The Use of Sensory Details in Sandy Longhorn's *The Alchemy of My Mortal Form*

In the first week of most of my writing classes, I start with a simple descriptive exercise, just to shake off the cobwebs for those who didn't spend their summer or winter breaks writing. And that would be everyone. I light a candle and place it in the middle of the room and ask them to simply describe it for five minutes. At the end of the five minutes, I go around the room and have them each read their favorite phrase aloud.

As they read, I draw two columns on the blackboard, one of which I mark after each phrase. At the end, I usually have say 16 ticks on the left side and two on the right. Then I ask the class what the chart represents. After a few miscues, someone usually guesses that it's about senses: the two ticks on the right represent those who described the candle using any other sense but sight.

Bingo.

Then I gently scold them, saying that, heck, we're alive. Let’s use more than 1/5th of our senses. That’s only 20% of how we experience the world.

We do the exercise again, and I make sure that they know that they don’t have to stay in their seats. That this is an active sport. I urge them to go up and feel the candle, to smell it, to listen to the slight ticking sound of the flame eating the wick. I tell them that I once had a student take a bite out of the candle, and that though I don't recommend it, I applaud his sense of adventure. After all, excellent writing is about curiosity & investigation. Yes, you want writing to be wonderful and sparkling, but what use is that if the author isn't curious enough to delve into the topic, to ask the right questions, to go beyond the obvious?

When I was a teenager, I was lucky enough to find myself standing in the garden of the Rodin Museum in Paris. I remember walking among all the gorgeous sculptures, the muscles straining out of the marble and metal. But out of nowhere I was transported to my grandmother's backyard, which I hadn't stood in for over a decade. What had so suddenly pulled me back through all those years? I finally figured out that it was the smell of boxwood, which lined both the gardens at the Rodin Museum and the gardens in my grandmother's back yard in Trenton, New Jersey. The *smell* had been enough to eliminate thousands of miles and a dozen years. Marcel Proust experienced the same thing when he bit into a madeleine and was immediately transported back to his youth. That single taste had been the start of his magnum opus, *Remembrance of Things Past*. Smells, tastes, sounds tactile sensationa—far more than mere sights—are portals to memories, and writers are well advised to take advantage of them.

Whenever I read, I'm on the lookout for sensory details that can tether me even tighter to this world. So when I sat down with Sandy Longhorn's *The Alchemy of My Mortal Form,* one of the things I was most struck by was how frequently Longhorn doled them out to the reader. In the poem “The Body Itself the Narrator of the Message,” I am pulled in immediately by the smell of a burning stick of incense in the second line. Then again by the whispering of a tunic in the third line. I am engaged by the way the speaker of the poem touches a series of photographs, the way she tastes the blood and the cuticle she tears off with her teeth. Add to these the visual details in the poem, and the reader is taken through every last sense.

Sandy Longhorn has not only created, but has led the reader through, a fully developed physical and psychic landscape. Instead of thinking of the book in our hands, the couch beneath us, the steaming cup in front of us, we as readers are momentarily *in* her world. And for an hour, two hours, or maybe even more—however long we hold the book in our hands—that is an excellent place to be.