

ALOYSIUS BERTRAND

FROM GASPARD DE LA NUIT

TRANSLATED BY ANDREI MOLOTIU

THE TULIP MERCHANT

The tulip is amongst flowers like the peacock amongst birds. The one has no scent, the other no voice: the one prides itself on its robe, the other on its tail.

The Garden of Rare and Curious Flowers

No noise but for the rustle of vellum leaves under Doctor Huytlen's fingers—Doctor Huytlen, who'd only take his eyes off his Bible, strewn with Gothic illuminations, to admire the purples and golds of two fish captive inside a bowl's damp walls.

The doorpanes swung open: it was a flower merchant, his arms laden with tulip pots, who begged pardon for disturbing the reading time of such a learned personage.

— “Master,” said he, “I come to show you the treasure of treasures, the wonder of wonders, a bulb as once a century blooms in the emperor of Constantinople's seraglio!”

— “A tulip!” cried out the old man, incensed, “a tulip, that symbol of the pride and luxury that, in the unhappy city of Wittenberg, gave birth to the hateful heresies of Luther and Melancthon!”

Master Huytlen pinned shut his Bible's clasp, slid his spectacles back in their case, and drew aside the window curtain, revealing in the sunlight a passion-flower with its crown of spines, its vinegar'd sponge, its whip, its nails, and the five wounds of Our Lord.

The tulip merchant bowed respectfully and in silence, abashed by an inquisitorial glance from the Duke of Alba, whose portrait, a masterpiece by Holbein, hung on the doctor's wall.

THE VIOLA DA GAMBA

*He recognized beyond a doubt the pale figure
of his close friend Jean Gaspard Debureau, the
great pagliaccio at the Funambules, who watched
him with an undefinable expression of malice
and jolly.*

THEOPHILE GAUTIER, Onuphrius.

*By the light of the moon,
My dear friend Pierrot,
Please lend me your plume
Just to write a word.
My candle has died,
Fire I have not,
Open up your gate
For the love of God.
Folk song.*

Barely had the kappelmeister questioned with his bow the rumbling viol, that it answered him with a burlesque gurgle of slapstick and trills, as if its belly contained an entire colic of Italian Comedians.

*

First came nurse Barbara scolding that dumbass Pierrot for having, big klutz, dropped on the ground Monsieur Cassandre's wig-box and blown the powder all over the floor.

Then Monsieur Cassandre woefully picking up his wig, and Harlequin kicking the nincompoop's behind, and Colombine wiping away a tear from too much laughing, and Pierrot's floured grin stretching all the way to his ears.

But soon, by the light of the moon, Harlequin, whose candle had died, was begging his friend Pierrot to pull open all the bolts and help him light it back up; and in the end, the traitor ran away with the girl too, along with the old man's money-box.

*

—“The devil take Job Hans the luthier who sold me this string!” cried out the kappelmeister, laying the dusty viol back to sleep in its dusty case. — The string had broken.

THE ALCHEMIST

*In two wayes can our art be learned, to wit,
through a master's teachynges, from mouth to
mouth and not otherwyse, or through divine
inspiration and revelation; or agayne through
bookes, whych are much obscure and tangled;
and so as truth to find in them and ryghtnesse
one ought to be discernynge and patient, studious
and ever vigilant.*

The Key to Philosophy's Secrets by Pierre
Vicot

Still nothing! — And in vain have I been leafing for three days and three nights, by the lamp's wan light, through the hermetic books of Raymond Lull!

No, nothing, just the hiss of the sparkling cauldron, the mocking laugh of a salamander who takes his greatest pleasure in disturbing my meditations.

Sometimes he hooks a firecracker from one of my beard hairs, sometimes he lets fly from his crossbow a flaming dart into my cloak.

Or else he polishes his armor, then blows furnace ash onto the pages of my formulary and onto the ink on my writing-desk.

And the cauldron, sparkling ever more strongly, hisses the same tune the devil sang when Saint Eloy pinched his nose with forge-tongs.

Yet, still nothing! — And for three more days and three more nights I'll keep leafing, by the lamp's wan light, through the hermetic books of Raymond Lull!