

GLANDULAR HISTORIES, EXTRACTED

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SEBUM

For the third or fourth time now, my mother pulls a face and tells me I smell like cat piss.

She'll deny it, but to my mind her figure of speech is almost too characteristically acerbic. Once upon a time, a similar remark—"Jesus, Christopher, have you smelled yourself recently?"—had machined away inside my head until her words had propagated themselves across the surface of my body, infiltrating my leaky pores and setting

"May he smother me with kisses. Your love is more fragrant than wine, fragrant is the scent of your anointing oils, and your name is like those oils poured out; that is why maidens love you."

up camp inside of me. A virulent little sequence of code had appended itself to my mitochondrial DNA, commanding me to wage an expensive chemical war against the microbes that sought to exploit the nutrient-rich sebaceous glands tucked beneath my follicles. It took ten years and a perfumed corps of *sympathisants* to contain that particular neurosis.

Having cordoned off at least some of the unexploded ordnances she left scattered about my consciousness, I'm prepared to accept that there could be a physiological basis to her complaints—regardless, even, of whether her senses are any keener than my own. (I suspect, begrudgingly, that they are.) The key to unearthing the materiality of my pungent scent comes much later—improbably—from the language she used to describe it, when I overhear someone else using the phrase "cat piss" to identify an offending accord in a men's fragrance that I happen to fancy. In the age of the

Internet, it takes but a moment of cross-referencing to put a name to my primary suspect: phenylacetic acid. In a very tiny dilution, it can evoke the smell of honey. Too much, though, and it smells like ammonia. Cat piss.

SWEAT

Marie and I are both already more than a little drunk. We're also both more than a little headstrong, so our modest disagreement risks devolving into something entirely unsuited to amicable dinner party conversation. She—a university-trained chemist and a professional perfume evaluator who once worked on a delicately honeyed scent for Guerlain—is maintaining that she is drawn “magnetically”—her word—to men who exude especially powerful pheromones. For my part, I—a closet empiricist—am not shy about demanding, entirely too theatrically, that she substantiate her argument “with *some* kind of *evidence*.” As a cumbersome bowl of salad circulates counterclockwise around the table, she offers, in all seriousness, to smell everyone's armpit and give us each a rating.

“But you're making my point for me!” (My voice is getting too shrill, I can tell, but I can't seem to stop myself.) “Pheromones don't smell.”

Had we imbibed less enthusiastically before eating, Marie and I might realize that our dispute is only nominal. What we're really talking about, what's really *worth* talking about, however informally, is how our body chemistry—“our *scent*,” I continue to chirp, “not our pheromones”—affects how we respond to potential sexual partners. A knotty stretch of our DNA welds amino acids into a fragrant chain of proteins. Blood carries these unwieldy molecules to our sweat glands. They migrate from within our bodies to without, and our heat lofts them, gently or aggressively, away into the air. We are evolutionarily predisposed to like people who smell different from us, different from our family. Anti-incest sweat.

(Hung over the next day, proxied through a university library, I'll click through outdated scientific journals until I find the decisive counterevidence I had wished for at dinner: human beings don't have a functional vomeronasal organ. We can't perceive pheromones, not even below the level of consciousness. I won't be able to resist sending everyone the citation.)

Another guest gracefully steers our conversation back on course, and now everyone at the table is bursting with anecdotal evidence. “White people smell like sour milk,” a Japanese friend offers helpfully. She confesses to a decided preference for Latin American men. A litany of ethnically correlated likes and dislikes unfurls. Ilan tells us with a sly grin that he loves the smell of black women. I admit to having been intoxicated by the scent of a Sri Lankan Tamil. For all her discreet charm, Marie’s tastes orbit closer to home: she swoons over the reportedly powerful pheromones of Iberian men. I wonder aloud whether there might not be a genetic correspondence between preferences in food and preferences in sexual partners.

MILK

“Pinot doesn’t need much to flourish. It’s little more than a weed. Cabernets are *so* much more temperamental. It takes generation after generation of refinement to get a well-balanced cab.”

Cabernet Sauvignon, Laya has just informed me, is a far more elegant varietal than Pinot Noir. The rain-swollen slopes of eastern Oregon’s Willamette Valley could scarcely dream of producing the wines that Spain has known.

As quaint as this bit of Old World chauvinism sounded—and whether or not it’s even true—I can at least appreciate the perversity of her agricultural take on the labor theory of value. Europe has, after all, been the site of a vast human-vine-soil assemblage for over two-thousand years. The network of energetic exchanges is dizzying: the radiant sun and the Earth’s elliptical embrace; the explosive photosynthesis, upward and outward, of *vinifera* leaves; the measured osmotic greediness of the vine; the depth, composition, and inclination of the soil below; the lightning-fast evolutionary mutability of the single-celled organisms orchestrating the magic of fermentation; the organization of human labor and symbolic systems; all this pivoting around the artificial pleasure of intoxication.

When Spaniards first made their way to the Western hemisphere they encountered a native drink—a viscous white sap, decanted from the

wounded heart of the *maguey* plant and fermented in animal skins—that was just as old and at least as complex.

Like wine, it was the product of a profound history of co-articulations: solar rays, subsoil minerals, photosynthetic factories, bacterial machines, sharp obsidian utensils for scraping away the fibrous scabs that paper over the maguey's pierced breast, dried gourds for suckling its sweet honey-water. (Bataille's fantasy of the hyperproductive Mexican sun was rooted in libidinal investments as much as general economic ones.)

Like wine, it bears the unmistakable seal of *terroir*: a delicate microbial balancing act between effervescence and putrescence, a heady bouquet redolent of tough desert greenery. It survives today under the name of *pulque*, but Bernardino de Sahagún's sixteenth-century informants had any number of terms for it: *nécuatl*, *tlachiqui*, *necubtli*, *octli*, *teoctli*, *tlalocli*, *poliuhqui*. More numerous still were the varieties of inebriation it was said to induce, one for each of the fabled Centzon Totochtin—four-hundred rabbits who supped at the prodigious breasts of the goddess Mayáhuel, herself a human incarnation of the divine maguey.

This flow of potent native milk did not fail to enchant the fair-skinned children of Dionysus when they finally embarked on their pilgrimage across the Atlantic. Whites have forever adored the vitality of the Mexican landscape. Weston's miotic eye was drawn ("magnetically") to the maguey's erect stalks (blind to the galactic ferment churning perennially within its core). Further north, Artaud's delirium was fueled by another desert succulent, the storied *peyotl*, while to the south, the cloud forests of Oaxaca bore secret shrines to mushrooms that are still revered as "dear little sacred lords," *ne-to-chu-táta*. Fungal saints.