

# ON SCENTED THINGS

INTRODUCTION BY JEHANNE DUBROW

*The Book of Scented Things* began, as so many books do, with an obsession. I had fallen in love with perfume, not just with the scope and variety of fragrances available in modern perfumery—roses and orange blossoms and orchids and chemical compounds never smelled in any garden—but with the bright packaging, the glass and crystal bottles, the gilded language of marketing.

I became a follower of perfume blogs with elegant, textured names like *Bois de Jasmin* and *Grain de Musc*. I read books about the art and science of the field, Chandler Burr's *The Perfect Scent* and *The Emperor of Scent*, Luca Turin's *The Secret of Scent*, and Denyse Beaulieu's *The Perfume Lover*. I learned that I was a *perfumista* or a *fumer*. I joined an invitation-only Facebook page where members discuss their "scent of the day" and exchange information about their latest purchases, finds, and passions. I discovered that experts in the art of constructing and deconstructing scent use a vocabulary that has much in common with the study of literature. They speak of perfume as if it were a narrative, a text to be read through the nose. Top notes pull us into the story, heart notes add complexity, tension, even conflict, and base notes offer resolution. And perfume, like literature, can seem formulaic when summarized; the fragrance pyramid used at every Macy's and Bloomingdale's to hawk the latest flanker of Viktor&Rolf's Flowerbomb resembles the dramatic structure most of us studied in grade school: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement.

My bathroom vanity now looked like the display counter of some out-of-the-way shop in Paris. I seemed to favor scents from small perfume companies, what are known as *niche*, not mass-produced with celebrity spokesmen, but handmade products, often with narrow audiences. My tastes in perfume mirrored my tastes in books; niche houses are the small poetry presses of the perfume world. I preferred the quiet, adventurous work of a niche brand over the latest fragrance release from a pop star, a bubble-gum eau de toilette perky with peaches, frangipani, and vanilla musk. Perhaps, as a poet accustomed to hearing rumors of the impending death of poetry, it's natural that I should root for the small, boutique perfumers, the underdogs, who are sometimes less constrained by market pressures and more able to focus on the craft of perfume-making.

Working with my friend and colleague, Lindsay Lusby (a poet herself), I came up with the idea of *The Book of Scented Things* as a way to bring together two esoteric, often misunderstood art forms. Both perfume and poetry work on the senses to create persuasive illusions, both require craft, a study of tradition, as well as a need for innovation, and both are frequently dismissed as old-fashioned or irrelevant in contemporary society.

We began by contacting American poets, writers who had published at least one collection, who might be willing to write under deadline, and who wouldn't be frightened away by the strangeness of the experiment. We were surprised to discover how many other poets already recognized the fleeting, narrative pleasures of scent. For instance, Elisa Gabbert has written columns on the subject for *Lucky Magazine* and *Open Letters Monthly*.

Jeannine Hall Gailey once managed a small perfume boutique. Moira Egan and Erin Belieu are self-described perfume nerds. Even some of those poets who had little prior knowledge or interest in fragrance, admitted that the writing project sounded weird or wild enough to be worth a try. *I'll do my best*, they told us.

Every poet who agreed to participate received an individually selected vial of perfume. We decanted fragrances into glass bottles no bigger than a thumbprint. This one would go to Jericho Brown. This one to Carmen Giménez Smith. Soon, the Rose O'Neill Literary House stank, a cacophony of twenty, thirty, forty perfumes filling all of our offices, the building more evocative of bordello than of cultural center.

Each scent we selected was meant to reflect the poet's particular aesthetic or voice or writerly obsessions. This was not science but intuition. We asked ourselves odd questions like, *If Laura Kasischke were a flower what would she smell like? What's the spice of a Matthew Zapruder line break? Is a Rachel Hadas poem an orchard or a temple?* While we believe all of the anthology's poems are able to stand alone, distinct from their scented inspirations, we've included a "matchmaking" section at the back of the book, listing the poets and the perfumes with which they were paired.

Along with a small bottle of scent, we gave each contributor these instructions: *Please, write a poem that engages with or responds to the fragrance that we have sent you.* We said the poem could be an interpretation of the scent, a memory, a series of associations, or some entirely different kind of interaction with the fragrance. We told the contributors to wear the perfume or sprinkle it on their

pillows or just sniff the scent in its glass vial—whatever might work best for the writing process.

Months later, as poems arrived from across the country and we started organizing the anthology, certain themes emerged: pungent *ars poeticas*, poems about the sense of smell and the act of sniffing, poems that used scent to meditate on the philosophical and the spiritual, poems about the relationship between fragrance and place, Proustian poems about childhood, poems about the musks of the body (particularly of the female body), and finally poems about love, desire, and the redolence of longing. We numbered each poem in the anthology to reflect the way that perfumers often number distinct attempts at or versions of a scent.

In addition to the hundred poems that comprise *The Book of Scented Things*, we also asked Alyssa Harad—memoirist, essayist, and blogger—to write a preface to the anthology. Harad, author of *Coming to My Senses: A Story of Perfume, Pleasure, and an Unlikely Bride*, is not only a collector of fragrance but she is also a trained literary scholar with a doctoral degree in literature of witness. Her preface makes explicit the many implicit connections between perfume and poetry, between lovers of scent and lovers of language.

Every poem in *The Book of Scented Things* began with a tiny glass bottle of perfume. Many of these fragrances came from my own collection. But Penny Lane Perfumes—a niche shop in Rehobeth Beach, Delaware, which recently closed its doors—provided the project with dozens of other samples. And, Charina Ethier, the nose behind Providence Perfume Co., donated several

samples of her handmade, natural perfumes as well.

*The Book of Scented Things* was conceived of, edited, and produced at the Literary House Press, which is the publishing arm of the Rose O'Neill Literary House, a center of the arts at Washington College, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. While the Literary House Press has a nearly 30-year history of publishing fine letterpress broadsides and books, *The Book of Scented Things* is the Press's first trade paperback. Lindsay and I oversaw all stages of the book's construction, but we also looked to Owen Bailey for help with its marketing and promotion. Samantha Gross, the 2014 Literary House Press Intern, assisted with the time-consuming process of proofing every page in the anthology. Carla Echevarria is responsible for the book's striking cover design. And, of course, *The Book of Scented Things* could not have come together without all the poets who agreed to lift those miniature bottles from their tissue paper wrappings, who unscrewed the tiny black lids, and then, who eventually found the words to name that presence, that body, that story misting in the air.