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Of Perfumes

To be honest, I'm a little cold. I'm moving tenderly, careful not to make the turntable's needle jump, as we hold hands and dance our imaginary waltz. My mind is all summer dresses and Bowie's greatest hits; the air conditioner shuts off with an audible click as we dance through memory and the cool summer night. I shiver— it isn't summer in Evanston, it's January in Denver and my space heater (damned old thing) has given out again. I inhale deeply, slowly. He isn't here. He is in another place, very far away, and all I have of him is a worn-out t-shirt, which he got for free with the renewal of a magazine subscription, and some Charlie Mingus records. I pull the shirt on and it smells like him: Old Spice and movie theaters and the beach on Lake Michigan. The smell is transporting— it is the perfume of summer, the earthy aroma of balmy evenings, the trigger of a locked-but-loaded memory gun.

It's no coincidence that his aroma causes me to reminisce: smell is the sense most closely linked to memory, being the only sense connected directly to the brain's limbic system. While the other senses are routed to the thalamus, or the brain's "sensory switchboard", smell is connected to the hippocampus, which controls memory, as well as the amygdala, the brain's emotional center— meaning that scent is capable of eliciting emotional memories more deftly than the other senses. But quotidian smells— your usual coffee roast brewing in the morning, the clary-sage and frankincense notes in the aftershave your father wears, or the laundry detergent with which you wash your clothes each Sunday afternoon— don't elicit memories as strongly. Smell's ability to extract memories is limited to the special and the long-gone: unique smells are linked with unique memories, and the reintroduction of forgotten smells awakens dormant past experiences.

The connection between smell and memory is well-documented, often in unexpected ways: even Andy Warhol was an olfactory connoisseur— a perfume pundit, as it were. Though he was best known as a pop-art magnate, his true allegiance was with smell rather than sight. In his autobiography, Warhol explained his partiality for perfume, explaining his precise system of cataloging smells: “I really love wearing perfume... I switch perfumes all the time. If I've been wearing one perfume for three months, I force myself to give it up, even if I still feel like wearing it, so whenever I smell it again it will always remind me of those three months. I never go back to wearing it again; it becomes part of my permanent smell collection.” He cherished old perfume advertisements, graced by names like “Toujours Fidele” and “Roi de Rome,” lending themselves to elaborate fantasies about their distinct smells and the memories with which they were associated. In essence, Warhol created his own museum of fragrances, allowing himself to revisit memories via the smells that elicited them.

Though I don't care for expensive perfumes— I've worn the same vanilla-tinged Hollister body splash since I was twelve— I have a de facto fragrance museum of my own: a desultory collection of items strewn throughout my room, capable of a kind of magic. They give rise to olfactory occult; they violate the laws of space and time as they propel my consciousness into motion. A pair of tired, grey-tinged pointe shoes hangs in my closet, their stale aroma masking undercurrents of resin and fresh wood floors. They smell like years of ballet classes, transposing memories of Tchaikovsky and gauzy pink tights into immediately accessible sensations. A dingy stuffed rabbit with tattered little ears transports me back to my first summer at Camp Matoaka, hot like campfire smoke and cinnamon-peppermint lice shampoo. And a simple red t-shirt, permanently shrunken from too many cycles in the dryer, smells like Old Spice Fiji, jasmine and cedar-wood, and boys who will only eventually learn to love us back.

I'm *too* cold now— the space heater emanates a faintly burnt, tar-tinged smell as it bumps and struggles to heat the cavernous room. Shivering, I jettison the faded red t-shirt for a

cozier number. I am abruptly disconnected, like a telephone line that has been cut. As Warhol pointed out, "the thing about a smell-memory is that the feeling of being transported stops the instant you stop smelling, so there are no aftereffects. It's a neat way to reminisce." The end is immediate. I am 1,151.4 miles from Evanston. I ambulate aimlessly. I finally find myself in my mother's bathroom, gazing longingly at her collection of tiny old perfume bottles shaped from fantastic, rosy blown glass. There are easily twenty of them, packing the shelf like a neat little museum of aromatic memories. Some are labeled. Most are not, their intricate delicacy lending itself to hypotheses about their unique scents. They are precisely organized. Each is empty. There isn't room inside them for perfume anymore; they are too full of remembered anecdotes and treasured fantasies, too great to possibly be contained by a single bathroom shelf.