

The Enigma of Desire

Anna Dupay

Glorious was the only way to describe the day. It was the day where the only appropriate activity was to lay outside in the sun and eat golden, crispy apples. Enjoyment required an open book, or a free-flowing pen. But even black-and-white couldn't capture the glorious colors of the day, the clear blue sky that make one believe the sky is blue again, the brown dead of the earth on the verge of renewing itself, and many other subtle shades of green, red, white and more. All were enhanced by the sunlight, which made everything drop into clear focus. In fact, the sun seemed to wake everything up into their full brightness. Enjoyment of this day was a communal experience. But it was the animals who truly knew how to enjoy the day and though they told us how, our ears were closed to their understanding.

The snow had melted and with that event came all the pungent reminders that Spring had arrived in all its gentle glory. The earth squished underneath, saturated by Spring's love and desire. Standing water stood wherever the earth could not contain the fullness of Spring. Spring has always been misinterpreted as a feminine time of fertility, but really it is the time for gentle sex between first-time lovers. Spring penetrates the earth in order to give the seeds that lie therein life. But Spring is a gentle lover, not penetrating forcefully or roughly, but taking his time and letting the earth deal with his love as she will. It is a time of love, and awkwardness, for it is the time for the earth to strip herself of her garment and let Spring see her nakedness.

The world is changing, I'm changing. I feel it in the air, I hear it in my heartbeat; I sense my presence. Is it good? Is it bad? Is it qualitative at all? It frightens me. Do I give in to bodily passion? To the feelings that mingle with my blood? The old pillars of safety are crumbling; the net that is holding me has frayed through. But I cling to it, desperate to hold onto the truth, the way and the light. Academic apathy has taken over. If the world hates you, know that it's hated me first. But I realize that I have not sold my soul to the academic devil. I have freedoms and liberties. But I am naked; my façades have been stripped from me. The conservatives accuse me of blasphemy and avarice while the liberals accuse me of open-mindedness. My mind is open—open for business, open for interpretation, open for questions, open as a prairie field (where my open eyes first fell in love with wide expanses and miles of territory waiting for exploitation with my eyes). The laws of physics are my only comfort. I am exploring the virgin territory of human experience, not raped by any man. I am too busy learning what it means to be human to actually be human. Help me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I am utterly bent and broken. My wounds grow foul and fester because of my wicked deeds, in the company of men who render me evil for good.

The lust, urge, desire, longing, yearning, craving to kiss someone overtook me that Spring. It was all I could dwell upon. I grew languid in nervous panic that I would grace the earth, but no one would grace my lips. I was growing desperate; I would accept anyone at this point, man woman, supernatural beast. I could no longer operate like this. I mustn't get so desperate as to grab the person I happen to exist next to and plant upon them the seeds of my ecstasy and bury the hatchet of my desire. But then *she* came back.

She came back, changed and beautiful. She had let her guard down; she chose to feel. She was confident and in control and independent. Her body did not run away from her. She was incurably fond of classical music, despite the best efforts of the world around her, or perhaps because of the world around her. And much to someone's dismay, though the culprit was yet to be

found, she had also become faithful to bluegrass, the white man's music. But she was not limited to her own point of view, no; she had adopted twenty other and learned to appreciate them all. None of this was made manifest until she had returned. Even then perhaps she would have been safe from my heart, but my responsibility entered stage right in the Pacific Theater. Until then, she had remained dormant in the back of my mind, slowly developing into a supernatural enigma, before only being a human one. But her tenderness and politeness was a beautiful façade. I couldn't tear my eyes away. She was beautiful. She was interesting, she was desirable. But she came back; she came back—in love.

She was in love with someone; someone whose alphabet told a story in pictures, an undecipherable code. He had caught her in a net made up of those characters. She swooned to his song of small talk to a friend on the receiver. His past lay locked away across the sea. In consequence, she would not look at me. She cared only for soccer and foreign languages. She waited on the front stop for her love to come back to her. She did not know I waited for her, that no one wanted to wait for her, but they had no choice but to do so. With each day she became more unattainable and more desirable. The game has begun.

I went to the cafeteria in a good mood, but my senses were dulled by petty conversation. You weren't listening, but I poured out my soul onto deaf ears, while expounding upon Russian pronunciation. You didn't realize I had sold my soul to the Russian devil; everything that was Russian was me, and everything that was me was also Russian. In Russian music, I did not find my culture or my heritage, but my everlasting soul. My spirit promenaded with Mussorgsky and performed Springtime rituals with Stravinsky, and I would have been content to let it dance with Khachaturian's sabers. But the enigma of her soul would not let me rest. I sit on my front stoop waiting for her. But she's not returning until two weeks hence. In the meantime, I can't breathe. I am in the altitudes, 10,000 meters above sea level. I run, but my heart starts pounding and my head swims. I have to rest, sit down, but the thought of her keeps me running. And the burning thought of him also—my responsibility. She's left her stoop and the oxygen has been used up. The purest air is the air she breathes out. Without it, I feel like ten feet underwater and my air's run out.

They had stir-fried their love in the wok of common experience, fed by the flames of passion. Cheesy, I know. But cheesy was the only way to describe it and still maintain my composure. Every time her face turned towards me, I flinched. Her expression was one of pain and heartache, as if her heartstrings were pulled too taut. She missed her love, and became more unattainable. Her thoughts were continually over the sea. She was too far-sighted to see me in front of her. And it was killing me. She was love-sick, and that was killing her. We were both of us dying, but neither of us could confide in the other. She was too timid and afraid, and I was too close to her skin. So we sat on our respective front stoops, and awaited the fate awarded to us. In the meantime, she tried to not deify her lover, and I tried to not see the color of her eyes. She saw her lover reflected in every almond eye and black hair she saw, and I saw my love across the street. My soul continued to promenade with Mussorgsky, while the characters flexed their legs and walked away from her, and as they marched, she grew more and more unattainable.

But she was not distant. Right across the street she was. And so we talked, from one front stoop to another. We told each other our desires, our fears, our enigmas. She told me how she was wasting away, even if she only had to wait two weeks. I told her that I was also wasting away, from erosion, neglect, hunger. But she did not know what I was referring to. Her body was graceful; she thought it was being wasted on a shadow. But she had promised herself to wait, and so she waited. She would wait until the end of the world, so I guess I would have to as well. As she talked, as I talked, as we talked, she became more unattainable. The love-light and far-

sightedness crept back into her eyes, and her sighs grew pronounced. Accordingly, I changed the subject to culinary arts. Then art in general. Then politics, religion, economics, love, literature, action heroes. And every time, she thwarted me. She changed the subject back across the sea every time. She told me she had been in love before. She had been in love with countries, ideas, people, but she had never been in this sort before. Never before has the object of her desire been receptive and seem to reflect back what she had projected towards it. Hearing her say so panged my heart, for I had always loved her. But I could not tell her this: I was honorable, I had just noticed this longing for her, and I was content to be close to her skin. But I knew, eventually, being close to her wouldn't be enough.

We talked. We talked nearly every night, reminiscing and remembering high school, remembering past loves, past lives, past fears, past hopes, past successes, and past failures. We talked until our throats were dry. To wet them and lubricate the conversation, I came over. I came over, and I brought a bottle of brandy. The night was cold, but we stayed out on the front stoop. The brandy kept us warm and we warmed our souls with tales of daring deeds and missed fortunes. We laughed and cried and grew loud. To prevent dirty looks from the neighbors (why are there other people in this world we have created?), we went up my front stoop and into my basement. There, we had fun and spoke our minds. We were drunk, but too drunk to care. We were too inebriated to see, but our ears worked fine. I wanted to tell her everything, analyze the workings of the world, and explore hidden depths. It was odd how she inspired me. The enigma of her personality overtook me like Dalí's enigma of desire. We spouted philosophy and poetry and prose, unedited and direct:

"Falling in love is definite proof Descartes was wrong;"

"A name can't possibly contain the whole of its contents;"

"Why do we dream of Preludio before going to bed? As our final act in our waking life, we leave our bodies and come to the land of the pre-disposed. The notes bounce around like a tennis match while bars of music swirl around in our heads. Each black symbol elongating itself towards the horizon of human thought;"

"I know not whether what I do is important or worthwhile. I only do it because I know nothing else and nothing else exists outside of it;"

"O ye of little possession, do you not realize you have it all? Do you not see that the underdog is championed and the dead awakened? That appearances are fleeting and possessions deceiving? What we own does not exist, and what we lack is waking life. To dream is to scream into a vacuum. If a girl is eaten by wolves, and no one is around to care, does she exist? Are the wolves fed? Do we die by what we live for, or do we live by what we die for? Is experience defined by reality or has reality defined experience?;"

"If I exist only in your mind, do I think outside it? Surely you must know what I am thinking, else I would not exist. Are we enlivened by death, or deadened by life? Do the wolves eat the sinner or the saint? Must we think? Do I extend my hand to you or do I extend it to a drowning man? I think I extend it to myself. Or maybe I reach it out to grasp that which I cannot own, so that I may own what I cannot have. When I cut my losses, I see how little worth I am compared to my possessions, and my possessions are meager. Do I have it all? (No.);"

"If history is a collective memory, then is a simultaneous event seen by many already history? Do we live in the past because we do not know the future, and the present is fleeting? Certainly, we cannot keep up with it or even ahead of it. Always we must react and never act."

"What is extraneous is lasting and what is intransigent is fleeting."

"If the world is dualist but made by a Trinitarian God, where is the third part? I see a dualist world, but I still search for the third part;"

“I am in mortal danger.”

The announcement was so sudden and nonchalant that I turned around to look at her. I had been pouring out my soul toward the heavens, one hand uplifted to Michelangelo’s ceiling. I turned, my hand and arm spiraling down across my body. She lay poised on the divan, holding an old-fashioned cigarette holder in one hand, wearing a mink wrap and nothing else. Her demure expression relieved the tension in the room, but not in my throat. I could’ve jumped her then, but she seemed so unattainable and distant. Instead, I washed away the lump in my throat with another shot of whisky (we’d finished the brandy bottle). I sang to her in my best voice an ode to the Queen of the Night. I lifted her arm and placed it about my neck, as I stood behind the divan. I hoisted her body in my arms as I paraded her around the room, a grand display of the Queen. When I got back to the divan, my strength failed, and we collapsed onto it, singing, laughing, and mute. I held her in my arms and I kissed her neck. She did not resist, but she would not turn her head.

“Let me ask you for we are as intimate as me and my roommates, or at least should be, have you ever engaged in the act of kissing? Have you ever been drunk before tonight? Have you ever had sex? My roommates have told me that they have done, and I can tell you what I have done. My answer is no, yes, no. And I don’t expect those answers to change anytime soon. Though once all three are yes, I can never go back and change my answer.”

After a long silence, she spoke without answering my questions,

“Perhaps this is the answer to my problem,” she announced (what problem?): “I am in love.”

“With whom?” I gave up on my inquiry; after all, I was afraid of her answers.

“Perhaps with the wrong person. Perhaps someone else, who I’ve previously ignored...for certainly now, I do not feel anything for...for...the one...”

“The one that you are waiting for?” I asked, my heart perched cautiously, my lips trembling, waiting to strike, “Do you not love him?”

“Yes, I love him dearly. But I miss him dearly, too. Always I felt the pain of separation, but now a new feeling I have. It is loneliness. I am despairing; never again will I see him. I feel as if I have never known him. I’m not separated, but alone. No one was ever there. I had a dream the other night that he had kissed me. When I woke up, I ran to tell him about it, but he was impatient with me. When I woke up, I realized that nothing had happened. Even his impatience would have been better than his absence. I wanted so much to go back to sleep and enter that first dream again. I am denying myself reality, for he may not come back to me.”

Love is a strange thing, indeed. I wanted so much to hold her, and hear her love me, but I couldn’t comfort her. I had nothing to say to her despair, I couldn’t slay the dragon that held her captive. She sensed that, and grew wistful. I felt her physically in my arms, but she was pulling away from me. By the time she had pulled away physically, she had been residing across the sea for some time. I do not remember her standing and she adorning her body once more. I do not remember her leaving me or her silent sob into the darkness. I had fallen asleep.

The next day, she did not appear on the front stoop. I was relieved that she didn’t. I felt too awkward, as if I had broken some unspoken rule, crossed some uncharted boundary. But the day after that, she was there. We went back to talking across the street. I didn’t dare cross to her side, and she was too shy of my place to come to me. She was also afraid of the overtones of such a gesture. We were in this eternal suspension for four days. Finally, she broke her own rule and came and sat down next to me on my front stoop. We talked for a while, mere petty conversation. I did not think my senses were growing dull, but when she touched my arm, I woke up into the unbearable fullness of being. I looked at her, right into the color of her eyes.

“Listen,” she said, “he returns tomorrow. Please, let us not remember that night, you know, March 26th.”

“What is the significance of that night?”

“It was four days ago. I don’t want him to know about it.”

“That’s not what I meant. What is the significance of that night? Why do you fear to mention our activities that night?”

“Listen,” she said, “I was drunk, you were drunk. I said things I didn’t mean—”

“Oh?” I interrupted, “What things would those be? I didn’t detect falsehood at the time. It sounded very sincere to me.”

“I didn’t mean *to say*. It was all sincere,” she replied, “but I didn’t mean to tell you those things. I really did feel as if he would never return, but now that the day has come, I feel it no more. Besides, when someone’s drunk, they say what they feel and really mean it, but they may regret it later. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why are you ashamed? You did nothing wrong or unfaithful.”

“Yes, I did. I did not believe; I lost hope. Despair is the worst you can be. I let my inhibitions down, and now I wish to cover what I revealed. And when you kissed me...” She turned away and looked down.

“You wish to cover what you revealed? But my lady, you are too late. I saw what was in your heart, and I saw your beauty. You can’t go back. You can regret, perhaps, but never, ever feel shame for what you did. And I did not kiss you, I held you in my arms, an intimate embrace.” I knew the difference, it made all the difference in the world to me, but could she? I didn’t think so.

“No, I felt your lips on my neck,” she said without looking at me, her face turned toward the sea, “It was intimate, but not merely an embrace. There was nothing between us.”

“We acted as close friends,” I said, “Anyone would have done the same in our situation. Man, woman, supernatural beast...” The poor choice of words made me choke off, but she didn’t know why, nor did she care to know why.

“I will accept that. I regret nothing, but I wish I could take back everything. We acted as close friends, and close friends we shall be.” With that, she stood up and took her leave of me. She went in through her front door and disappeared within the tomb of her house. And I cursed my dirty, soiled, torn, ripped-up luck. All I wanted was to bask in the glow of someone who loved me, to be warmed by love, to sun myself in the love-light that streamed from her eyes. But I chose the person who could not give that to me and so I waited on my front stoop.

A week later, I was invited to a party. My enigma and my responsibility were there, the happy couple, drunk on whatever love potion he had concocted and she had drunk. I saw them and I went to talk to them, but I was stopped by someone else before I reached the corner where they were huddled, talking together. I talked distractedly to my obstacle, but she lost interest when she saw my disinterestedness. I crept closer to them, but I stopped short when I overheard what they were saying, my responsibility and then my enigma:

“And that’s another difference between us; your joy is so exuberant, so full of life, and I—I don’t know, I’m—”

“You are much calmer, I know, but somehow, I can’t help but think that your joy is better, I mean, it makes mine seem so hollow...”

“Hollow?”

“Yeah, hollow. You’ve got it now, it streams from you. You fill the room with this peaceful presence. When I look at you, your eyes reflect love-given light, your face is calmly set,

and your skin seems to glow, your whole being seems to glow with this inner light. What makes you do this, what are you thinking of? Whatever it is..."

"I'm thinking of the night on the couch. I imagine myself in your arms, in your embrace. My head is at the right height to hear your heartbeat through your chest. I feel like an embryo, safe and warm and oblivious to the world in its mother's womb. In fact the world doesn't exist, its problems vanish. Time slows and a moment stretches on for eons. Stars grow old and die while I'm in your arms. Thinking about it makes me happy, doing it makes me joyful."

"But joyousness makes me want to jump around the room, and you don't do that."

"No, joy makes me self-reflective. I don't want the world to know of my joy. The world ridicules joy, parcels its effects out to hormones, and luck, and maturity. I keep my joy within me, for eventually it turns into love."

"Love?"

"Yeah, love. Two pints joy equal one quart love."

"And do you love me now? I had so hard a time convincing you before. But your eyes, I can't stop looking at them, they're so peaceful...joyful..."

"Yes, I love you. I thought you knew that. But I did have to be convinced. Not by you, but by my joy. And your heartbeat. I loved you from the moment I was in your arms on the couch. Nothing then could contain my joy. Joy is dangerous. Two pints joy equal one quart love, and three gallons desire."

"Desire. Such a strong word. Horrible associations. Don't you prefer—?"

"Lust? I hardly think that's a better word, I don't think there *is* a better word for it."

"Longing, craving, is more along the lines of what I was thinking of. For I feel the same way, too. I want you, I long for you, I need you, inside me, outside me, beside me, alongside me, any side of me. I feel you always, within, without, above, below, around, everywhere, like a stalking ghost. I can't forget that night on the couch. When I held you, rockets exploded, lightning crashed, bombs went off—I can't describe it. And ever since then, you've loved me. I loved you before then. Before I even met you. When I was born, I was born loving you. But I had to convince you. I guess I didn't have to convince you, but your joy. And I didn't have to convince you, only hold you in my arms, and beat my heart. What a beautiful thing."

"What is? Love?"

"No, a beating heart, and embryonic lovers. Being my lover's womb. Creating joy."

I turned away stormily and looked elsewhere for someone to distract myself with. Creating joy! That night on the couch! He had stolen from me what was rightfully mine. That night on the couch was mine! I was the womb and she the embryo, yet she dared present it otherwise! I felt raped, as if she had scraped the inside of my body with a rake. I wanted to weep, to gnash my teeth and pull my hair. She was the master and I was the foolish servant who did not increase the given talent, shut out of her kingdom forever. I cursed my fate, I wanted to lie on the floor, to hide behind a plant and let everyone forget me. But I could not let myself do that. The next best thing—getting drunk—I could do that. And so I did. I made the foolish servant come to life. I let the world see what a happy person I was, so jovial and carefree! But inside, I was dead, a decomposing self. My spirit descended into the catacombs with Mussorgsky, and lamented the end of the king with Rimsky-Korsakov, Sinbad's ship wrecked on the rocks. Karamzin and I lamented Liza's fate. I lost control of my actions. I became drunk, a menace to myself and others. I grew rowdy and broke things. When finally I was sent home, I sobered up and remembered who I was. I turned on my stereo. Rolling Stones. "You Can't Always Get What You Want." Yeah, yeah, I know, okay, next track. Tom Petty. "Time to Move On." Stop already, what's next? Eric Bibb and Needed Time. "Just Keep Goin' On." What the hell? Who burned this CD anyway? I

pull it out. It's labeled, "For when you're drunk and need cheering up." I don't remember burning this CD, and besides, this doesn't look like my handwriting. In fact, it looks like *hers*. . . how did it make its way into my CD player? I put it back, curious to see what else was on it. "Beautiful Day", "More Than This", "Pig" and other optimistic songs. I flicked through the tracks until I came to "Paint it Black", by the Stones again. Now this was more like it. The next song, as depressing. I listened to the second half of the CD. Dominated by Bessie Smith, all depressing, all perfect for my mood right now. I fell asleep listening to it, "Weeping Willow Blues," "I'll Fly Away," "Lonesome Valley," "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and the pièce de résistance, "I'm Down in the Dumps"

The next morning, I woke up, late for class and way hung-over. I took my two aspirin—set aside for hangovers—and grabbed my hangover water-bottle. Ten minutes late, I walked into the room. I stopped dead, afraid to see her. How could I face her when I knew what she and my responsibility had done? When I knew what secret ritual they had performed? But when I looked at her, I continued on my way, though I stared at her face with fascination. She had perfect, flawless skin. Her beautiful façade was once again constructed.

That was the day she ceased to be my enigma and my responsibility was no longer invested in him. I took Tom Petty's advice and strove to move on. She was a bad fit anyway; she did not appreciate my Russian soul. My breathing became better; the oxygen came back to the air, I descended from the high altitudes. When I returned to sea level, I vowed to fall in love when the time is right, when my heart was ready. From the looks of it now, that would probably be when I'm 64. In the meantime, I took care of myself. I concentrated on my schoolwork, on my appearance, on my friends, on my own needs and wants. I started feeling healthy and free again, as if I were flying instead of walking. Time certainly passed as if this were true. She did not want to remember March 26th, well, I trampled all over it.

But eventually, my happiness waned, and I grew morose. Then the symptoms began. The tingling palms, the stomach knots, listlessness, nervousness, edginess. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, commonly referred to as love, is airborne and highly contagious. It wafted across the street and infected me. You listened when I announced one day:

"This is it: I am in love with no one—and that is my problem, that or, I do not know. I tingle, I sweat, my knees buckle at the sight of them, but *they* I do not recognize. I'm in love with someone whom I've never met, I've never seen, I've never spoken to. There is no idealized form in my head, but their presence, their form, their shadow moves on the screen of my mind, not in focus, but like Chinese shadow puppets. And I love them. Or perhaps I am in love with myself. Self-love is legitimate, but one cannot kiss oneself, and therein resides the problem."

And this is what you said:

"Of course you're in love—it's contagious, and the person across the street, while no longer your enigma, is still the object of your desire. You love her, still, though you deny yourself the feeling."

Of course I knew this already. But I didn't want to hear it in public. I wanted to hear an answer to my summons, an absolution to my confession, a pardon from my crimes, an acknowledgement of legitimacy to my feelings. I sighed in resignation, "Of course, you're right. But I don't want to be, I want to close the door and shutter the window on her. But I can't, I can't. I can't. . ."

But you had stopped listening. You had left me to myself.

The next morning, I decided it was time for action. I threw everything that reminded me of her out the south window, everything she had given me, all the journal entries I had written about her, all the love songs I composed, all the hangover aspirins I set aside for when I needed to

forget her. I did not throw out “For when you’re drunk and need cheering up.” It did not remind me of *her*, but I relabeled it in my own handwriting, “For the trip back to reality.”

But it was not enough. I needed to block the air drifting into my room, for the air was coming from across the street. I stuffed the cracks in the wall, I covered all the windows that faced her front stoop, and I used the fan to blow the air back from whence it came.

And yet it was not enough. So I took the most drastic move of all. I packed my trunk and made my getaway. I left no forwarding address, no point of contact. All I left was this note on *her* door, “Stars grew old and died while I waited for you. I was there when I needed you, where were you?” I left without looking back, suddenly, without warning, without returning the key. I let the key drop into the Caspian Sea, along with the CD—I didn’t need it anymore now that I had arrived at the destination. Never again would I need the English language. I did not wait for the devil to collect his dues. And now, I live in a hut on hen’s legs, servant to the great witch, Baba Yaga. Forever is my soul imprisoned in those immortal woods, surrounded by glowing skulls who grin evilly; monks who have earned their eternal reward and now are anxious that others shall follow them. Every Sunday they chant in rhythm to the bells emanating from the spires of the multicolored onions perched on high for all to see, christened by the greatest of herbs, Basil, “*Svahtie Bozhe, svahtie kryepkie, svahtie bez-mertie pomiluy nas.*” Here shall my soul remain, rid of its enigma and alive to death. It chants with the holy martyrs, those skulls glowing on the fence; “Great is the Holy Motherland, yet the bright sun shines on the whole world.”