

Lena Eltang

BLACKBERRY SHOOT

Translated by Polly Gannon

Pp 31-41

Notes by Oscar Theo Forge

London, October twenty-fourth

I finally started work on the Maltese papers.

In general, as was to be expected, they are made up of monastic chronicles, letters, and handwritten accounts.

Among the papers I came upon a pharmaceutical reference book, as well as a copy of David Lagneus' teachings, *Harmonia seu Consensus Philosophorum Chemicorum*.

The pharmaceutical book is a real beauty. The print is in two colors, leather bound, the book's spine and cover also leather. The frontispiece is an etching. A manuscript or letter, alchemical as far as I could tell from its contents, was inserted into the leaves of the text. It would be good to translate a few pages to make certain though.

The beginning of the manuscript is missing altogether, but judging from what appears to be the colophon it would seem that it was written by one Brother Joannes—not a very original name for a scholarly monk, it must be said.

The first of the existing pages begins: *ad perpetranda miracula rei unius*. "In order to enact the one and only miracle."

As I have already mentioned, the language of the manuscript (the letter?) is saturated with Greek words, and what's more, lacks the alchemical terminology commonly used in texts of the sort. Not a single chimerical shadow, black dragon, or red lion. The subject is obviously *Transmutatio* and *Opus Magnum*; this, however, in a completely unexpected and unusual context.

I am uncertain as to whether or not I should report this to the venerable Hospitalers. For them a library is merely a collection of lots to be auctioned. Not one of them even deigned to leaf through the book, even out of curiosity; had any of them done so, Joannes' paper would have fallen right into their hands!

In any case, I shall first read the whole letter through. This will require refreshing my Latin and Greek, but there is nothing to be done about it, dear Theo.

There is one other amusing thing. Many of the Greek words found in the text are the names of Phoenician gods. *Damuras*, *Dagon*, *Tautes*—it strikes the eye immediately. It is known that the Phoenicians founded the first settlements on Malta in the ninth century B.C., but what does that have to do with the Great Deed and brother Joannes? Perhaps nothing at all.

Moras

October 27

lucas writes that in malta they drink cherry wine, homemade
he buys it in marsaxlokk at the market
what a lovely sh in that word
in barcelona there are a lot of a's, and ll's, and rr's
today I walked along rambla de santa monica, there is also a rambla of the capuchins and del
estudio, there are so many ramblas

in arabic, rambla means dry riverbed, so all streets here are former rivers
it is nice to think that you are walking along a clean, dry river bed

no date

a saturday morning, empty, dove-gray skies, it is quiet in the city, only little hammers can be heard, somewhere high up within the scaffolding—but close-by, as though right at one's temples—persistent and cool

my favorite sound in childhood was when I pressed the pedal of my father's piano without touching the keys, and it seemed to exhale, hoarsely, like an old dog, but you had to do it with your hand, only your hand would do, so you had to be very little, sitting on the floor

November 1

what am I thinking about? I am thinking about malta
thinking about malta is like standing behind someone's back when they don't know you've returned

watching them rearrange books or wash dishes
you try not to breathe, waiting for him to turn around, but he has already felt you there and does not turn around, on purpose
you know the expression on his face
time becomes just like the floating snow in a glass toy
the glass has such a pleasant weight and inside there is a little marzipan house

no date

there are some things you grope for blindly, in vexation, like a light-switch in an unfamiliar hotel room
ah, there it is! the light comes on and you forget about the switch—now that you know *where* it is, you'll find it again easily in the dark
with words the opposite occurs: should one glimpse their inner workings, feel out the switch, their meaning blurs
imaginary knowledge is the scourge of man, said montaigne
knowledge is the death of the poet, I say, denunciatory words pull the neck downward, like a bag full of river rocks

Notes by Oscar Theo Forge

London, November third

Since the letter of Joannes of Malta came into my possession I feel a long forgotten curiosity tickling my throat, which was parched with boredom.

It is quite obvious to me that this text is a practical guide.

You can lie to yourself as much as you like, but sooner or later a moment comes when something simply *must be done*. This is the time.

I suppose that Joannes's letter, so carelessly left in the Pharmaceutical reference book, was waiting for me in particular. Perhaps, only I am capable of assessing its worth. I am not a thief, though I did take something which did not belong to me. I am the recipient of that *message*—that is who I am. I am a messenger.

And here's another thing. Alchemy is terror. Not the kind of terror when bombs are flying and bullets are whistling past, but rather, a deeper terror, when a person occupies himself with the practical deconstruction of reality, ignoring common sense and with no hope at all of any result. They do this to themselves, as well.

This is why Kunrat wrote: *study, meditate, labour, work, experiment, boil, and a cleansing*

stream will bathe you. There is no need to show me your hermetic vessel and salamander, the full moon and the setting sun—it's already enough that I myself am sane and fully understand as I do that free thought, and therefore life, are possible only *in spite* of all of the other mere chemical processes.

London, November fourth

That's the way, Theo! Last night I translated the second page. Soon I will become a hot-shot Latinist, though I'll never be a match for old Sollerius.

...It is said that these objects are prima materia, fragmented into parts. Division is contrary to the very nature of prima materia; however, having been forcibly split, it takes on the form of objects created by human hand.

The nature and property of things is such that the enlightened man can unite them without great difficulty. The acknowledged difficulty lies only in the fact that intention and free will must be inherent in every object.

This is why each object must find and unite with its owner through a secret desire, something each person is endowed with.

Let it be known to you dear brother, that prima materia is the true honey of existence, but, alas, for the present generation, mired in sin and deficient in faith, this honey may turn into a deadly poison.

For only true faith is compatible with the power acquired by one who has prima materia at his disposal.

Now you understand how the judgments of our senior brothers were dictated by fears for the fate of the entire Christian world, for the time is not ripe for such power as the aforementioned objects bear.

Times more suited than these will come; hence, you must guard the objects after my death, and should it happen that you, as well, pass into the next world, leave thy mission to a worthy member of our brotherhood.

Do you recall that, upon my arrival in Malta, I asked you to find an appropriate cache for the relics I had purportedly brought with me? You did not ask me any questions, though it was clear that you thought I had stolen something of value that I wanted to hide.

I do not blame you. In your place I would probably have thought the same. Who in his right mind would leave a warm post beside the Holy Father?

You probably thought that I had been caught in the act of thievery and sent to a monastery, so as not to call attention to the situation. I read all of this in your expression, but my lips were sealed with the promise I gave to all our brethren; therefore, only now can I reveal the truth to you. I did keep some things hidden away there, but now you know what they are.

Having set off for Malta I had not the slightest notion where I would establish this secret recess, but a faithful friend, whose name I will not mention, told me about you and said that only you knew the secrets of the Maltese underground caves.

In the Gypogeum cave, by the altar of the Holy Trinity, I hid that which had been given to me for safe keeping. You should have no difficulty finding the place if you study the drawing attached to this letter.

Your humility and meekness are beyond all praise, my Brother. During our first encounter I gave you a letter from the Counsel of our Brotherhood, in which I presume you were asked to assist me by any means necessary. You asked no questions and executed the task impeccably.

You had doubts about me, but your faith in the ideals of our Brotherhood remained unshaken; because of this, there could be no better guard than you. Know also that I have already notified the Council of the Brotherhood, and your candidacy has been approved.

Moras

November 3

my land lady has lost her mind
she wants to sew me a pillow
a small thought-pillow, like my Nanny used to say
she asks what I want to have on it: red poppies, a kitten, or some lettering
I came up with an inscription: *I shut my eyes and the whole world drops dead*
señora pardes waved her hand and went off to the kitchen.

November 5

When I was in the hospital there was an auburn-haired girl there. Pia. She wanted to die. Everything in her ward was made of plastic. Even the mirror frame. She had many visitors: her mother, father, and various pretty cousins. Pia smelled of vanilla, like a fresh cupcake, she walked around the halls in a white woolen robe with a rabbit embroidered on the pocket. Before, when I was in the other hospital, we weren't allowed to wear our own clothes and walk through the hallway with girls. There were no girls there, only short-haired ladies who were really old. The doctor told me that Pia would be checking out soon, she was going home, so I decided to give her something to remember me by. I drew her portrait in profile and I glued a lock of hair to the picture. I used my own since I couldn't get a hold of Pia's. In place of her eye I glued a piece of blue glass from a broken thermometer, I'd found it before in the examining room. I put the drawing underneath Pia's door. It was late at night, and they were already bringing around the sleepy pills.

In the morning she didn't come to breakfast and I brought her a tray with chocolate milk and a cookie, we were allowed to do that. We could visit each other and stuff. I went up to her door without spilling a drop, although the floor was slippery because it had just been washed. Pia's door wouldn't open. I put the tray on the floor. She didn't come to dinner, and the next day she wasn't anywhere to be found either. Nurse Rhoby waved me away when I asked. The Doctor looked surprised, and after that I didn't ask anymore. When people make such faces I am afraid to ask. Then I forgot about Pia. I only remembered her now. Maybe she didn't really exist at all.