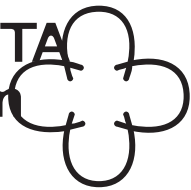
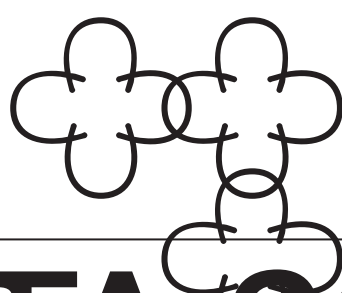
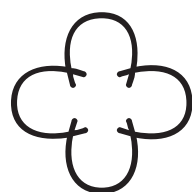
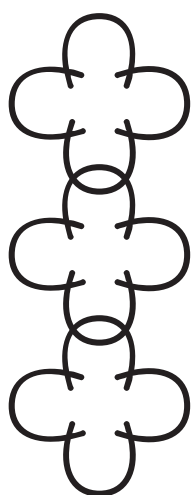
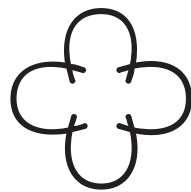
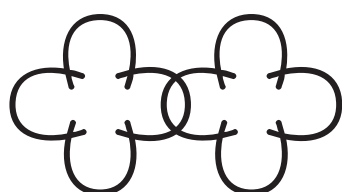
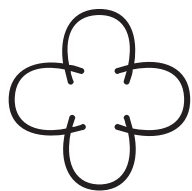
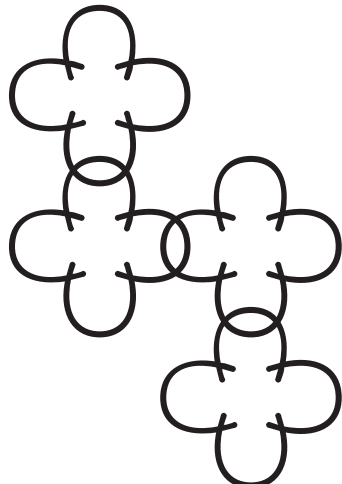
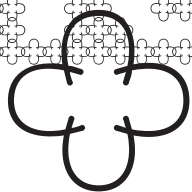
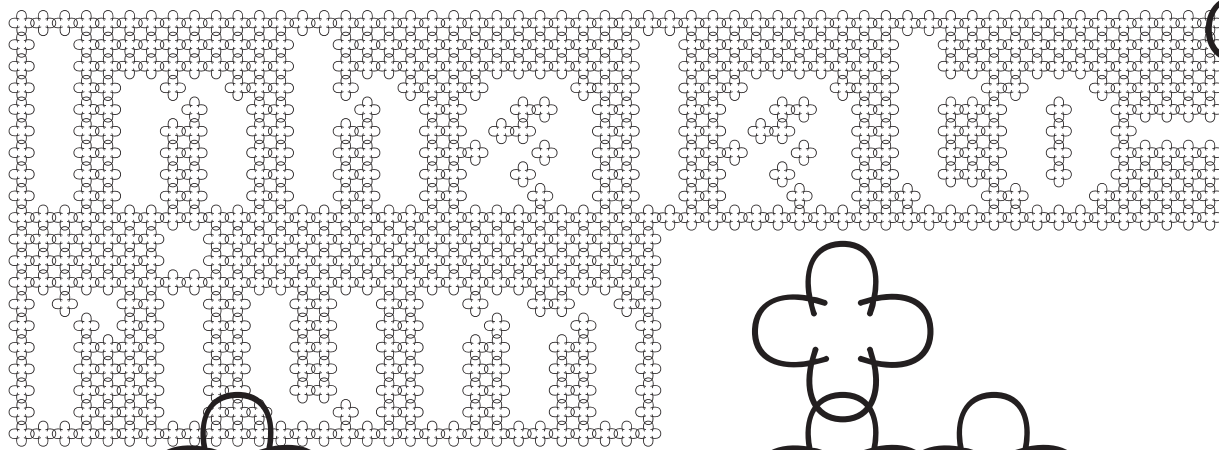
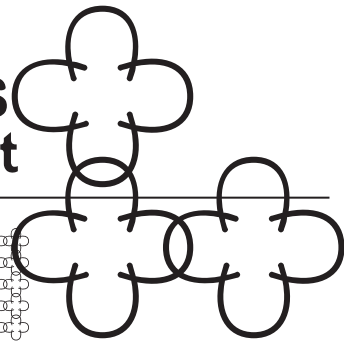


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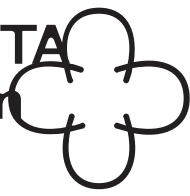


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OLFACTORY
Sumaya Kassim

SUMMARY: A scent archivist is leaving a recording for her replacement. Through her collection of scents she tells her life story on the day her lungs (and sense of smell) are being removed. She has so far been spared this because of her profession. Themes of migration, climate change, the environment, air travel and scent as memory.

AMAL shuffles through her laboratory. She looks anxious and distracted. A menagerie of colourful diffusers, shisha or hookahs, incense sticks, perfume bottles and incense sticks in the background in cabinets. The lab is old, post-soviet vibes, brutalist in design. Fluorescent lighting flickers. A door with bars and a security code. A recording device is sat in the middle of a table. AMAL is the narrator to the story and is in the background throughout, watching, as her memories play out.

AMAL:

Today is an important day. They're coming for me soon. I'm leaving this for the next person, my replacement, whoever you are. Temperature control is paramount, of course. The controls are by the door. We are a repository for scents. We lease them to organisations for people who have undergone the procedure and which to simulate scents for the scent-blind. Hospitals. Certain spas. Rehab units.

Loud knocks on the door.

GUARD:

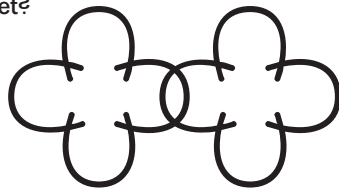
Are you done in there yet?

AMAL:

Nearly!

GUARD:

Hurry it up.



AMAL:

They tell me you're from outside the city so perhaps a history lesson might be useful. This place, the doorway to the forest, once had rivers running through it. Würm, Nagold and Enz. A long time ago people would ride logs like horses on the water. Floßerei. Taking the wood into cities far away so a little piece of the forest can be found everywhere if you know here to look.

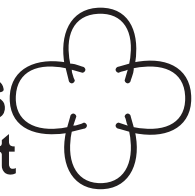
Here there are woody scents – pine, beech, elm – and river scents. But some of the items are more personal than you'd expect of a government facility.

Guard knocks the door. She takes a deep breath.

Breathe in for four counts and then hold for four and then release for four. My father taught me that. He was a scientist. One of the engineers they brought here to start work on the local people. The first few experiments were failures. They chose old people. Poor people. It was only when they chose younger subjects that it started to work. He never told me how many ended in failure. The only drawback is that people die young. Thirty. Thirty five.

Scientists came from all over the world. Actually, that was when he met my mother. Love at first sight. She was a perfumer. She made scents like this one.

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AMAL picks up a small bottle of a'atar or perfume and inhales.

Jasmine. Threaded through with musk and neem. Traditional. Timeless. Jasmine threaded through hair and around women's necks. Memories.

AMAL puts closes the bottle and puts it down.

Anyway. Then there was the industrial revolution. Margrave Karl-Friedrich built a clock factory and employed orphans and later they made jewellery. The walls were black with soot but the necklaces and gentleman's watches shone prettily. Gold everywhere. This was my mother's favourite perfume bottle, made here in the city. She always said it was the loveliest thing she owned, a gift from my father.

She came as a student to join her two older brothers. They were in their final years at Stuttgart. When she arrived, they expected her to clean and cook.

The exact scent of an aircraft. Recycled air. Food in foil and, faintly, cologne.

AISHA is sat at an airplane window, looking out. She smiles and mouths 'thank you' to an invisible flight attendant. She gets up and gets her rucksack from under her chair and walks, slouching slightly, and looks around wide eyed.

When she came here, I think she lost herself a little. She'd call her family every night and then every week and then every few months. They were living life outside her. They looked at her differently: They thought she was rich now even though she lived in a house with flatmates and was struggling to find work. She cleaned houses on the weekend and worked as a waitress in a small café.

AISHA sits back on the chair, talks on a phone, visibly sighs. She gets up and wipes down the lab table with a rag. STEFAN takes the seat and mouths his order.

That time in her life smelled like carpet cleaner, cling film sandwiches, and loneliness. She met my dad at the café she worked at.

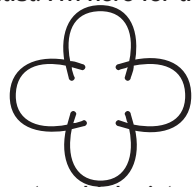
AISHA and STEFAN talk. STEFAN is clearly trying to impress AISHA.

STEFAN:

I work in one of the labs. I'm a scientist. I'm here for the forest and the factories.

AISHA:

That's an interesting combination.



STEFAN:

Pforzheim is a special place for a quantum biologist.

AISHA:

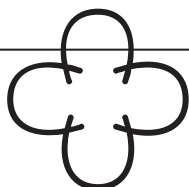
What are you working on exactly?

STEFAN:

I can't go into too much detail. Top secret. But it's to do with tackling air pollution from the root of the problem.

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AISHA:
So cars?

STEFAN:
No. Lungs.

They continue to talk silently. STEFAN is animated.

There was something nostalgic about him. He reminded her of her dad who was also full of revolutionary zeal. Men like these, for better or for worse, never stopped being boys. He showed her the city as a man who had left and then returned. Pforzheim as post-war experiment. Pforzheim as a city build by ingenuity, opportunity – all of the things that made the industrial revolution great: ingenuity, opportunity and technology. He didn't see the brutalist architecture as ugly anymore than he saw the cheap labour as ugly.

She listened, a little awestruck. At night, she was sure she could hear the march of the Rasslers coming from all around. Perhaps she could believe in this dream of the past, this dream of the future. Lungs that didn't need air.

Furious knocking at the door.

Sometimes I try to understand what drew them together. Especially after what happened, the pain they caused each other. I guess it's easy to focus on how different they were. She was an Arab barely scraping by with nobody, really, but herself. And he was a successful, middle class Bavarian man whose future glowed in gold and green.

Maybe it's like with perfume: Contrasts just work sometimes. Like when a perfumer mixed cherry and lavender, feminine and masculine scents that you wouldn't think would go well, and yet, somehow, it works. Sexy. Rich. Evocative. One of the most popular scents of all time, Mon Guerlain. Maybe they saw in each other an opportunity or a dream.

AISHA and STEFAN walk hand in hand.

They'd walk through the forest and talk.

STEFAN:
All around us is the best oxygen on Earth, available to all and it's cheap.

AISHA laughs.

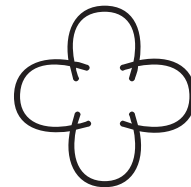
STEFAN:
I'm serious. We just have to believe that people can be better engineered. We can't wait for evolution. We have the technology to change ourselves to change the world. We just need the politicians to believe us and then we can all breathe freely.

AISHA:
Sometimes I wonder what hope would smell like.

STEFAN:
You're such a romantic.

AISHA:
It would smell different depending on whether it was in colder

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climes or warmer ones: Your position globally would make you taste hope differently, wouldn't it?

STEFAN:
If twenty or thirty percent of each city's population had the procedure, things would change, would get better. It would have a global effect. Everything that happens in the forest, happens everywhere else.

AMAL:
For better or for worse. Aren't you worried you're playing God?

STEFAN:
If we don't do something now not even God can save us. He left us to it sometime ago.

STEFAN lets go of her hand and exits. Two little girls, ANISA and YOUNG AMAL enter. They hold hands and dance around AISHA.

AMAL:
My mother wasn't an ardent believer, but she didn't agree with him. Sometimes she took me and my sister Anisa to the mosque – the one which, every now and then, gets bomb threats – and sat and prayed whist we ran wild in the women's section.

ANISA and YOUNG AMAL run around playfully, mess with perfume objects on the set, one of them pretend hovers. AISHA sits on her heels and cups her hand to pray or make du'aa.

A'atar and carpet cleaner and lemon bleach. She'd call her family each night and listen to them talk about a life she knew, once, about the neighbours' goat escaping, the illnesses plaguing a family nearby, the air that was increasingly becoming unbreathable.

YOUNG AMAL and ANISA lie next to AISHA, their heads in her lap, as AISHA sits at the phone again.

AISHA:
I can't just bring someone over. I wish I could, but there's paperwork. It would be too difficult. Okay, habibti. Send salam to everyone. Yalla, ma'asalama.

STEFAN enters.

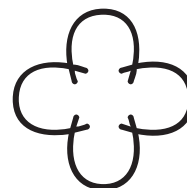
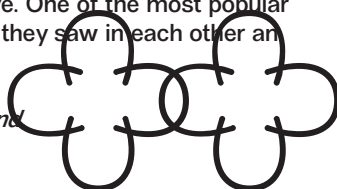
STEFAN:
How are they?

AISHA:
My sister is asking for me to bring her son here. He won't stop coughing. She has daughters but it's always the sons they care about.

STEFAN:
I mean, we could –

AISHA:
No. Don't even say it. If he came here and stopped praying or got injured or worse, they'd curse me. Even if the paperwork wasn't an issue, I wouldn't do it.

YOUNG AMAL and ANISA get up and exit. STEFAN exits. AISHA gets up and wipes the lab table with a cloth again.



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AMAL:

When we were old enough to go to school, she went back to work at a shisha café. She served people black coffees. Cardamom, bitterness, amaretto biscuits. Eventually there would be no coffee shop. Why would you spend seven euros on a coffee you couldn't smell or taste?

AISHA pours thick black liquid from a silver pot into a small cup. AMAL picks this up and sips it. AISHA tops it up.

She chatted with customers. She was charming, charismatic. My dad hated it. He said it was because men stared at her, but I think he didn't like that she had her own life. She replaced the small, synthetic cubes with her own homemade concoctions. She'd come home and bake an incense "cake". Bakhoor: black and pitted with pieces of wood.

AISHA uses the distillation machine, pouring the black liquid of the coffee into the machine and extracting liquid of pure gold. She puts this to her nose, breathes in and sighs happily, pure bliss on her face.

It became a way for her to talk about herself. Her past. Once, as she was baking the inedible cake which smelled of smoke but also, somehow, of the forests, she told me she was married before. To a bad man. A teacher. She was his student. There were so many questions I had for her but I was too young to know what those questions were. She'd bake cake from the wood of the Black Forest. Here...

She picks up a hexagonal box and lifts it to her nose.

Bakhoor. Smoke. Dense pine. Mixed with oud, frankincense, sandalwood. Earth. Smoke. Its own kind of magic.

AISHA exits. YOUNG AMAL and ANISA enter hand in hand, walking.

I was thirteen when we went to the forests alone and breathed in the wet, wet air, our lungs burning. Birdsong. Mulch. It was the same year surgeons found tiny pieces of plastic in patients' lungs. Colourful as the balls in a children's ball pit. It was the same year Dyson developed a single person's air purifier.

They pick up colourful leaves and throw them in the air and then lie down to make "snow angels".

But we weren't thinking about air quality or our lungs or our planet. You can never really see the big picture when you are in a forest. When you are in a forest your thinking changes. You belong to something more ancient. Forest time. You become fairy. You become old woman. You become the young woman running barefoot silently.

They run around, play hide and seek. YOUNG AMAL and AMAL stops and looks up.

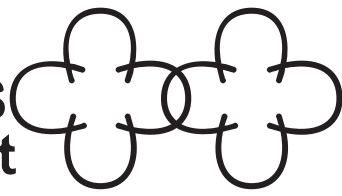
I closed my eyes and when I opened them I could see the air. It was multi-coloured, pink and lilac and pastel green and yellow. Just like the dyed smoke of my mother's workplace. Like that old Disney movie, Dumbo, with the pink elephants.

On our way back, we stumbled across tourists with wide hopeful

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eyes who were trying to heal. People came from all over the world to heal their wounds, physical or emotional, taking in the oxygen rich air, whetting their throats, clearing their minds. Some even carried jars to capture the air and take it with them, back to wherever their home was.

ANISA stands up and walks slowly to the table. She gets on it and lies still. STEFAN enters wearing scrubs and a mask, helpless.

Anisa was one of the first. She turned sixteen. My father tried to stop it. He thought his prestige could protect us. But they told him it was safe and that it would look great to the press, for a scientist's daughter to undergo the procedure.

It was a huge success. She took to the new lungs perfectly. But there was one seemingly insignificant side effect. A year or so after the procedure, patients lost their sense of smell. Another oddity was that the procedure only really worked if it was done whilst the patients were young. Sixteen was the perfect age, not too young, not too old. In a year's time, it would be my turn.

The first few thousand operations were considered a success. It was a great experiment. Many scientists called for us to study the lives of people with their new bioengineered lungs and modified hearts, but this was deemed overly cautious. With this new technology, we could just replace the lungs once they'd gotten worn out. No more sudden deaths due to pollution. And these new lungs produced oxygen and did not produce as much carbon dioxide.

Except, behind the scenes, things started to go wrong.

ANISA gets off the table and walks backward into the background until she is just a shadow. Each step is slow and deliberate as AMAL speaks.

We saw it in Anisa. She started to fade away. My mother was convinced it was because she lost her sense of smell. She wasn't the only one who took her own life.

AISHA is at the distillation apparatus again, mixing liquids. AISHA steps backwards until she is next to ANISA's shadowy figure. They hold hands.

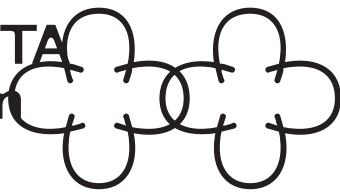
She never forgave him. After Anisa was gone, she refused to talk to him. My mother walked into the forest and never returned. Sometimes I think she went back home. Sometimes I think she lay there and waited for the black trees to envelop her.

He managed to delay my procedure somehow – he had put in a special application for me to be trained as a scientist. It was my mother's idea: They let me keep my lungs so that I could engineer scents. I think they first thought it would be to get people their ability to smell. Boutique experiences where we plugged people up to computers, attached nodes to their heads and voila, they could smell whatever they wanted!

AMAL puts on a mask. STEFAN and AMAL stand over the table. He produces a translucent, lung shaped gel object.

When I was at university, I sat in on an operation. The boy on the table was sixteen. The operation was mandated: Unless you had powerful friends or family or an underlying health condition, you

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were going to get the “mechanical lungs“, as we called them. They weren’t really mechanical. They were bluish and gel like, like jelly fish, gloopy in a kidney shaped bowl. Attaching it to the chest cavity and to the oesophagus was complex but it had gotten easier over time. They were mechanical only in that they were all sponsored by the car companies.

Maybe it was because I became a scientist like him. Maybe it was because he had lost everything but his job. He decided to tell me the truth.

STEFAN mouths the words behind his mask as AMAL speaks.

There are always two operations: One where they removed the lungs, replacing them with a biomechanical version, and one in the next room where another person was waiting to receive those young boy’s lungs. Rich elderly people. Important people. Whose lungs had been ruined by the inferior air quality.

STEFAN:

...Pforzheim is the perfect place to recover. And just because people die young after the mechanical lung procedure – we have an overpopulation problem anyway. Two birds. One stone.

AMAL takes off the mask and STEFAN steps away, several feet apart from ANISA and AISHA. AMAL stands at the distillation apparatus.

AMAL:

He never told her that it was only days before the war that his great grandmother fell and broke her hip at the border and waited for either the Swiss or the Nazis to find her.

So, I became a scent archivist. At first, I only did what they asked of me. I kept scents on file and recreated them for those who could afford it. Maybe scents are just chemicals finding their way to receptors, igniting the brain, unlocking something. But I believe scent is taste plus memory. Scent is touch for the soul. Each scent is a perfect jewel, perfectly crafted, for each person’s soul.

I’ll be honest and tell you that I believe they knew what they were doing when they walled up the forests. Why else would they request I make this?

She lifts a bottle and smells its contents.

Part of the collection here are the different scents of each forest from around the world. The ones you can’t experience anymore. But the Black forest will always be my favourite. Fresh and clean and yet still comforting somehow. For everyone, still, even after all this time. This is what the forest smelled like.

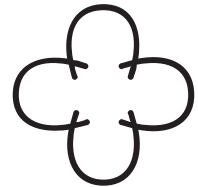
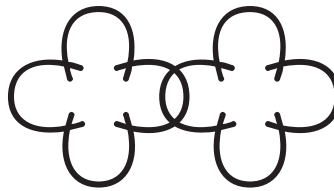
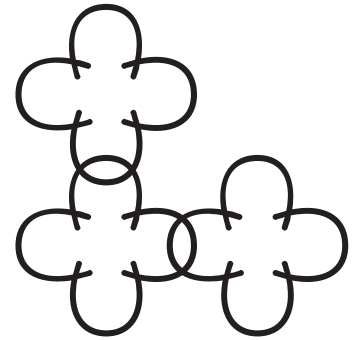
Furious knocking at the door.

AMAL:

I knew they’d come for me eventually but you just get used to living day in, day out. And I’ve avoided it for so many years. I’m twenty six. Makes you wonder if my lungs are good enough for transplant. But it’s been good to remain whole this long. Maybe you’ll get lucky too.

I wish you the best of luck in your new position.

The End



BIO: Sumaya Kassim (she/her) is a writer and curator based in the UK. She writes fiction, art criticism and essays about her obsessions: The environment, colonial legacies, museums, families, secrets and the gothic. Her work has been published widely, including at *The Good Journal*, *The Happy Hypocrite*, *Media Diversified* and at the Sandberg Institute’s *The Place of Birth*. She is prose editor at *Middleground*, a literary magazine for creatives of mixed heritage. She is currently working on a variety of film scripts and a novel. @_SumayaKassim