

On Smells

My mother flips a quarter and I call tails. I always call tails. It lands heads up in the small of her palm and this means it is my turn to ride the bike to Fralick Heights for drinking water, baby trailer attached behind, filled with empty apple juice jugs.

Our water comes from a well, runs through the faucet orange with rust. I fill a glass and hold it up to the light. It is foggy and dark but it is only iron. I want to drink but my father tells me not to. My mother tells me to smell it first. My parents don't want me to grow up drinking this, so they put me on a bike and send me to my grandmother's house. The tires squeak against gravel. For six miles I smell only pine trees.

Fralick Heights is mapped in circles, exactly two, weaved together with mustard houses, wooden street signs larger than eight year old girls, and grandparents drinking merlot on their patios. Brothers with bloody knees race for their father's last piece of cinnamon gum, their thin tires spinning until their mothers call them home, until their dinners are cold. Girls run with pink, sparkling hula-hoops to the old Buddhist's home, tossing their rings around the copper statue on the front lawn. Their grandmothers tell them this is okay. Their grandmothers tell them about worshipping false gods.

I turn my bike into my grandmother's driveway and see the drunken, callous man from next door spit tobacco into the wet soil around my plum tree, his cracked hands clenched as he pretends not to notice the sound of my tires. I get off my bike and walk toward him. I hear the neighborhood boys laughing at me from their porches. They don't know what this soil means to me. I reach out, pluck a fruit from the tree, and squeeze it in my hands. I can smell the juice between my fingers, ripe and warm. I can smell the black-eyed susans. My mother planted this tree for me while I was in her womb.

The Buddhist across the street waves at me from her yard and I walk over, plum still clenched in my hand. She lets me touch the copper statue. It smells acrid and metallic. It smells like pennies. She takes me inside to wash my hands and her house is cold. Her thin, dark fingers rub soap between mine and she smiles at me. I notice the cracks in her lips and the way her bottom teeth overlap. I notice the freckles on the bridge of her nose. She clips me a piece of witch hazel, tells me how she uses the fruit she grows to make jam, tells me, “Not everyone is soft like us.”

Her name is Anne and she is not a Buddhist at all. When you're twelve it is hard to understand these things. I ask her about the figure in the yard and she tells me about Vishnu, Hindu god of protection. Anne asks if I would like a glass of water and I tell her about the plastic vessels I have carried with me. She offers to fill them. I smell the jugs before handing them to her, one by one, untwisting the yellow caps, making sure the water will not taste sweet.

My mother taught me to smell before I consume; to inhale the spice of red wine, sniff the tea to tell if there is enough lemon, make sure the cow's milk has not gone sour. “Don't drink if the scent is off,” she'd say. I have carried this lesson with me into adulthood. I never drink a cup of coffee before breathing it in first. I rub lavender between two fingers and smell. I test the aroma of canned soup before heating it up, smell the small chunks of pink chicken, the thick yellow broth, the aluminum tin.

Some people do not understand this and I am always hesitant to sniff the cup of chai that is bought for me on a first date, to smell the glass of water from a house I've never been to before, or ordering a café au lait in a restaurant for breakfast. This never bothered my mother like it did me. She never flinched when people would stare.

When I was eighteen I moved into my own apartment. The first thing you saw when you entered was the scuffed scarlet kitchen floor, the cracked porcelain sink, the faucet aching with rust. The walls were stained yellow with nicotine from the woman who lived there before me. The cupboards smelled like dirt.

On my first Saturday morning there, I woke up alone with a thirst that needed to be quenched. I thought about my mother as I dragged my feet over the scarlet tiles into the kitchen, as my fingers reached for the brass handle glued securely to a large, mauve cupboard. I moved my hand through the cabinet searching for a glass mug.

Above the kitchen sink were two wooden boxes, each with three shelves, painted white many years before, the varnish cracking and peeling. A small light with a pull string sat on the brick wall between the boxes. On the shelves were jars of homemade jam, candles shaped like fruits, field guides on edible flowers, ripening bananas, jars of olives, and a small copper statue of Vishnu.

My mother would have hated the place. She never visited. But I thought of her anyway as I placed my hand beneath the faucet and turned the plastic nozzle. The water dripped out of the spout, black as plums. The roseate terns outside coupled in the ash tree, their dander bursting into the air. I bit my lip. I thought of her. I filled my glass and I smelled.