young, so young.



So next we talked Queneau, how sometimes the story comes through style not narrative. Code and color. I Googled kaleidoscopes, handed them out, asked people to write what they saw. "It was not a normal chameleon," wrote Kyle, "but one I could picture in my head. The middle of it had a dark orange color that made it really stand out. In some parts, there was kind of like birds."

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In some ways, it's like painting a room. Say I want a green bedroom. I imagine my bedroom green, I go to the paint store but I don't see anything like the color in my head. So I pout. I stick with white walls. But what if I sucked it up, tried forest shamrock or Kelly? What if I listened to the guy who said *hey lady, try yellow it makes dreams brighter*, went buttercup and buttercup was better than I'd ever imagined, ever in six million years?

You don't actually have to paint that afternoon, you know. Take samples home; tape them to the wall. Make a sandwich or something.

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I remember one shrink, her voice like milk curdled in whisky, she sat across the room and said, "This, you know this never gets better." Part of that's true, and it's also a secret strength. But another part is she saw my chest, which was so caved it made an M-shape when I brought my hands together, like Dante's men's faces except I wasn't really anything. And whammo! she boxed me in. Sometimes you just tell the world it's wrong, it's wrong, *fuck off that's not me*. That's really hard and sometimes you screw it up, sometimes you blow it up, but whatever. It's worth it.

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In the introduction to *The Walking-Away World*, whose cover is yellow and has something like an aborted squirrel on it, Jim Woodring says, "SEE YOU IN THE MORNING: it was a phrase I used to use without thinking until [Kenneth] Patchen shone the light of his selective genius on it and allowed me to see it for what it is: an excruciatingly tender, pathetic genius of hope." Did anyone ever sing to you in the morning?

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One summer, my friend drove to Mexico to clean his dad's house. He sent envelopes stuffed with beer bottle labels and Spanish postcards and scrawled-upon looseleaf. Blue ink. "A friend told me about one of her dreams where (in short) her goldfish lived inside her. His name was Jonah! After some encounters/experiences, she wanted to set him free. So she started cutting herself open, but her mother stopped her for fear of salmonella. After my friend told me her dream, I had this intense desire to kiss her." And I him.

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In the dream I had last night, he was a cat the color of his hair, and she was a cat the color of hers. They curled into a circle and fell asleep on each other. In another, my mom and I were pigtailed, little, playing. I asked if I could be the Mom this time, and she could be the girl. "Okay," she said, and laughed.

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There are marvels, curiosities and paradoxes, all of them arms, legs, and noses of the body dialectic. There are opposites and reciprocals, constellations and becoming. It's all specific: *those* opposites, *that* reciprocal action, *that* relationship between *those* elements, in *that* becoming. It's all in your blue ribbon hot dog self, and when you meet another one self and the differences join, open out into the world, sometimes it's really brilliant. Of course, sometimes it's not. Sometimes it sucks twelve rocks through dry dusty cheesecloth, but whatever. It's worth it.

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Once, Rob and I, but mostly Rob, we made a movie about a cowboy going West. When Cowboy hit the Pacific, the guy just dove in. And what if, asked J. one morning, what if Icarus could swim?



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First there is your desire, then your desire with someone else, then you take that and apply it to us, to country, to constellation. Ye Olde Symbole Dictionary says constellations were not brought to earth after being “read” in the sky, but the other way around: formed in the heart and projected up, then the right connect-the-dots were found. You see scorpions, belts and unicorns; cups, bees, and dogs; hair and diamonds. In the Chinese zodiac, the constellations are the third element of interpretation, after and supporting ying and yang.

A lover has freckles and once I polka-dotted a finger down his arm, said how you could link the constellation into a flock of birds, a lizard or teeth: like this. He smiled back, and I think that means something too.