

# Three Samples from DECANTS

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COGNOSCENTI: Germaine Cellier

*Verde que te quiero verde.*

– Federico García Lorca

Germaine Cellier, foremost female “nose,” a woman working in perfumery when all perfumers were Master, not mistress, despite women’s more sensitive sense of scent. Germaine – meaning “German,” a Frankish people – was born in Bordeaux to a would-be Bohemian artist and a melancholy herbalist.

Alchemical, she discovered a natural ability with formulas and structures, how chemistry + narrative = perfume, how a story grabs you with its top notes but engages you with its heart, all the while the base notes provide a satisfying backdrop of setting and scene. She debuted producing basenotes for DuPont in the *cellier*, the storeroom. Then came the Great War.

Then afterwards, a regrowth, as of new green germinating. The Forties a fertile era for her, though she budded best on her own unwilling to work with the male perfumers, she was granted her own lab where, unlike those who composed perfumes according to charts, she flung fragrance like a Fauve, adding ingredients by the ladleful, painting notes in expressionist colors, where juxtaposed components fight and fuck within your nose. An aggression of aroma. A dissonance of scent.

Germaine means “armed.” In ‘44, her *Bandit* strong-armed its way on the scene with its nose-searing 1% quinoline, the leathery bitterness a kiss she blew “to the dykes.” Then

*Vent Vert’s* gale-force, the

galbanum galvanizing,

its stun-gun of green.

‘48’s *Fracas* “for the femmes,” a buzz up the nose of buttery tuberose – but Germaine means “loud” and it’s not a room – clearer for naught. And *Jolie Madame*, a leather so green it hurts the head to contemplate even as you swoon. Green her germ, her cell, her scented vernacular.

She was famous, while composing her fragrances, for chainsmoking Gauloises and consuming quantities of garlic, breakfasting on sardines. Germaine, loud and outspoken, swore fluently and wore fluid Cossack pants, though ne’er a brassiere.

Eventually so much incendiary scent, chemicals, and inhaled smoke germinated in the cells of her lungs, inflamed them, burning off what remained of greenness. What’s green smokes most. What’s germane are the perfumes that remain, encellared, precious. The smell, indelible, pervades everything.

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## THE LOVE FOR THREE ORANGES

In 1918, Prokofiev wrote *The Love for Three Oranges*, a surrealist opera-ballet featuring figures from *Commedia del’arte* – a comic absurdity, an earnest satire – fairy princesses popping out of giant oranges as if cocooned. A 1988 production added to the music, dance, and visual spectacle, distributing scratch-and-sniff cards scented to accompany the story at various points: a whiff of sulfur for a gunshot, a fart by the Fool Truffaldino, and the scent of oranges.

Now, the fourth wall, bro –

ken completely by language,

its utter attempts.

*Aether’s Love for Three Oranges* [2015]

Inspired by the scratch-and-sniff cards at Prokofiev’s opera, Amber Jobin created a scent to encompass all three aspects of orange: fruit, blossom, and tree. Wearing it, I become

bird, concealed among

glossy leaves in an orange tree  
 abloom and fruiting.

*Serge Lutens' Fleurs d'Oranger* [1995]

Sweetness of blossoms  
 paired with salty, sunwarmed skin:  
 hot flesh after sex.

*L'Artisan Parfumeur's Seville à L'Aube* [2012]

A perfume blogger and perfumer collaborated to create this erotic scent-memory: embracing a Spanish lover under orange trees brimming with bees during a Holy Week procession.

I'm a perfume collector, and my son Wyatt is irresistibly attracted to my many bottles and samples, loves sniffing their contents alongside me. While not a connoisseur of the orientals and leather scents I prefer, he's partial to florals, orange blossom and jasmine in particular. He often pleads for a spritz. I often grant it. We choose a bottle—his tastes are young, and he's swayed by a flashy *flacon* or brightly-colored juice—say, *Seville à L'Aube*, an orange fluid in a dramatic octagonally-cut glass bottle. I uncap it, spray him lightly. I spray myself too, and we enjoy the greeny orange blossom scent warmed with honey as I rub my arms against his, perfuming him, marking him with my scent like an animal, making him mine.

I say, *Tell the bees*  
*my heart overflows with*  
*sorrowful wax.*

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*DJEDI* [1926]

Someone scores a priceless bottle, vintage 1927, offers a sample: just a drop or two at the bottom of a tiny tube, sold for a princely sum. Which you spend.

It arrives. For days, you only gaze at it, attempt to

sniff it through the glass, up near the stopper, to avoid opening it, using it up. You read what little description is available to prepare yourself, so when the time comes, you can attempt to appreciate it on as many levels as possible before it vanishes, gone forever.

Created by Jacques Guerlain, inspired by the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb, and named for an Egyptian magician famed for resurrecting the dead, *Djedi* is stark departure, alien, anti-Guerlain, sucked dry of all voluptuary, what Roja Dove described as "the driest perfume of all time."

And so, you select a humid night to extend the scent, and apply it.

Mineral. Medicinal. Smoke curling from a stone bowl at the limbic, liminal doorway to a tomb. Outside, the smell of dry, reedy vetiver carried on a hot wind blowing over sunbaked bones. And something animalic—a jackal, sinuous in the background. The fumes an ephemeral ghost raised briefly from the past.

And though you stay awake as long as possible, you descend to dreams, disquieted. In the morning, *Djedi* has dissipated like smoke:

distant country  
 you can never again visit,  
 sunk beneath the sand.