

Palen Stream was the 2014 Paul Engle "Glory of the Senses" Essay Contest top prizewinner.

The Trail Of Senses That Leads Me Home

Quintessential Iowa holds a different meaning in the heart of every Iowan. Around here, most of us smell the same sweet petrichor of rain after a long and often bitter winter, the same tangy, slightly acidic, and ever-wafting scent of silage after harvest season, and many hear the combines rumbling well into the night as farmers hurry to get the crop out in time. These scents and sounds describe Iowa and people who live here in a way a dictionary never will. The smothering smell of a steer-lot in the summer or the thick dust that rolls off the country roads might make others turn their noses in disgust or disdain, but for me and many others, these things mean home. The large torrents of gravel-dust and rolling fields full of crops and livestock welcome me home from long trips in a way that a pair of open arms will never be able. Iowa is not a state of grandeur in the eyes of many, but for me, the familiar smells and sights are unparalleled even to the lavish gardens of Versailles that I have strolled through. Though I may travel far from home and have great experiences, there is still a sense of security and serenity that I feel as we roll past the familiar fields and houses in Taylor County, Iowa.

I feel the same tranquility on our home basketball court. Feeling the solid wood beneath my feet that countless other players have devoted their high school years to creates a sense of unity with those who have played before me. The sweat, thick in the air and in my nose, always accompanies the hard workouts we are sure to

endure. The rough hills and valleys of a basketball cling to my fingers even after I have left the gym, and my body remembers the unforgiving blows and jolts that the floor relentlessly doles out to all who dare defy gravity. The banners lining the walls tell the tales of successful teams in years past. The banner I am most proud of stands at the end of the line. Its starch blue material is fresh from the factory, and that banner tells the Cinderella story of our sophomore class that has been in relentless pursuit since second grade to earn the right to step on Wells Fargo court. Wells is exhilarating, and when I'm on that court I can feel the electricity thrumming in the air from crowd, and from our own hopes and dreams. But it hardly compares to playing on our home court on a Friday night, the stands packed with cheering moms, dads, and friends as I run up and down the court that got me where I am today. "The Big Gym," as we call it, holds a sense of home to me, it is a place where the community gathers every winter to cheer us on. It is a place where I feel every time the sweat-riddled basketball left my hands as I struggled to put points on the board for my team; a place where I have felt my knees tear open with warm blood gushing out as I slide across the floor. Most of all, it is a place that feels like home.

If it is true that we are supposed to listen to our hearts, then the sounds of southern Iowa echo loudly within me. Few great pieces of music can rival the sound of a newborn calf taking in its first breath of air and bellowing a deep guttural sound of hunger meant for its weary mother. I leave after the birth so I don't disturb the critical moments in which the mother will claim its newborn, but I always stay to listen to the soft sounds of a mother and calf meeting for the first time. The mother, always attentive and caring, begins to run her rugged tongue over the calf in an effort

to cleanse it and ensure that it stays warm. The steady thrum of her careful tongue carries on for long minutes before the calf grows impatient to fill its belly. The calf's throaty wails fill the barn as it notifies practically anyone in a three-mile radius that its unbridled hunger urgently needs quenched. The mother finally ends her careful inspection of the calf and allows it to nurse. Afterwards, the calf drunkenly wobbles to its mother's side to snuggle in for a long nap. The contented sighs of the calf are all that can be heard over the exhausted mother chewing her cud after a job well done. For a short while the barn is silent and I begin to hear my own beating heart, the chirping of the first Spring birds outside, the subdued guzzling as another cow sips from the trough, and I think what I've heard is the purest sound of Iowa anyone can distinguish.

Perhaps the best part of living here is eating home cooked meals fresh out of my mother and grandmother's oven. The anticipation before the Saturday meal is shared by my entire family as we watch the Hawkeyes play their opponents. The delicious smells wafting from the kitchen beckon each person to venture out and attempt to steal a bite. My favorite meal is the roast-beef dinner. One might think it is the roast beef I would rave about. However they would be sorely mistaken. The best dishes on the table, by far, are the mashed-potatoes and gravy and my Grandma's rolls. The mashed potatoes are thick, and not too creamy like so many others I have eaten. The thick yet fluffy potatoes have the perfect amount of salt, butter, and cream mixed in, and they lay lightly on my pallet allowing the gravy to take hold of my taste buds. The gravy. Everyone says, "My mom makes the best gravy ever!" I have had my share of gravies, in fancy restaurants in Vegas and

London, and in several eateries around the Midwest. I am going on the record now to say that my mother's gravy is the best I have ever had the privilege to taste in my short life span. I would be lying if I said there aren't any close seconds, because believe me, there are. But when my mom makes gravy, she does it right. The rich dark mixture has the perfect amount of stock taken from the slowly cooked roast beef surrounded by a generous amount of veg, a slight warmth from the red wine, and the thick, comforting, familiar taste of the roux. Paired with the mashed potatoes, this dish could be a meal in itself, but it would be a shame to miss out on my Grandma's rolls. The rolls are just as they should be, sweet and warm with a generous coating of butter on their golden tops. Mashed potatoes, gravy, and rolls is what southwest Iowa tastes of, and a homemade meal is never far away.

Sometimes I think of how much has changed here. My grandparents talk of different and more difficult times, but I have still had the privilege to experience the core of Iowa of which they speak. I have aided and witnessed the birth of many cows in our pasture, felt my hands grow rough from choring callouses, tasted the kind of home cooking in which no store-bought-boxes would be even thought about, and I have smelt the sweet smells of a pasture that a dwindling number of people can appreciate. However, the technological age still seems as though it is flooding my life, and in some ways, not always positively. I am constantly checking the various social networking apps, and I can't drive anywhere without Google Maps to help me. Just as Albert Einstein predicted, technology is not only exceeding our human interaction, but it is interfering with our ability to listen to our senses, which give us life's sweetest moments and guide us home. It is my hope that the smells, touches,

sounds, and tastes of Iowa retain their integrity and are not washed away by myself and my generation.