

Arthur van Schendel (1874–1946)

*The green dream*

Life can be as singular as a dream, whether a dream of happiness that turns a minute into a century, or a nightmare from which you cannot wake too soon. But a dream can also seem so real that you wonder whether you are really dreaming and whether the world is seen most truly by waking or sleeping eyes. And even if the healthy mind draws a line between fantasy and reality, it must admit, if it is healthy enough to look into the matter, that the distinction between the two is often a mystery.

But whose mind deserves to be called healthy? Is the man who has never dreamed, and doesn't even know what delusion is, the only one whose mind is free of flaws? In that case, we can be certain there are few people in this world whose minds are perfect and unblemished. Men who never dream appear to be very rare indeed, and as for their minds, a scholar once said that such men must be missing something essential, because the power of thought depends on the power of the imagination. He went on to say that, in fact, new ideas are born of dreams and fantasies.

On the other hand, it seems doubtful that a man who dreams a great deal is perfectly healthy. There are people whose minds are so eager to flee from everyday reality that they need only close their eyes to see dream images. It is not normal, you must admit, this mental compulsion to flee from the world of one's fellows to another of unreal beings; it is immoderate, irregular. Those who do it are fantasists, dreamers, and they may be ordinary, healthy specimens of their kind, but in human society they are as orchids among flowers, exotic quirks of nature.

When Cloverleaf, dreamer and fantasist, was still young, he was set apart by his many eccentricities. Food and drink that everyone enjoyed, like currant bread and milk, revolted him. Sights everyone agreed were beautiful, like a Sunday suit or a parade, were ugly to him. The things that inflamed passion in every heart, like a comely young woman or a glass of red wine, made his spirits sink. He did not care for *this*, he did not care for *that*, and what he *did* care for were things he had never really known, things beyond his grasp, like fairies and ambrosia. That Cloverleaf, people said, he's an odd one, there's no pleasing him. In truth, he had no desire for

pleasure. The only thing he enjoyed was sitting by himself, or better still, walking by himself, because then the fantasies in his head were not disturbed.

These fantasies were a process independent of his will. They began to run through his head as soon as he opened his eyes in the morning, and when he closed his eyes again in bed at night, they continued in a slightly different fashion. Sometimes he fought them, because he grew weary of them or because he believed his heart needed something more. Then he would seek diversion, and his extreme behaviour would surprise people. Yet although his head would stop its picture show for as long as he remained frenetically active, no sooner had he stopped than it would take him by surprise with a new show, more vivid and colourful than the last. Once in a while this turned into a battle between Cloverleaf and his mind. Then he would talk and laugh with friends so much and so uproariously that his mind had no way of playing its games. But he couldn't keep that up for long; his mind would ambush him in his sleep, when his will could not protect him. Dreams, strong and burly, overpowered him with images beyond counting, presented to his inner eye for centuries at a time, while Cloverleaf was aware of lying powerless, a toy, an object that drifted on mists.

Maybe I'm giving you the wrong impression of Cloverleaf's fantasies. Who put on these picture shows? He himself? His mind? That was what he believed in his youth, and that was why he resisted when he'd had enough. Later, once he'd learned that even the most ferocious opposition could not liberate him from his fantasies for any more than a moment, he began to suspect some other mind or spirit of possessing him and using him as its plaything. Perhaps this was merely another delusional idea, slightly further removed from reality than the previous one, because this delusion went so far as to involve the supernatural. You will understand how easily a man enslaved by his imagination could come to believe such a thing. Whatever the case may be, Cloverleaf ultimately had no doubt that his head was merely a playground for all sorts of spirits, who communed with each other there, usually without taking any notice of him, although he sometimes seemed to amuse them.

Now, another eccentricity of his was his strong preference for certain colours, sounds and smells and equally strong aversion to others. The sound of a cat or a tenor caused him pain, he said, while the sound of an infant or a dog was music. Of all colours, he was most attached to blue, so much so that he was never seen dressed in anything but blue – navy blue or a touch lighter in winter, sky blue in summer. There was also a colour that he detested, a colour that sent

vicious pains stabbing through his head: green, in all its shades. You might think this an unnatural character trait, since nature loves to dress in green, but while he admired the colour in trees and grass, he rejected it anywhere else in the world as false, venomous and pernicious. Green is envy, he would say, green is hate, the heart of the devil, and when he saw someone dressed in green, he would avert his eyes. He believed that heaven was filled with a radiant blue light, while hell burned with green flames that gave off green fumes. Little wonder that many people thought Cloverleaf a man of outlandish tastes and distastes, and those who learned of his fantasies pitied him, saying that he must harbour a diseased spirit.

And one day he had a dream, an illusion, a hallucination, whatever you might call the phenomenon, after which he himself feared that his mind might be poisoned.

When he left home that Saturday around four in the afternoon, he was still in a waking state. It was late June, oppressively hot and humid. Over the roofs he made out a greenish glow of the kind you sometimes see before a storm, and over the bricks that lined the street he also detected some hint of green in the shadows. The air he breathed reminded him of the smell of pickled gherkins. He could normally tolerate that odour well enough, but now it so disgusted him that he made a detour into different streets. By the time he reached the outskirts of the city, the sky had become overcast, with here and there a yellow glimmer. What a strange place, Cloverleaf said to himself, imagining that he had lost his way. Then he froze in astonishment. On his lavender blue trousers, from top to bottom, and his darker blue jacket, especially on the sleeves, he saw tiny yellow stars and flowers whirling rapidly. He wanted to brush them off with his hand but noticed that this left stains, green like canal water. It made him shudder. When he looked up, a coachman stood before him in a green jacket, with moss-green whiskers, beckoning him into a coach of a dark, dirty green. This is a bad idea, Cloverleaf thought, but he climbed in anyway. Inside it smelled of sulfur, and he noticed that he was riding down a steep slope. The coach came to an abrupt halt, and the coachman, looking a little slimy by this time, loomed up outside the door and ordered him to run away quickly, because it was becoming dangerous there. I knew it, thought Cloverleaf, who felt as if his throat were being pinched. He ran down the hillside through soft reeds of some kind, and as he was running he realized he was dreaming. Well, then, he thought, I have nothing to be afraid of. It must be some spirit playing another mean trick. He stopped and, since his head was growing heavy, lowered himself onto some bushes, which smelt as if they had been painted. The spot where he sat was still on the same

slope, with trees below him whose round tops had an enamelled look, dark against the sky. From the right and the left, fleeing in panic, came women in veils who sat down all around him, keeping their faces covered.

He examined them one by one and thought every one of them beautiful, a thought which gave him pause, for they were all wearing green veils, in a greater variety of shades than he had ever seen: sea green, translucent green, from light to dark and all the way to greenish-black, bronze green, emerald green, mackerel green, spruce green, and he could peer through all the veils and see the green hearts. Although he knew they could not be beautiful, he felt drawn to them. Looking at one, he longed to look at another, and once he turned to the other, he was drawn back to the first. That's how love begins, Cloverleaf said to himself. I never thought I would have anything to do with love, and I'll be amazed if some stupid spirit can change that. Has my time come after all?

He spread his arms and was about to stand up and wrap them around one of the figures, but he could not. She straightened and rose, the veil falling from her head, her large malachite eyes gazing into him. Two braids slithered over her shoulders, two green snakes. The mouth opened and the voice was like waves crashing on the rocks: Here is the green man. He has stolen the colour from all the grass in the world, all the trees and all the seas, for his own use. He has drunk all the light of the sun. See how he glitters in his green glory, a tree of peacock plumes. We must sit in his shadow or we shall turn pale and wilt.

It's true, thought Cloverleaf, I am what I abhor.

All the figures rose and paced in slow circles around him, in their trembling veils. The one who had spoken approached, sank down before him and laid her hand on his knee. Around him blew a rustling wind of sighs. When he held out his hands to her, he saw that they were as green as emerald. It made him cold, and he did not dare to touch her. Shivering with fear, he took off his jacket and tore off his shirt sleeves. His arms were the colour of stems growing in the dark, with streaks and patches of faded green. His chest was oak bark covered with a thick layer of chilly moss. He thrust his hand into it, pulled out his heart and saw that it was a heavy piece of green marble. He grew angry, hurled it far away and heard it fall with a clap like thunder beyond the trees.

Yes, said Cloverleaf, sitting at home, that was a very bad dream. But why do I still feel as though I am green on the inside? The malachite eyes were not real, I know that – I haven't lost

my mind. Yet somehow they have found their way inside me; their spirit has latched onto mine. Is it a game or vengeance? And am I really in my right mind? Who can tell me that? If I go to a psychologist, he'll ask me a thousand questions, and even then, he won't know. Maybe he'll explain that it was only a dream and I shouldn't let it worry me. And if I say I can still feel the green eyes here inside me, he'll tell me not to let my fancy run away with me. And so on and so forth, and meanwhile I'll be no closer to the truth. But I'll find it in the imagination, and it must be blue.