

CHEMOTAXIS
ON A
ZEBRA
CROSSING

Elida
Silvey





“...nothing reveals more honesty than smell”
– Sissel Tolaas

The gauntlet. That’s what he’d call the zebra crossing after we’d exit spliff park. Where we’d regularly smoke, partially shielded by ivy-covered fences and a couple of fickle, anaemic trees, sure of our separation from the outside world. An exercise in *what I can’t see, can’t hurt me*. The walk back to our apartment, across the striped carcass of the pavement, required us to reengage all of our mechanics, the machinery of which had gone sideways from the expedition. Now, faced with a similar tug to my buckled knees, that word reinserts itself into the forefront of my mind. The

gauntlet. A daunting task that must be undergone.


The party I’ve stumbled out of has left me in quite a state. The world holds a resolute minerality to it that it did not have at the start of this day-turned-night-turned-day. The sun looms, peeking over the horizon brow furrowed and unconvinced, as if annoyed by the prospect of commencing the day at this point and not, as would be more agreeable,

later. The metallics of a nearby traffic light shine a sharpened edge, demanding attention and commanding respect. The walking-man painted red, static and stagnating, makes a mockery of my position on this side of the gauntlet. I blink as if to will his movement, imagining his body, bound by the pointillism of LEDs encased in plastic, metamorphosing into something more fluid. A form of choreography that moulds his silhouette into the embodiment of *Go!* but he, like most figures of his kind, stands immobile and unbothered by my request.

The stale scent of decay protrudes from the

bin to my left. I lurch my hand forward to cover my nose and mouth, as if slapped and shocked by its statement of intent. ‘I am decomposing’, it slurs ‘and so are you.’ The pattern produced by the source of this putrid smell appears to me as a Rorschach test. I imagine prophets locating messages from God in the shapes hidden in the mud, forming civilizations out of the meaning culled from those particulates. I laugh at my own neurosis. A splatter, typical for bins in the city, revels in its peculiar sliminess. I redirect my attention to the woman





standing next to me. Eyes scanning her surface in an attempt to surmise. I had seen plenty of reels from that fame-obsessed perfume guy, a blond

in a white suit, who roams the city sniffing unsuspecting passersby

to guess at what they wear. 'Content' distilled into bite-sized, reproducible actions. I try to guess what she's wearing without closing the distance, but the only note that springs forward is anonymous-sweet. Vanilla, maybe. Or the chemical composition of coconut, sans the fruit. I think, 'Angel' but then I shake my metaphorical head, pausing to check I had not, under my current state, shaken my actual frame, and decide that wasn't it. The residual image brought on by that scent—of Ms. Ida Lowery's face, stretched across the screen like animal skin over a drum's head, from the film *Brazil*—dissipates. I touch my face. These images stitch together the false sensations of a movie scene turned memory and collide with the reality of the present moment, causing a slippage of worlds. A double exposure. The static man, painted red, turned green in response. A


beacon, beckoning me forward. Finally


I jolt across the gauntlet. I am now in the process of *gauntlet*-ing, delayed in my response, only briefly, by the shock of this harsh transition and my own inebriation pulling visual fragments out of thin air. I collect the particles of scent off another woman whose hair whooshes past me. Citrus, like a lime peeled in the sunlight off the coastline of a small town shushed by its proximity to the equator. Salt,

from the ocean or the rim of a cocktail glass.
Clink Clink Clink-ed. I

recognise, given my affinity for conjuring spirits from the most minute details, that I must be walking at a snail's pace. And yet the rush of her insistence paired against my semi-stasis is complimentary. I feel lively and perhaps, from this position of liveliness, enthralled by the circumstances of scent and its minerality, that is why the man's face is so jarring. He stares at me

with disgust pouring out of the corner of his periphery, nose upturned





as if he knows something about me that I have yet to realise. I immediately look down at my body in search of fragments, of anything that could be deemed unacceptable; is there a stain on my front from a meal I had forgotten about? Or the familiar drooping chrysalis of ivory-coloured pigeon shit on my shoulder? Or perhaps more severely, a Post-it note stuck to my slick forehead stating;

look at me I am, in fact, high – call the cops will ya xxx. Then it strikes


me that while I can smell the scents of others, others too can smell mine. That is as close to a Post-it note as anything could be. My mind races, reproducing far-fetched imagery like bacteria duplicating in a plastic Petri dish. I picture cops rushing out of the rusted maroon car parked on the other end of the gauntlet. Videos of people getting 'swatted'—where men fully kitted out in SWAT gear burst through the ceiling of


unsuspecting civilian homes – broaches my mental membrane. I imagine

SWAT men falling from the sky like anvils. Rushing towards me in the middle of this zebra crossing and zip-tying my wrists together behind my back. A cop car with woo-ing lights would surely skid across the tarmac as if driven by Vin Diesel himself. Who, at this point, would decide to join the Metropolitan police to combat petty crimes, after finding the repetitive and unrealistic plotlines of the latest *Fast and Furious* movie too much to bear. They would smell of rust and gunpowder and hold the top of my head when guiding me into the back of their patrol vehicle.

It would be comical if not for the weight of my decisions. I

try to centre myself on anything else. I imagine that the old woman hunched over across the street waiting for the 109 with a trolley in faux-Burberry print would smell of a peculiar combination of steamed potatoes and mothballs. The kid, riding a yellow kiddie bike past her, with his mother walking behind him yelling, yelling something I could not hear: she would smell of flowers. Daisies or chrysanthemums. He would smell like cheeseburgers and raw earth. The tall man in worn blue jeans that opened up his





corner shop by tugging at the metal gate with one hand, his cigarette in the other—my eyes following its path towards the sky as it slid up—he would

smell of leather, tobacco and a hint of musk.

My eyes anchor against the pastel shade of mint that covers the surface of the coffee shop on the opposite corner. A woman in a cherry red scarf steps out of it with a cup. Its steam, boisterous and seductive. Coffee, that's a scent I could walk home to. I picture a cartoon hand gloved in satin reaching towards me, coming from the shop.

The hand of coffee, which is to say God.

I feel the arch of my foot hit pavement, driven towards the shop by the faint traces of electricity that smell has produced within me. I smile but

it's brief. It fades

the moment I realise that in order to get the coffee I craved I had to: cross another street, enter the coffee shop, choose a coffee from the menu, which I

may or may not be able to see from behind the barista, who I must speak to in order to get this coffee and then pay, which meant locating my card and/or phone. That in order to do all of this I had to go through another

dreaded gauntlet. I outstretch my leg onto

the concrete slab, adamant that in the mustard hue of sunlight sweeping through the inside of this coffee shop I would find a resolution. The stale scent of decay protrudes from a bin to

my right. I lurch my hand forward to cover my nose and mouth, as if slapped and shocked by its statement of intent. The static man, painted red, turns green in response.