

*Salita S. Bryant*  
*First Place*

First Spring in New York

A woman next to me on the #9 coughs, her breath throwing off the smell of newly plucked feathers, the scent of measles. I know, of course, that death smells, the corpus breaking down, casting itself away into a sea of mud—but, I find it a curious fact that sickness smells. Like how yellow fever will hang low with the blunt smell of the butcher shop. Or how during plague time the smell of ripe apples will lie about bodies like a second skin, a crust of scent waiting to be peeled back by death. And typhus—typhus scuttles the nose like the pulpy, dry smell of mice.

And once off the train, the tang of old piss, the marble mottled with it and the man lazing at the portal, his corded arms blue, and scuppering his veins, a needle's worth of heaven, like Bobby, who when we were seventeen already lived his life behind the needle. Who died beneath it one April, and whose hair smelled of the attar of lemons and bee balm.

The death watch beetle in my pocket ticks and clacks. And for the first time, in this strange place, at the first April token of the ginkgo bud, a carapace of longing folds down on my heart like the stone root walls of the weaver's cottage. And I know in my bones why the star-nosed mole grows delirious in fruit season.

Just think how sweet the damp feathers of goslings smell, or how stunning the droop of care when a horse will rest his muzzle, and the weight of his head, in the palms of your hands. The sweet smell of sweet feed, molasses and oat in the air. And today, a thousand miles away from here, the magnolias are blooming without me, without caring that I am gone, laying that thick scent down so low to the ground you'd swear a jam jar of dew would taste like heaven.

Think how I knew him in the dark, how much I wanted him to tuck me into his pocket beneath his nightshirt, to keep me in that little gash in his heart,  
the same hungry way Flaubert stashed his lover's mittens and slippers in his desk drawer, so that in the morning, at his leisure, he might be able to smell them in the sun that canted through the broad glass panes.

Think of Jacob, nothing more than the aroma of Esau, that hirsute brother and how the exquisite truth is that even here, I still navigate by the sun, and by the moon and by the stars in those darker hours, how the sweet smell of larkspur and blue sage and wild heather off the coast glides along streets fretted with stone and still takes my face in its hands.