

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

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Synesthesia

LAYLA WOKE UP, LIKE MOST NIGHTS THESE DAYS, while it was still dark outside. The light pollution from the non-stop commotion outside illuminated her small studio with a shimmering blue-green glow. Layla reached over for the faded lump of beige cashmere on the empty side of the bed, gave a soft inhale, and for a moment he was there right beside her. The smell was already waning. Allowing just a moment to wallow, she slipped out of bed, through the sliding glass doors, and out onto her tiny balcony. His shoe was still there.

It was cold. A gentle snow had caked on the balcony floor, and her bare feet scrunched up until her toes went numb. She looked down over the edge, but couldn't make out the ground through the churning smog. Screens flashed all around her: Targeted advertisements for products, movies, and more products flickered about, beckoning her to consume and to distract. Vehicles weaved in the air between the skyscrapers.

She returned inside and checked the clock. 4:00 AM. The room, once filled with photographs, was now dotted with overturned frames and conspicuous pegs in the wall. Several half-empty cardboard boxes constricted the flat's open floor plan. It was cold inside, as well. Layla checked the heat coil by the balcony door, even though she knew it wouldn't get turned on for another month. With a sigh, she crossed into the kitchenette to make coffee. She searched through the mound of glassware in her sink and fished out her coffeemaker. Clean enough. She lined it with a paper filter, ground the beans, realized she used too many, threw half of the grounds out, and poured water over the rest at an even 92 degrees centigrade. Her morning ritual. Cup in hand, she turned on the TV. Layla scoffed as the logo for Echelon, the multinational technology behemoth, danced on screen.

"They say smell is the sense--"

Layla turned off the TV, slipped on the sweater, and left the apartment. She made her way across the hall, and ran into Mrs. Welles from a few doors down, the other insomniac on the 97th floor. Mrs. Welles clutched her small dog, which was bundled in a heavy sweater, tight in her hands.

"Oh, good morning, dear."

"Good morning."

They got in the elevator.

"Ground level?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah. Yes, please. Thank you."

They spent the next three minutes of the ride in silence. Layla waited with a grimace for the inevitable outpour of pity. Finally, when they arrived:

"It will get better."

And with that, Mrs. Welles placed her dog on the ground and scurried away. Layla watched her go.

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Layla put on her ventilator and braced the air and the cold as she stepped outside. It was much colder down on the ground level, but she decided to take the long way to work nonetheless. On the walk to the subway, it was hard not to notice the Echelon ads plastered all over the streets. Layla tapped her ring on the turnstile's payment hub, and made her way to the platform. She was ready to shed her winter coat, an expensive and heavy garment supposedly made from what was once a real sheep, but it was somehow even colder inside the station. The train arrived, and the vacuum-sealed tube opened with a shrill hiss. Layla boarded, her ears popping from the pressure change. She chuckled as she sat down. The train was lined with video screens.

"They say smell is the sense with the strongest link to memory. Tap into your body's powerful olfactory system with Synesthesia Mk II, only from Echelon. Echelon, for advancement and progress."

Layla shifted her focus to the view outside the frost-covered windows. The velocity of the high-speed train made the cityscape into a desaturated blur. Neo-brutalist superstructures loomed over the few remaining brick buildings lucky enough to have been deemed historical landmarks. Layla lifted up her arm and sniffed on the fraying sleeve of the cashmere sweater.

And just like that, she could just barely feel him sitting on the train with her. The rhythmic creaking of the car was putting her to sleep. She relaxed her neck, and let her temple land on his shoulder. It was sharp and bony, but she didn't care.

She snapped back with the terrible shriek of the train's brakes. She'd arrived. While walking across the glossy marble floors of Tarbot Station, she eyed the ever-present Echelon branding following her until she exited onto the street and pulled her coat closed over the underlying sweater. It was a short walk to the Corporatocratic Archives right off of Meyer Square. She was the first one on her floor that morning. Layla was meant to be parsing through data on a soft disk from before the Great Reformation, but couldn't bring herself to open her work computer; despite the hyper-productivity of the modern world, one could still get away with abusing the inefficiency of government bureaucracy. Instead, Layla found herself falling on old habits. She scrolled through the endless stream of photographs on her handheld. He always hated taking photos, but Layla loved looking at them.

The sight of his face caused a searing pain behind her eyes. She held back tears, fought against the pressure mounting inside her skull. She paced to the hall, hoping a drink of water would thwart her nerves. But right next to the fountain: an Echelon vending machine, staring at her, taunting her. Her heart rate spiked, her head went light, and it felt like her innards were unraveling on the floor in front of her. She pressed her ring to the machine.

She locked herself in the stall and sat on top of the closed toilet. With a soft touch, she removed the device from its packaging. It was a sleek black mix of metal and plastic, angular and almost weapon-like, out of which jutted a tube that connected to an over-the-nose facemask. She skimmed the instructions, and pressed a button on the device, igniting a small

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purple 'E' at its base. She heard a flush in the stall next to her, and considered the issue of the stench. She stuffed her hands in her bag, making sure to shield the device from the stale bathroom air. She pressed the tip up against the wool of the sweater and flipped a switch. In a second, the machine inhaled the miniscule particles from the cloth's fibers and processed them with its tiny internal chipset. With a beep, it was ready.

Layla inspected the device in her trembling hands. The number five was displayed on its small screen. She held it up to her nose, enclosing the mask on her face, and activated it. The contraption blew air directly into her nasal channels, exposing her to a fragrance so strong that she may as well have teleported elsewhere.

She saw him sitting up next to her in their bed. He was nervous, and couldn't hold eye contact. She prodded, until he finally spoke, a coy smile on his face. She laughed a laugh of relief, brought him close, and kissed him. They held each other, and fell asleep, frozen in their embrace.

Just as suddenly, Layla was back in the bathroom stall. The number four flashed on the device's screen. A moment to collect her bearings before she darted out of the building, ignoring the incoming wave of coworkers who flooded the building's lobby. She was soon on the bridge over the river, which was frozen over a glossy brown. She removed her ventilator for a brief moment to bring the device to her nose.

They were on a deck at the top of Pavel Tower, taking in what they could see of the city through the thick haze. They were alone up there. He spit over the edge before crouching down next to her, enjoying her company.

Layla shivered in the chill of the wind, but ignored the temperature. As she shouldered her way through the bustling mid-morning street traffic, she took another puff from the device.

And then she was waking up, stepping out of bed. He was lying still, but she knew he was awake. She made two cups of coffee, as always, and placed one of them on his bedside table. She stroked his hair and forced him to sit up. She removed a pill from its bottle, dropped it in his mouth, and made him wash it down with coffee. He wrapped his arm around her elbow and sunk back under the covers. She smiled at him, a mix of love and pity.

She had been walking for miles, and was only blocks away from her building. Her knees felt creaky, her hips tight, and her thighs sore. But she couldn't stop. Another inhale.

And all of a sudden she was entering their shared apartment. She set her keys down and called out for him, but heard no response. On the ground, she spotted a splatter of blood still moist on the vinyl floors. She moved into the bathroom, where she saw him naked, curled up in the bathtub, with steady droplets of blood streaming from his forearms. He was crying, and looking at her with his big empty eyes. He looked guilty, as if caught in a lie.

Layla entered her building just as Mrs. Welles did.

"Back early?"

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Layla nodded, and tried to hide her inflamed and ruddy cheeks from her neighbor. She waited for a comment from Mrs. Welles, but none came this time.

Layla entered the studio, trying to ignore the dry red stain by the front door. She dropped her things to the floor. She opened the balcony door and let the cool air attack her. She brought the device to her face, slowly this time, and inhaled long and deep.

And then she was in bed, just waking up. She reached over to his side of the bed. It was warm, but empty. She checked the clock. 4:00 AM. Still recovering from her languid stupor, she flipped to her side, and saw him out on the balcony, caught in a fury of snow and hail. She could barely make out his silhouette under the barrage of white. She squinted, and called his name. No response. She watched him climb onto the balcony's ledge, his right shoe falling off and onto the snow-covered balcony floor. She immediately shot up, called for him once again. This time he looked back, just before he let himself fall.

Layla stared at the device. A red 'zero' flashed on its screen. She took a moment to stare out through the open frame of the balcony door. She tossed out the device, receded back inside, but left the sliding door open, allowing the cold air to stream in with an agonizing howl.