

The Blue Route

Issue 12: Spring 2014

The Blue Route Staff

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Widener University's online journal of **undergraduate writing** takes its name from the Blue Route (I-476), a north-south highway running through the suburbs of Philadelphia.

The Blue Route is where we are located (less than a mile from Exit 1). The Blue Route is a metaphor. The Blue Route connotes a certain mood and a certain direction. The Blue Route suggests one possible path to where you might want to go. The Blue Route is an alias. *The Blue Route* is a place to which talented undergraduate writers should submit.

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For the Presumably Homeless Man Peddling Harvard T-Shirts on Boston Common After Dusk

Brian Thomas – Ursinus College

Boston, you give me the creeps.
I can't say it's your gridless, faux-European streets,
That encircle the center like rings in a pond
(although they are ridiculous).
I can't even say that it's your unnaturally azure skies,
Stolen from the Indians you blamed your tea party on.
What gives me the creeps, Boston,
Is the innumerable Harvard t-shirts that circulate
Throughout every facet of your existence,
Like vital blood rushes through an animal.
It's as though, despite Fenway Park, Faneuil Hall,
And the damn Cheers Bar,
People rush to Boston to get their hands
On half-hour old hickey colored shirts
Emblazoned with "HARVARD."
Parents asking for child sizes,
Thinking that they missed their chance
At the American dream,
But they'll be damned if the kid follows their lead.
Parents violently pulling them over their child's small head,
As if this were enough to cement their acceptance.
And the poor, dirty old man,
Collecting \$20 bills and bottles,
Pushing his cart with his hunched back
Through historic Boston common every day,

Bellowing his mindless mantra:

“T-shirts, folks, T-shirts.”

The Mechanic

Brian Thomas, Ursinus College

Dad, I still have your middle name,
Despite how you say you're 'dumb as dirt.'
Despite how your shirt, encrusted with old oil,
Hangs in the hamper for mom to clean,
I still have your middle name. I carry it with me
Like a little girl carries a doll through the super market.
Dad, don't be sad when you see me slowly slip away to school,
Nimble on my fresh feet and knees
While you nurse your back, broken by work.
Your glazed over eyes give you away, your exhaustion,
Your gritty knuckles with countless callouses
That would softly get me out from sleep when I was too world-weary.
In the days when I would wake up soaked in broken tears,
Hearing the clink of your coffee cup,
I knew how hard it was, and when you kept going, I kept going.
Dad, father, can't you see how poetic you are?
How you knead life into lead ridden machines
And give dreams to your accidental children.

Train 353

Riley Nisbet, Central Michigan University

On January 6, 1988 the last train to leave
Michigan Central Station in Detroit
slid toward Chicago with no thought of return.
Passengers sat silently in two-by-two rows
and warmed enough to fold pea coats
into laps five miles outside the suburbs.
They could hear despair of buildings crumbling behind them
in the uncomfortable crinkle of a newspaper's turning pages.
Above them, a smokestack's stagnating breath
dusted the city left behind like light snowfall.

Southbound

Julie Bartoli, University of Connecticut

On her twelfth night in Claiborne Val drank a full bottle of hot pink Moscato and passed out on the hardwood floor. She spent the next morning balancing an icepack on her forehead, body wrung dry and pinned to the clothesline. When she puked her teeth went slick with sugar.

“One year,” Tim said, rubbing the soft of her thigh. “That’s all I’m asking.”

Val nodded, fantasizing about a yearlong induced coma. She wasn’t made for Louisiana. Already she ached for her metropolitan life, Manhattan flat, studio space with framed canvases lining the walls. She won awards for her impressionist paintings of littered sidewalks and street vendors. Each piece sold for a couple hundred dollars, sometimes over a thousand. *I’m looking for that flash of God in the gutter*, she said during one of her gallery shows. Charming, but false. The reality was Val couldn’t paint anything other than still life, and impressionism was her go-to because it gave the illusion of motion when in reality it was just thousands of tiny dots.

Not that it mattered. Not in Claiborne. The first few days Val tried, setting up an easel in the kitchen while Tim was a work. She mixed colors, poised herself in front of the canvas and—nothing. Any time the brush made contact, colors bled and sighed onto the tarp. Everything she painted looked like a crying Jackson Pollock.

“There’s something up with the water here.”

Tim shrugged. “Use less.”

“You’re not getting it. My work has gone to shit.”

“It’ll come back,” he said, planting a kiss on her forehead the way a parent does when their daughter falls during a second grade dance recital.

In the winter of her junior year at NYU, Val dated a writer named Sid who was addicted to his own adrenaline. He was late to everything, rushing in at the last second with flushed cheeks and a laundry list of apologies. Tonight they were meeting at a bar on twelfth. She waited outside under a cone of streetlamp light, a Zig-Zag dangling from her lip.

Val had done everything right. Silk thigh highs on the milk white mile of her legs, tacked to a garter belt that cinched her taunt little waist. Pretty, too—a flat feline face with green oval eyes. She was pissed. Girls like her shouldn’t be kept waiting.

Tim must have felt the same way. She caught his gaze through the bar window. He was sitting in a tight corner booth, wearing a suit jacket and thin red tie. The second

time they locked eyes he stood up and joined her outside.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You know,” he said, leaning against the streetlamp. “Kissing a smoker is like licking an ashtray.”

Val grinned. “What’s fucking one like?”

She quit smoking that night and Sid one week later. Soon she was living in Tim’s apartment, painting in the loft while he studied for the bar exam one room over. The workspace was wide and white, with hardwood floors and bay windows. At night Tim came in, his breath hot on her neck. She dropped everything, followed him onto the floor and pulled his clothes off with, or in spite of, the fresh paint on her hands. Forget the artists. They were too self-conscious, always working missionary style with their eyes trained on hers. Tim was wired for pleasure, for sex without the sentimentality. It could happen any moment in any room, any way she wanted. Val loved the idea of their romance—the lawyer and the artist, the realist and the romantic. It felt raw until the phone call, Tim’s wiry boss saying there was some pro bono work he should look into.

“This could make me a partner, Val. And it’ll only take a year.”

Claiborne, Louisiana. Why didn’t anyone warn her.

By the end of the first month Val had a routine. Wake up hung over. Suck ice chips. Fresh cup of coffee. Run a hot bath. Soak in the porcelain tub until Tim came home with pizza or Chinese takeout. They never did learn to cook in New York—Val used the oven for extra shoe space.

That night, eating spring rolls in front of the television, Tim reached over and touched Val’s arm.

“I think you should get out more.”

She snorted. Her breath was thick with soy sauce.

“What do you suggest?”

“Don’t be facetious,” Tim said. “I just want you to meet people. You seem bored.”

Seem? She was bored to the core. The only thing keeping busy was her liver.

“Take a walk tomorrow. There’s a coffee shop down the street,” he said.

That night she went to bed at a normal hour. She put her hand on Tim’s shoulder and gave him a gentle shake. Nothing. They had sex only three times since they landed in Claiborne. Maybe he was disgusted by the extra ten pounds on her waist. She was no longer thin as a pin, smooth as water running from the faucet.

Val lay on her back, squeezing her stomach. Moonlight cut through the curtains and pooled onto the carpet. She saw dust suspended, hung like gauze. Licked her lips and imagined a New York interior, slick, shining doorknobs, microwave ovens, Plexiglas

buildings that went on for days.

A hangover free morning. Val pulled on a white tennis dress and a pair of boat shoes. Outside the air was balmy. She walked to the end of the road, breathing heavier than a twenty-three year old should. There was the coffee shop—Red Bean. Sounded like a bad porn title. She sighed and pulled open the door, a pad and pencils tucked under her arm.

At the counter she ordered coffee, black, and the cashier clicked away with plastic painted nails. She found a seat in the back and started sketching. In art school the first lesson was perfect circles, so she always started there. One, two, *whoosh*. It had to be instinct. Once you started thinking too hard, the only thing you could draw was ovals.

After ten minutes of this she set her gaze on a floral arrangement in the window. Plump yellow tulips dripping petals onto a lace doily. She drew an outline and started shading hundreds of tiny dots, ping into the heat of the paper. For a while she lost herself in the motion, then a teenager with big teeth, small ears and a backwards baseball cap swung open the café door and stunted her thoughts. Color came back, coffee shop sounds, whirring of an espresso machine, the cashier's nails click-click-clicking.

Val sighed, rubbing her temple. She tried to slip back into her piece but the moment had gone. This is what she missed most about New York—it was all noise all the time, the faded soundtrack to her work. She packed up and walked outside, past a tight row of mom and pop drugstores. The delta dawn felt hot on her face and the streets were too clean for comfort. She fought the urge to litter.

“Hey,” a voice said behind her.

She stopped, checking over her shoulder. It was the kid from the coffee shop, his baseball cap tilted over his eyes.

“Hi.”

“You're not from here.”

“No,” Val said, stopping herself before adding, *thank God*.

The kid walked faster, joining her. He had those long, bicycle-riding strides. Leaned back when he walked, hips first, then chest. He'd probably never seen ice in his life. Would have slipped and busted his ass if he walked on it like that.

“Can I have your number?” he asked.

Val snorted. “How old are you?”

He looked offended. Crossed his arms over his chest, kicking a stone across the sidewalk as they moved ahead.

“Eighteen.”

“Right.”

He shifted his eyes toward Val. “I saw what you were drawing. I like art too. You don’t have to be a bitch about it.”

He said bitch with a slung southern drawl—*beytch*. Val felt a wave of embarrassment. She was being cruel. It’s just that in New York no one stopped to talk. She couldn’t understand random politeness.

“I’m sorry,” she said, tearing a piece of paper from the sketchpad and scratching out her name and cell number. Maybe the kid wanted some art tips. She could do that. She could bring culture to Claiborne. It would be difficult but rewarding, like Anne Sullivan feeling Helen Keller tap out “water” for the first time. Val could be a miracle worker. She had that in her.

The kid shoved the paper in his back pocket, said his name was Greyson and left in a huff. She had a feeling she wouldn’t hear from him again, but the next morning her phone rang and he asked if he could stop by.

“It’s Monday,” Val said, staring at the calendar. “Aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

Greyson snorted. “Skipped.”

She tried starting with circles, but Greyson refused.

“I looked up your paintings online. Teach me how to do that.”

“This is the first step.”

“Then take me to the second,” he said, dropping his pencil and staring her in the face. Val bit her lip. She stood up and opened the cabinet, pulling out the coffee pot. When she asked Greyson if he wanted a cup he rolled his eyes, which she wasn’t sure how to interpret. She brewed an extra one.

Back at the table she placed the pad between the two of them and went back to circles.

“You flick your wrist, like—”

“Are you deaf?” Greyson said. “I don’t want to make circles. Teach me how to paint.”

She dropped her shoulders. Greyson stared with wide eyes and a half open mouth, the dog waiting for his bone. Couldn’t blame the kid—he had no idea how stale her work had gone. She’d have to show him.

They descended the crackled wood steps to the basement. In the center of the room Val pulled a string light, flooding the space with pall yellow hues. She gestured to ten different canvases propped up along the wall. Greyson nodded, cupping his chin in his fist.

“Now you’re a modernist?”

“Not by choice,” she said, cheeks flushing. Greyson took a step forward and kneeled down, getting a closer look. He scrutinized each piece individually. She

wanted to cry. It was shit, all of it, and here she was making it public.

“You don’t like it?”

“The word is hate,” she said.

Greyson shook his head. He lifted Val’s attempt at painting a wicker chair, which ended up looking like a Rorschach test.

“I think this has serious potential,” he said, and walked back upstairs with the canvas in hand. Val took one last look around, shuddered, turned off the light and followed him.

He almost never went to school. At first it drove her crazy. One morning she threatened to call child services, but Greyson’s smooth little drawl convinced her to just *Relax, sweethurt*. Soon, though, his truancy became endearing. Val wished that when she was in high school she skipped half the week to paint.

They worked from nine to four on Mondays, Fridays and sometimes Thursdays if Greyson was feeling inspired. She bought an extra easel and they stood side by side, the sun flushing through the window and onto their backs. While Val layered shapes, textures and thick, blotted color, Greyson painted dreamscapes. He said his favorite artist was Magritte. Val could see it.

Greyson was the more talented of the two. They both could tell, though he made the point to ask for advice and tips every hour or so. But he had a raw gift, a natural sense of light and the way it falls. His painting had dimension because he understood shading. Any dimension in Val’s work came from layering.

Still, though. She was proud. She finished her new piece, “Southbound” one month after Greyson showed up on her doorstep. That afternoon, after signing the lower right corner, she went to the grocery store and bought crackers, cheese wheels, flatbread, hummus, stuffed peppers, custard cups and bottles of expensive French wine. Au revoir, Moscato. She arranged the appetizers on platters through the kitchen, slipped into a blood red cocktail dress and waited for Tim. When he reached the front door she opened it and gave a sweeping gesture toward the house.

“Welcome to the show.”

She took him into the kitchen, where “Southbound” sat on a chair against the wall, beaming. Tim circled it for a moment. He squinted. Then he grinned.

“It’s different, but I like it. It’s like you broke out of something. The style is really freeing.”

In her rush to set up Val forgot to bring Greyson’s easel downstairs. Tim studied his painting next, eyes wide and round. He asked if it was hers and Val said no, she was teaching art classes for a kid down the street.

“He’s good,” Tim said. “Is he paying you?”

“Yes,” Val lied.

The next day Greyson finished his piece. He didn't say anything, just dropped his brush into the cup of cleaning water and took a step back. Val had just started a new painting but she felt the energy shift and moved next to him. They cocked their heads and stared.

It was an oil painting of a hollowed-out yellow hibiscus flower, beads of dew clinging to the petals. A coiled red snake swelled in its center, wrapped around what looked like a little girl's wrist. She had a tight gold band on her finger, skin puffing around it.

"It's sharp," Val said.

"Really?"

"Really. You've got serious talent, Greyson."

She turned to face him and saw that instead of surveying the painting he was staring back at her. They eyed each other for a moment before Val stepped forward, planting a hard kiss on his lips. At first he was limp, then he opened his mouth and pulled her lower lip into the space between. He found the tight part of her wrist and gripped it, leading her to the bedroom. She and Tim's bedroom.

They collapsed onto the comforter, licking, sucking, closing the space between each other. There was an urgency in Greyson's motions, that same fresh want Tim had when they started dating. Val soaked in it, closed her eyes, then she heard the sound of Tim's car pulling into the driveway. She jumped.

"You hear that?"

He looked around. The baseball cap, already edging its way to the edge of his forehead, fell onto the bed.

"Hear what?"

"I thought I heard a car pulling in."

Greyson stood up, walked to the window and cupped his hands over his eyes.

"Nothing," he said, turning back and making his way to the bed. Val put her hand out.

"How old are you?"

"I told you. Eighteen."

She raised an eyebrow. "How old are you really?"

He rolled his eyes. "You tell me, Val."

"I think you're sixteen."

"So what if I am?"

"I just," she placed two fingers on her temple, rubbing in small circles. "I need a minute."

They waited in silence for a moment. The room swelled with the tick of the clock. Greyson tapped his foot on the floor.

“Do you want me to leave?”

Val couldn't answer. She lowered her eyes, letting her hair fall in front of her face. Greyson snorted. He stepped across the room, snatching his hat off the bed and jamming it onto his head. Val heard his feet pad through the kitchen, the crack of a chair tipping. Then the front door slammed and the rest was silent.

She waited a minute before walking into the kitchen. Almost everything was the same, clean, pristine with paint at the edges. Except her chair was on the floor, “Southbound” gone, Greyson's painting still there.

She saw him one last time the week before she left. He was standing outside of a Walmart, smoking Parliaments. They pretended not to notice each other. Val bought packing crates and made a beeline for the car, never checking over her shoulder.

Back in New York she set up her workspace. Woke up in the earliest parts of morning, when clouds glow red around their edges. Sometimes she shot a line across the canvas, but mostly she paced small circles and thought of Claiborne. The slanted light on the rotting kitchen tiles. The silence she never could appreciate before leaving Manhattan, where the air is a constant chorus of car horns and sirens and mouths that never stop moving.

When Tim made partner they went to dinner at a steakhouse on fifth. They ate thick, dripping meat and drank California red. At night they stumbled home and collapsed onto the mattress. Tim touched Val's inner thigh and she leaned in to kiss him.

“Thank you, *sweethurt*,” he said in a fake Southern accent.

Val dropped her head into her hands and burst into tears.

“What?” he said. “*What?*”

“I miss Claiborne.”

He laughed. “Good one.”

Forsythia

Jenna Rodrigues, Hartwick College

Fall means we rake the lawn,
stuff leaves into bags made from their trunks.
When filled, they look like
paper-pulp people, lined at attention in our backyard,
crisp and nutty.

The forsythia reaches over the top of my head now
like my little brother.
He cooked himself an egg this morning
and I thought: "I'm sorry; I remember the day you were born."

My mom's boss cut branches off her plant to establish our forsythia.
"Put them in water and they will put down roots."
She spoke the truth.

Once planted, you cannot get the bush out of your landscaping.
She has put out tendrils in all directions,
a foster child eager to prove herself.

We go to the beach,
barefoot in the middle of October,
dogs running in time with the waves.
Put me in water and I will put down roots.
It is the truth.

Once planted, I cannot get myself out of this city.
I have put out tendrils in all directions,

a Maine child,
“from away” but eager to prove herself.

Salt covers the rocks in a fine-layer of sea-film,
preserving the city while I am gone.
Portland is a flavor I cannot stop craving
and even though I want to see *everywhere*
I want to come back here,
greet the lobsters that still live under my bed (never monsters),
ride the ferry boat to Peaks,
pile maple leaves,
take myself for a jump.

I walk the neighborhood,
see Bean Boots on every pair of feet,
smile.

We are all forsythia,
happy to have found soil
for our roots.

Windows

Kimberly Villacis, Lehigh University

I stare up at the dull cement ceiling, sweating, tired, and restless. I have been having trouble sleeping ever since the day I ran back from *el mercado*¹. I look over to my little sister across the room, sleeping in a bed that is too small for her, in pajamas that are too big for her frail body yet too small for mine anymore. I can see that she too, is sweating, even without the one raggedy old bed sheet covering her. I turn the small oscillating fan that sits between us closer to her as I get up to look out the window.

I hate windows. They only show you what you don't want to see. When I was younger, around my sister's age, back when I knew nothing, I used to love them – I would stare past bakery windows at all the delicious breads and treats, past clothing store windows at all the new jeans and shiny shoes, past book store windows at the displays of books and magazines of all these faraway places and international celebrities. I would yank my mother's hand towards every window we passed as we walked down to *el mercado*, begging, "*Mamá, mamá! Comprame esto! Yo quiero ese!*"² And she would reply, "*Si, si, Marcelita, un día te daré uno de oro.*"³ I would squeal of delight at the promise of desserts, dresses, and dictionaries all covered in gold. That was back when I knew nothing. I hate windows.

Outside the window in the cramped room I share with Mariana, all I see is darkness. Our neighborhood is now notorious for crimes late at night, so the street is usually deserted by six o' clock. That does not mean it is silent, though. Everyone who lives in *El Camal* has grown indifferent to the sounds of dogs barking, police sirens, and cars screeching in the night, blasting music. *El Camal* wasn't always dangerous, though. Mamá told me that she met Papi as she was outside playing with her sisters, and he saw her through the fence that surrounds our house. They became close friends, and both their families did, too. Back then, Mamá said, things were different. You could walk outside whenever you wanted, and everyone knew each other. She knew to come home exactly at dinnertime, and often in the evenings she would go with her sisters to see Papi and his friends play soccer at *la cancha*.⁴ This was before all the storeowners with their treats and clothes and books in the windows became older, and their stores all eventually closed down. I was so sad when we would walk to the market and no longer see anything, but empty windows.

¹ the market

² "Mother, mother! Buy me this! I want that one!"

³ "Yes, yes, little Marcela, one day I will give you one made of gold."

⁴ the court (usually made of cement and found in the middle of the community park)

By the time I was four, all my friends in *El Camal* began going to school. One day, Gaby asked me why I wasn't joining her on the school bus every morning. Thinking nothing of it, I just told her what my mother had told me, that I would simply have to start school later because Mamá would miss me too much. Obviously, Gaby's mother did not care about her, or else would not be sending her away every day. This was irrefutable logic in the mind of a four-year old. At first, I was happy to stay at home with Mamá, helping her cook and clean and run errands. All my friends were jealous. Two years passed, and my friends started the first grade. Mamá kept making excuses as to why I wasn't going to school – I was too little, I wasn't prepared, I would miss home. I believed her, and hardly complained, but little by little, I started losing my friends. I remember one day in the park they were laughing over a comic they had been given in class, but when they handed it to me I didn't understand the markings in the thought bubbles above the cartoons. "You still don't know how to *read*, Marcela?" They laughed even harder. I felt as if the bubble above my own head was completely blank. When I ran home crying to Mamá, she said not to worry, and that was when she told me that I wouldn't need those friends because I would be having a little sister soon. When I brought up the fact that I still couldn't read, she just stayed quiet.

At the age of ten, I began realizing that I would never go to school. I began realizing that *El Camal* was not the wonderful place I had convinced myself it was. I began realizing that Mamá could not read, either - that the woman I had loved and admired so much, struggled just figuring out prices at the market. Nor was Papa my knight in shining armor. He worked at the sanitation department during the early morning and guarded the local church late at night. He worked two jobs, yet still was paid much too little to support our family of four. Not nearly enough to be sending even one daughter to school. I began to wonder how we even afforded our meals, since Mamá could not read, nor could she leave Mariana and me alone. I wish I never found out.

Mamá sent Mariana and me to *el mercado* every three days, at the same time, during which she would use the opportunity to clean our room while we were out, so she said. We were sent to buy enough vegetables, fruits, and rice to last us until the next time we would have enough money to return to the market. I always made it a point to avoid the street with all the new stores – all built a good distance away from *El Camal* - but one time Mariana ran too far ahead of me, and by then it was too late. Behind her dirty little face, shone the excitement and bewilderment at all the treats behind all the windows. She was at the age where she knew she could not have any of these things, but that did not stop her from looking and dreaming. From then on, we always passed down the street on our way to *el mercado*, me keeping my eyes forward and trying to ignore the concerned shoppers dodging our way, and Mariana lagging behind, gazing at everything and ignoring everyone.

One day, when we got to the block with the stores, I noticed that Mamá had been a dollar short for the groceries. I knew that if I ran home alone, I would be able to get there in half the time it would take to drag Mariana alongside with me. I made her promise she would not leave the block, but when I saw how distracted she was staring at the electric trains I knew she would be okay. When I first got to the fence at home, I realized that it was locked, which was strange since it was usually kept open. I went around and through the loose plank in the back fence, which only we knew about. I opened the door to find a strange man sitting at my table. I had never seen him before, but he was obviously not from *El Camal*. He was dressed in a cream-colored suit with an open collared white shirt and brown oxford shoes, and had huge gold rings on several of his fingers. He had dark black hair and a mustache, and gave me a smile that sent shivers down my spine. “*Hola, bonita.*”⁵ I stiffened immediately. “*No tengas miedo, ¿por qué no te acercas a mi lado? Ven y siéntate en mi pierna.*”⁶ He reached out his hand, and seeing that I was reluctant, he yanked me forcefully to him. I pushed him away, but he lifted me and sat me on his lap. He began putting his hands on my thigh, and slowly working them up my dress. I don’t know why I didn’t scream, but when I kept trying to push away he just dug himself into me harder and I could feel my ribs bruising. All I could do was look out the window.

After what had seemed like hours, Mamá walked into the room and dropped the tray of coffee and bread she had been holding. Her hair was undone from its usual braid, and she was wearing her church dress. “*Que estas haciendo? Sueltala!*”⁷ She began to cry angry tears and yanked me from the man’s lap. She hugged me but all I could do was stand there numb. I buried my head into her, but I could still hear the man yelling at my mother. “*¿Qué te importa, si yo te estoy pagando bien? Ni siquiera me dijiste que tenías una hija. Mira Maria, dejala, y te pagaré el doble que te doy, si le das a mí.*”⁸ It was then that I realized what my mother had been doing to support our family all these years. I pushed her away and ran straight out of the house. No one even bothered to look twice my way.

I felt hopeless. I felt ashamed. I felt angry. In reality, I felt as if the cartoon bubble over my head had no markings in it, just a bunch of scribbles because I couldn’t even write or think of the words to describe exactly what it was that I was feeling.

I had ran out of tears by the time I reached Mariana, who did not even notice anything was wrong, just yanked my hand to a window saying, “*Mira, Marcela! Comprame esto! Yo quiero ese!*”⁹ I was too heartbroken to even try to explain to my disillusioned little sister how her imaginary world would

⁵ “Hello, beautiful.”

⁶ “Don’t be afraid, why don’t you come closer to my side? Come and sit on my lap.”

⁷ “What are you doing? Let her go!”

⁸ “Why do you care, if I am paying you well? You didn’t even tell me that you had a daughter. Look Maria, let her go, and I will pay you double what I give you, if you give her to me.”

⁹ “Look, Marcela! Buy me this! I want that one!”

come crashing down in a matter of years. How I wished that she would never grow older and face this world, or have to suffer this life of staring into and out of windows, feeling forever trapped.

Before I could say anything else, I just responded, “*Si, si, Marianita, un día te daré uno de oro.*”¹⁰

¹⁰ “Yes, yes, little Mariana, one day I will give you one made of gold.”

Arizona Diner

Vinny Tangherlini, University of California, Irvine

my 1993 Chevy jostles and springs up
the long, narrow highway

the golden sun laps my face illuminating
the dark patch of my sweat-stained color

half a tank to go

A lonesome
diner, white stucco crusted with
sand, dulled and blackened red
neon sign, brown roof sagging

Turkey and cheese, Cheddar if you got it
I rest a five on the cool, muted counter

Annabelle's black name tag, dotted
with grease from the sizzling
griddle—long, smooth
stockings, a smell of bacon
and Jasmine perfume

Cheddar it is, Sweetheart
She flicks a wink my way

those blue eyes—that stained
green apron stretched tightly over that playful bosom—

my teeth dig
into the dark, warm bread.

The Alluring Aroma of Memories

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When the smell of smoky, crisp, ash invades my nostrils, the transfer of smell to memory ventures to the depths of my brain, searching through filing cabinets of my past life until it lands on year eleven. This was in no way my first campfire, but forever the one each flame-flickering night relates back to. The night I spent in Arlington, Vermont with my family alongside the winding river that tossed chilled air to our campground and urged us to huddle beside the warmth of a fire. Since that night, I've grown to appreciate the way smoke stains clothes with memories of Reese cup S'mores and scary stories of ghosts in the woods. The way certain smells hold certain memories.

I always find myself willingly inhaling smoky, campfire air that burns the back of my nostrils, down to my throat just for a glimpse of my past life. I suppose this is what smell is really all about. Not to forewarn you of how delicious your upcoming meal may or may not be, but to grab you unexpectedly and toss you back into another time and place where you know you've experienced this before. It's not just the way something smells, but how the way it smells creates a multitude of emotions within just one inhale. This is the power of smell.

The relation of my nose to memory is stronger than my own conscious mind can comprehend. This could possibly have to do with the fact that the olfactory nerve, our perception of smell, is located so closely to the hippocampus, which is in associate with memory. I recall times of aimless wandering that left me trailing behind a familiar fragrance that I couldn't quite pin until a second or third whiff brought me back to the arms of an eighteen-year-old boy. I didn't know what body spray, lotion, deodorant, or cologne that eighteen-year-old boy in my memory wore, but I knew that the familiarity of the smell that trailed from the stranger in front of me reminded me of snuggling up in his arms and burying my cold nose into his neck, breathing him in on a frosty February night.

Knowing that smell lingers so powerfully on the memories in my mind, I would deviously leave traces of myself for others to find. I'd coat fruity, sugary, fragrances of me from a blue perfume bottle onto love letters mailed from Fort Wayne, Indiana to Martinsville, Indiana sealed with a kiss and *I miss you*. Memories of me in citrus, floral form held in a circular pink perfume bottle, would seep into the pillows of my first love so he would smell, dream of and miss me. There was even a time I sent away an entire bottle of me to go overseas with a boy trying to find a purpose to survive, though it seemed he found a purpose in someone else. I was left inhaling every fiber of his USMC sweater, searching for one last trace of him, but all was lost to my own scent after many nights of falling asleep hugging the 50%

cotton hoping I would wake up one day to a 100% real human.

I suppose I appreciate smell the most because it is the least confusing of all senses. I know that a specific pine scent will remind me of Christmas and the coziness of holidays. What I don't know is how sound or sight will toy with me. I don't know if what I remember seeing is how I really saw it, or if my vision deceives me. I stood once with the barrel of a gun pressed to my forehead, its owner's finger restless against the trigger. I don't remember the details of their faces, nor can I recall their voices. I remember the pressure of something cold, but what I remember most is that the smell of cinnamon rolling off a stranger's breath will always frighten me.

I know that the smell of Black Walnut by Banana Republic will always throw me back to endless nights on an uncomfortable, broken futon, tucked with uncertainty into the arms of an equally broken boy. It will tug at my heart as a younger me breathes in his hair each night he'd take his place beside me after his nightly shower. What I don't know is what memory will topple from my brain as Florence + the Machine 'Only if for a Night' dances from my car speakers and floats within my hungry ears. I don't know if I will smile to the memories of when I first heard it with red-lipstick kisses in an old beat up truck. I don't know if I will sing along, fighting back hot tears of passionate regret and shame as each word explodes against my windshield. This, I don't know.

What I do know: Every fall my father and I collect leaves, stabbing them so they're stacked on a stick like a shish kabob and bring them indoors so that our home can be filled with the smell of our favorite season. When I'm away from home, living alone in my apartment at school, I can lift handfuls of crunchy fallen leaves and inhale the memories of my father; the memories of raking up leaves as our dog jumped through the piles, and the memories of my mother putting out Halloween decorations while drinking hot apple cider as the ghostly steam warms our noses.

When hot ashy air meets the memory strands in my head, gliding through the olfactory and stroking my hippocampus, I know what the smell is and what it means. Campfire. I know where it will take me. But if I close my eyes and bury my face in a pillow where the smell of smoke cannot find the filing cabinets in my brain, the crackling of the fire sounds like rain.

Contributors

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