

## Longing

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I'm not sure what it has to do with length, but it makes sense to think of them together. For longing, by definition, has no end.

The *O.E.D.* gives as one definition the cravings of women in pregnancy. Those objects can be had, though some are quite unhealthy. But cravings are concrete, and they come to substitute for longings. Krunch Kones at the Dairy Land instead of scintillating talk, achievement, the limelight. Whiskey instead of love.

Perhaps “longing” suggests the power of the want, not its unattainability. Perhaps I confuse “longing” with “pining,” which is a word containing pain. To pine is to long with pain for something you've lost and can't have back, ever, or for a very long time: home, or a lover. (The pine tree strained at the sky, stripped, attenuated, its trunk graying.) But I think you *long* for something you've never had, that's always just beyond the horizon. At the end of a long road whose end is invisible.

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The sexiest couple I have ever met are both tall and long limbed. When we are together, the longing is so palpable and present that it is nearly assuaged, so nearly that longing becomes a pleasure, worthy of prolongation.

Flight, a trajectory across an empty sky.

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I am never cheerful when I awaken in the morning. The day stretches dully before me like a furled window. I am sick with unknown longing. I want to get the dullness over with and have my treat, which is endlessly deferred, it seems.

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Longing concerns time and other people's bodies—sometimes one, sometimes the other, and most especially, both together. The word “hold” emerges when I try to name my longings. I desire to stop time and to hold another person. Or to turn back time and to return into another's body—into the “hold” of the mother's body, which will negotiate choppy waters while I stay, protected.

To “stay” something also is to hold it back. Stay, oh stay!

When Eve and Adam had to put on fig leaves, they became a married couple; then they were expelled from the garden. The fig leaves were the sign of enforced monogamy, of longing from then on.

*“Shall we go lie on the bed?” he asked. “No,” I answered, “too much like marriage.”*

You could say that marriage frees us to our longings. As long as we long, we can imagine life unbounded—life that goes on and on.

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I like men who have to groom for their days. Perhaps it's my longing for the feminine in men, the mother-in-the-father, or perhaps I like the masculine power of their suits.

Late afternoons, walking my dog, I see them coming off commuter trains. They wear gray suits with the faintest pink pinstripe. I would like to put my nose against their wool, just for a sniff of what it means to earn, to hawk and haggle in tall buildings. Because I am married to a thin intellectual who smells like a library.

(We rather like smelling of libraries, Mister and I.)

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Longings often concern the strangeness or perhaps the perceived likeness of another person's skin. The porn industry thrives on it. So does the sports industry.

*"Spaniard," I said, "I dream of your black hair nightly."*

Longing sits snugly and uncomfortably up against our fantasies of race.

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I am at odds with a little man who burdens my life by insisting we spill our longings constantly. This man, who dresses like a bum, fails to understand what the Greek philosopher said: "That which enslaves us makes us free."

I wish he wouldn't "dabble his fingers in my soul" (*Mrs. Dalloway*).

What's insidious is the implication, "I know your longing and can satisfy it." Thanks, but no thanks, dowdy artiste.

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Once, when I was little, my mother packed her suitcase at the foot of the bed, weeping, enflamed by my father. If I want to represent the word "hold," the word "stay," with their dual object of time and body, I can make myself remember how desperately I wanted to keep her back.

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Now I, too, wake in the night filled with longings nothing can assuage. There is no point packing the suitcase—as my mother knew when she unpacked again that evening. In William Maxwell's novel *Time Will Darken It*, the wife packs her suitcase twice—and twice returns to her quotidian life. At the end of the novel, she lies in the dark beside her husband, hatching her escape plan once and for all. And then she falls asleep.

We lie beside each other, twin cargos of longing. Dawn comes, with its bird chorus, its little cold breath licking our ankles. Stay!