

Then Winter

My phone screen is filled with condensation, a warm gloom of invisible water. Beneath the glass cover I imagine a shower filled with steam. Without warning my phone regularly goes dark, and when I see my reflection peering down, puzzled with lips pursed, it looks like I'm under this oily black surface. I press aggressively on the home bottom, unspeaking, I see myself biting my lip, rocking it back and forth under my front teeth. I wait from above to be shown what's underneath. I change location, I walk outside, where my face is hit with an icy wind, and soon my screen swells with light.

Antonia:

Hi, it's me again.

I went into a Catholic Church to escape the rain. Now I'm seated in the sanctuary, in a pew.

The smell of strong incense accosted me almost immediately; it surrounded my head and nostrils. I was transported to my childhood summers in the South. Greece, Tunisia, it's a sense not a place. Those summers I knew well, of course they were absent of religious severity, but now this big, airy nave seems good for evocations of the past. My early years are exhumed in curly rings of smoke.

Me:

A warm wind that sweeps up all our shit from past to present. Or maybe it's more vertical. Can you imagine layers of scent and air, drafty and cool in the rafters, before moving down towards the heat, the glow of the candles, the sweetness of clove. Now there's a smell, a block. The spectrum moves from dusty grey to rich orange. Smell memory can be bodily; it removes the possibility of newness.

Antonia:

A wall of smell, piled to the ceiling, the smell of "I remember". I've never been religious, you know, but I've always been attracted to the Catholic Church because of the smell of incense. That static smoke, it's smell is warm even if it's murky and sometimes invisible. I think of Italy. I think of Avignon. I think of orgies, and then I've already overstayed my uninvited welcome.

I had been adrift in my own thoughts, and somewhere between sleep and epiphany, I had concocted an exchange with Antonia, in which I was the recipient of her nostalgia. I was seated on the ground when it started, on a small white pillow, and I could sense my phone lighting up and going dark. A singer stood behind a large screen strung up across a reinforced cement basement, and next to her a string quartet played. On the screen's surface was the projection of a family, big and broad, six figures standing and triangular around a large chair. In the chair sits an old woman, big bosom and big glasses, she stares firmly ahead. Family intact, institution, members, they're all different sizes and ages, but they're present. Other audience members moved around on the floor in the cold.

My family is small and lean; it doesn't fit into a geometrical shape like a food pyramid. Together we slide through the years, breaking off from one another, scattering and occasionally coming back together unexpectedly. Sometimes I think about what my parents did for me as a child. There was eucalyptus oil to steam with, and it would cut away my winter congestion. Eucalyptus grows best in the Southern Hemisphere and in California, but I think of it as permanently linked to slush, tree branches heavy with snow and bitter cold.

Me:

Smell happens so quickly, a sense at the back of your neck that you've been moved somehow, it's a crash of inhalation. My father says he'll send me pictures of his new apartment when the smoke from the nearby brush fire settles.

Antonia:

It won't settle, but will just become something new.

Me:

Smoke, burning brush, burning rubber hits me in my guts. I think of warm winters and too cold summers. If I dig deep I'll move from cold into warm, again.

Antonia:

I've taken to slathering my scaly winter skin with olive oil, which covers up the older layers with something new. In the morning all the layers have sunken together, and my skin feels embalmed and taut.

Me:

Cut through the layers of those natural materials and your fingernails will be full of resin, oil and skin.

Antonia:

Eucalyptus is a natural decongestant, clove is a bleach, tea tree helps with dandruff. I found all of these things in my parent's bathroom, and they stung my fingertips and eyes.

Me:

You anointed yourself with their remedies, but you were too susceptible.

The moisture inside my phone seized on its lifeblood once more and switched off. Without Antonia's interlocation, I was left looking down at my own reflection with the antiseptic smell of natural bonds in my nostrils.

In films and romance novels, I have noticed nosebleeds are occasionally a precursor to a love scene. The nose-bleeder in question usually senses a drip, drip and then hurries away from the scene they occupy before the stream appears. Then on a darkened periphery, patting a tissue onto the drip, drip, there's a stolen kiss, or maybe furtive lovemaking. The scent of blood—not the scent, the smell—would put a lot of people off sex, I imagine. The smell of copper and what one ate for lunch, wouldn't fill the nose, it would just be there. The sniff arrives to keep it all in.