


IN SEARCH FOR COMMON SCENTS

Pitchaya Ngamcharoen

Maybe it is not about what we remember, but rather what we do not remember that makes us long for the unknown. When one migrates, the change of landscape offers a variety of new smells. If smells trigger the memory, changing the smellscape may cause a loss of connection to one's identity, memory, and emotions related to past smells. I wonder about what we forget only because we do not have access to those common, daily but somewhat particular, combinations of smells.

I am originally from Thailand. Moving to the Netherlands was one of the most challenging things I have ever done. The country felt like an extremely clean and sterile environment, which added to the severity of my homesickness. There are no smells that make me feel at rest. In fact, I did not smell anything at all when I first arrived in the Netherlands. If lack of smell causes one to lose a previous sense of belonging and selfhood, how can we bring back the smells from our past and use them to help revisit our experiences and process our internal struggles?



A small bottle of cooling oil has been my companion for the past year. I suddenly adopted the habit of rubbing this oil on my lower neck, shoulders, and chest area close to my heart. It smells familiar. After waves of extreme homesickness, this might just be another coping mechanism I have developed. One night, I started massaging my neck with the oil and a memory reel suddenly hit me — just like in a movie. I had such a clear vision of my grandmother laying on a soft mat as the family masseuse gave her a back massage. I barely looked at them out of awkwardness, but I smelt the cooling oil. My grandmother and I used to shower together when I was a little kid, and after the shower she would apply the oil on her body.

This cooling oil appeared again in my life around the time that my grandmother passed away. It was only a year later that I realised that I use this oil to ease my mind: to bear the guilt of not being with my grandmother in her last moments, nor saying goodbye or taking part in her funeral. I use it to remember her, to feel closer to her, and to help process the loss at my own pace. The muscle ache and the smell of the cooling oil remind me that loss and grief are parts of growth and that growth can be painful.

Fortunately, I remember the cooling oil; but what smells have I forgotten? I keep wondering what I forgot, what we as a diasporic community forgot because we do not have access to some of the past familiar smells. Furthermore, I am curious to find the connection I may have with others through what smell memories can evoke.

I had a few conversations with people using smells as a guiding medium. After explaining my hypothesis and a short introduction, we started by sniffing samples of smell material such as tinctures, cosmetic products, or dried fruit which are present in a form of liquid, paste, or powder, and exchange thoughts.

One of the conversations I had was with Lotte. We were colleagues for two years in a cafe that serves Japanese desserts, cakes, and drinks. More than half of the employees are Asian. I worked as a baker in this place for a year when Lotte joined the team. To me, she looked like a typical, cool-looking, Dutch person. She was a little shy at first, but I soon discovered that she was a vibrant person who loved art and Southeast Asian-inspired music. I am well aware that we also need to work for money, yet, a small part of me wonders why out of the many cafes in Rotterdam, she chose to work at this one. We sat on the cushions opposite each other, bottles and packages of smelling material laying on the table between us.

PN Pitchaya Ngamcharoen (PN) What was your childhood like, Lotte? I'm asking in general, since we all have such different experiences. How was it for you?

Lotte (L) I'm born and raised in the Netherlands. My parents are both Dutch. They worked a lot, but they worked from home. Two to three days a week, we had a babysitter. She was like a second mother to me. Her name was Joy, and she was from Thailand. I really liked going to her house. I went there until I was twelve. During school breaks, we would eat at her house. It was just five minutes from my home.

PN Did she cook for you? Do you remember if you had a favourite meal?

L Always. She was always in the kitchen cooking. She always cooked warm food for me so I grew up with a warm meal for lunch every day. Her chicken recipe was delicious but I don't know what it's called. It was a sort of fried chicken. It was so good. She also always made fried prawns that came with a sauce; a sweet and spicy sauce.

PN Prawn is big in Thai and many other Asian cultures. We use dried, fresh and fermented ones to turn them into a sauce. Then we put this sauce into different dishes. Anyways, aside from Joy, did you have another nanny?

L No, it was just Joy and her kids, who were like second sisters to me. My sister and I were around five or six years old. When Joy and her husband travelled, they would bring their kids to our house. They felt like family to me.

PN Was it a completely Thai family or was it a Thai lady and a Dutch person?

L It was a Thai lady and a Dutch husband.

PN Did they also cook Western food?

L Not really because she is the one who cooks. Her dream was to have a restaurant but it didn't happen.

PN I see. Try smelling this, you might recognise it.



L Not really.

PN Maybe this one?



L Ahh yeah, I remember this, what is this?

PN It's Kaffir lime leaf. It's in the family of

lime. We use many parts of the plant: the fruit, the skin of the fruit contains a lot of oil, and we put the leaf in many of our meals. It's a tough leaf so we don't eat it but it's for the smell.

PN Did they also join your family for the holidays? Where did you and your family usually spend your holidays?

L No, usually the holiday was only with my own family. We went to resorts. My parents are architects so they will just walk around to look at buildings, go to museums, and see other cultural things. I would get so annoyed. It was very boring for me at the time, but now I'm really grateful that I got to see those weird buildings and travel the world.



L It smells a bit like when I was on holiday in Bali but I do not know what it is.

PN This is a modern version of Thai scented water. It is used as perfume. It is made out of different types of tropical flowers and some herbs. Jasmine and Ylang-ylang are the strongest notes here.

L It really smells like what I smelt in Bali. It's like a vacation with my parents — we went to Singapore and then we went to Bali. I have been to a lot of places but in Singapore, just the humidity itself is hard to handle. On the first day, everybody was very frustrated because breathing was so hard, but after two days it became normal.

PN I remember the time I was in Malaysia and Singapore. I was wondering how I could survive...haha.. hmm ok maybe you will be familiar with this actually.



L Yeah, I remember it from Thailand.

PN From Joy?

L Yeah, this is from her, from my babysitter.

PN It's a cooling powder. In Thailand, when it is very hot, people put it on your body after showering. It's like talc and camphor. When it's mixed with a bit of water and you have the wind blowing on your body, oh my god, it's so cool that it's painful.

L Haha sounds good. Good to remember for my next trip maybe?

L Oh yeah, that is so weird to smell it again.



PN Have you used it?

L No, but I know that she always used it. The smell is like her smell so that is very weird. What is it?

PN It is a tiger balm.

L She used it a lot.

PN Do you know that every culture has this magical miracle cure/medicine? In Indonesia, there is an herbal mix, *Tolakangin*, that is believed to cure everything. And for example, when you don't feel good in your belly, there

is a saying that “you have the wind in your stomach” and they will advise you to drink this. Many countries around the Mediterranean Sea have an olive oil culture that is believed to cure everything. For Thais, it is Tiger balm. Maybe that’s why she also used it here. Do you still see her these days?

L No



L What is it?

PN It’s a powder that we put on the face. It’s known to be good for your skin, and cure pimples and rashes.

L Can I smell it again? It smells so strong. It’s funny. I totally forgot about this powder, but now I remember.

PN Did Joy use to put it on her face?

L Yes, I remember me being a kid and Joy would sit in her little chair. She applied this kind of powder to her face.

PN Does she put it on her kids’ faces as well?

L No, I don’t think so, just on herself.

PN This kind of thing sometimes is nostalgic provoking, for memory and also for comfort.

L It’s a bit of a painful situation. Although I still see her children a lot, I do not see her anymore. Her children have their own kids now, but something happened to Joy. I think she fell on her head. She no longer wanted to be in society and she closed herself off. Her husband didn’t encourage her enough to

bike again so now she sits at home. It is sad.

PN Can you reach out to her?

L I have tried. I think it was so hard for her to come to The Netherlands. Her husband didn’t teach her enough Dutch so my sister and I tried to teach her new Dutch words. She can speak some Dutch but not much. Her children studied Dutch. I think her husband should have tried to encourage her a little bit more. Her dream was to go back to Thailand and have her own restaurant there. They were planning to go but then she fell and the plan didn’t happen.

PN Is Joy still in The Netherlands these days?

L Yes. I think they will go to Thailand next year. They signed on a house so they will live there for half a year and here for half a year. It has been hard because her children now have children and they don’t want to visit her because it’s too far away. They also do not reach out to her that much.

PN That is sad. Moving here, especially if you come alone, is difficult. And if she doesn’t work outside of the family then she’s pretty closed off from society in general.

L I also heard from her adult children that when they were younger, and they visited their Dutch grandparents, they were quite unwelcoming and discriminatory against them. They would say “oh you guys are so dumb” and stuff like that, but they are so far from dumb. First of all, what an inconsiderate thing to say. Second, one of the girls did three studies at university in law, business, and economics. She teaches Latin and

Greek in addition to other jobs...
So she did three studies and all
that at one time. I think something
went wrong with Joy and her
family. So that's really sad. I don't
know their full history but it has
been hard on them. Anyhow, it's
nice to smell and look back a bit
and remember.

Maybe it is a moment like this one when smells can lead the conversation, restore memories and discover connections we did not know exist? It is by coincidence that I was able to have this conversation with Lotte. I did not know that she had a Thai babysitter whom she loves and cherishes as her second mother. But looking back now, I clearly see the traces of small factors that brought us to the same place. There are a few smells that we have in common although we share experiences with different places, times and events. We both somehow had lost connection and daily access to smells that reminded us of these joyous yet considerably painful experiences. Sometimes it is easier to ignore one's own negative emotions but its remaining effects would still cause conflictual sensations — many times resulting in actions we do not yet understand. Having the chance to smell these scents again, allows Lotte and I to reconnect with our memories and emotions which may have taken part in our decision-making without notice. Emotions are always communicated to us through our physical symptoms and one of the first steps to decoding what these signals or symptoms are trying to tell us is to remember.

Pitchaya Ngamcharoen is a storyteller, a cook and an artist. Her work focuses on the obscure area of overlapping inhabitants and how the sense of smell plays a crucial role in it. Ngamcharoen's research investigates the olfactory sense through the act of cleaning and the history of hygiene in relation to orientation, territory, group formation and deodorisation as a method of colonisation.

