

Love Me Green: A Story in Three Reflections

by

Sarah Beddington

Part I: The Dream

Perhaps it all started with the dream, a shadow stain of what was to come. And looking back at this dream now, or forwards, or wherever it is that dreamtime exists, I realise how very appropriate it was in relation to the final performance in a Lewis-Carroll-Looking-Glass sort of way.

It was a dream that took place at the very end of the night in the suspended zone between sleeping and waking. I was on my way to meet someone. Who that someone may have been I cannot say, as I do not now remember. Walking down a flight of stone steps, in a city that may have been London or New York or any big city, I had reached the basement level. Pushing open a heavy door whose surface was made uneven by accumulated melting layers of glossy black paint, I found myself peering into a room that was exceptionally dark except for accents of golden light that fell unevenly from above.

All I could initially distinguish from the shadowy interior were details highlighted by the kaleidoscopic fragments of light. Shards of a white damask tablecloth, a nose or an earlobe floating briefly in the gloom. In one instance I saw an outstretched hand with a trailing, cream lace cuff that plunged briefly into a glass half-filled with red wine. As I watched the liquid bleed up the intricate web of stitching, the limb was withdrawn back into the darkness. Slithers of exotic fabric and momentary flashes of silver dishes as the busy staff criss-crossed the space, were seen in magnified hyper-reality but did not allow me an overall panorama. And as my eyes began to adjust from bright sunlight to these extremes of lighting I realised that while the sounds were familiar and as they should be in such a scenario there was a strange warping and shrinking quality to the scene, as if I was looking into a fairground mirror.

Everything close to me seemed normal but towards the edges of my vision and further back in space the proportions of things and people morphed into an altogether different reality. The people dining seemed to have stepped out of an Oscar Wilde stage performance or a re-enactment of some story from the Ottoman Empire. Two women in antique Middle Eastern robes talked excitedly; they both had overlong necks that moved like riverweeds, their heads swaying across the table at one another in a disconcertingly unsupported sort of way. Scarlet ostrich plumes like disembodied antennae quivered convulsively, in and out of a beam of light, to laughter I could only hear. A man in evening dress who seemed enormously tall and had black greased-down hair, a centre parting and a waxed moustache that hooked up at the ends smirked at me from his great height. Although unsure if he was looking behind me to someone else I smiled back nervously, this being the first moment I appeared to exist here.

There was an element of suppressed hysteria in the air. Sealed precariously under a flexible veneer, it seemed that an incident could break out and rupture the murmur at any moment. The longer I scanned the room for the unknown person I was meeting, the more differences in body type, age, colour of skin and quality of costume

materialised. Age and youth seemed interchangeable depending on the light. But no one stared at each other. In all their variety and theatricality they seemed comfortable in themselves and accepting of others or otherness around them. It was only me that seemed to be hovering, apart and yet not quite separate. And it was then, or as near to 'then' as anything can be in dream-time, perhaps just after the moustachioed smile, that I noticed the strangest thing of all. Strange for its ordinariness and personal for its intimacy, and strange in that only I seemed able to see this little scene-within-a-scene, or attach significance to it, amidst the extravagant excesses of finery and bright colours and noise and expansive movements that garlanded their way back and forth across the space.

There was a vortex of stillness in the very centre of the room. An inverted funnel of light from above shone down on an unmade bed covered in a mess of faded, woollen plaid blankets in varying shades of brown. A thin husk of an old lady in an off-white nightdress was trying to insert herself between these layers. She seemed the silent pivot around which the rest of the room whirled. Watching the particles of dust rise from the blankets and spiral up towards the light source, it seemed as if she and her immediate surroundings were a projection from an altogether different time and place. Apparently oblivious to the diners and the restaurant bustle, she reached out a small arthritic hand towards the cane table beside her pillow and in extreme slow motion, that was graceful rather than laboured, she switched off the bedside light. This switch also seemed connected to the light above and the two sources dimmed together very slowly. The lampshade near the woman's resting head had a flame-shaped hole on one side where it had come too close to the bulb and melted. This bright shape seemed to hover in the enveloping shadows as everything else faded around it. Eventually the whole miniature stage in its shades of brown was reabsorbed into greater, darker brownness in the manner of fallen leaves dissolving into homogenous mulch. I strained to see an after-image of the old woman submerged in her blankets. There was none.

I was interrupted in my observations by a voice asking if I would like a table. Despite scanning the room all around me I could not hear where the sound was coming from. Looking down I saw a miniature woman dressed in nineteenth century maid's attire—all black and white and starched linen. She was so very small and the ruffle of her cap did not reach my knee even when she tipped her head back to speak to me. Her impossibly black eyes looked up into mine without blinking. I suddenly realised that she was the same woman I had just watched putting herself to bed, only now she was smaller and younger. Feeling intimidated and overwhelmed by the whole scenario, I stammered a response that I was just looking for someone and hurried on, scanning the tables as I whirled past, uncertain now of everything. And people lost their distortions as I came close by only to regain them as I moved away. I felt forever trapped behind a moving wall of deforming transparency. Whoever I was supposed to have been meeting was nowhere to be seen and feeling claustrophobic and dizzy I ran out of the room, without looking back, and up the stone steps into the sunlight.

Part II: *The City*

I never quite emerged from a shroud of half-remembered dream details all day. The morning consisted of a series of splintered flashbacks shooting towards me only to veer off, out of focus, just before they became recognisable. My head clouded by such glimpses, I made the first of two journeys across the bridge to the city. It

seemed, from high up on that pedestrian walkway, looking out across the river, that the city had extracted some of the density in my head and draped it over itself.

The sky hung suspended like a grey felt canopy whose weighted shadow flattened out the scores of buildings into a monotone silhouette. All sense of three dimensions seemed to have vanished. There was no apparent space between the high-rise towers- the lateral grid had been compressed into a single vertical plane. This unity created a de-classification in which the public housing projects in the foreground melted into the corporate buildings behind them and Empire State or Chrysler were just part of a continuous skyline and no longer needed names. Like some enormous blank cut-out rising up from the far side of the river, the city had become its own blank screen.

Seagulls angled in from the water, slicing through the strata of trains and traffic and bicycles and humans and boats that all make their different rhythms around, across and through the bridge. As a receiver and transmitter of wind against metal and echoes of sounds that emerge from one place to be sent ricocheting along its length, through and against different strands and thicknesses of steel, the bridge had its own voice. This accumulated orchestra obscured any individual cries of seagulls or suicide attempts.

Across the course of the day the dream had retreated from the foreground of my thoughts, although a residue remained as I made my second crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan. In the subway train that rattled slowly over the bridge, I turned to look behind me through a tracery of scratched graffiti on the window. The last part of the day was ending in brilliant sunshine. There was an after-the-storm intensity to the light, the moisture still hanging in the atmosphere acting as an intense magnifying lens that exaggerated the details and edges and colours of things. The buildings had shaken themselves free from their homogenous ironed-out greyness of the morning. They asserted themselves as individuals. Shadows cast from one onto the other delineated their separateness as they faced the falling sun.

Part III: *The Performance*

But that was all earlier in this elongated day and this is now, and I am sitting on a grey chair amongst rows of grey chairs in a space that is all black. It is painted black everywhere- the walls, the floor and the ceiling- and because of this it is a space without end, a space without boundaries. I sit and I wait. I see a movement in the dark. A figure who is almost not there at all, dressed in black pressed up against the black wall, shifts position. Black clothes and black wide-brimmed hat tipped down.

The few lights that illuminate this generally dark scene hover high above in an amorphous ceiling. They are a cool shade of blue and highlight floating details in the room below. My dream and reality are becoming enmeshed and confused in remembered and experienced light-fall. Scatter cushions encircle a dark area on the floor, demarcating a stage that is not raised above a watching public but is on a level with it. A small huddle of instruments on this stage area reflects the blueness from above in their metallic surfaces. People move into the space in near silence and settle on the cushions and grey chairs. A solo piano recording neutralises individual sound. The microphones on their stands quiver slightly, drawing attention to their isolation on the stage.

A screen is suspended midway between the darkness of the ceiling and the darkness of the floor. Set to one side, it cuts off a corner and there is an indistinct projected black and white image that could be just the dust trapped between layers of a glass transparency, or minute and long-dead flying insects caught momentarily hovering in the light, mimicking the people below moving slowly in their quest to find the best available seating.

The room seems full now. It is dense with breath and expectancy. The figure dressed in black takes female form as she disengages herself from the background and appears at one edge of the stage. Hers is the first act. This fragment of broken-off darkness, in the form of a woman in an old trilby hat, crouches on the stage. I believe she speaks in a soft but emphatic German accent. She speaks and she also makes music on a keyboard close to the ground. Images skim across the screen and the colour and movement push me further back into my dream. Phrases from what she is saying drift into my inward-looking mind and coalesce with the remembered images that hang there, diaphanous.

'Living desire...'

'And all I can do is dream...'

'...go to the threshold...'

And the blue lights reflect in the percussion instruments and the instruments glint in blue miniature in the glasses of a woman seated near the entrance and these spots of light pull me back into the room as the woman in black completes her performance and leaves the stage to be reclaimed by the dark environment.

And now a type of Middle Eastern music begins.

Figures start to enter the stage area but continue on, penetrating the audience seated all around. A man with long hair and beard dressed in a pink T-shirt takes up position on the part of the stage that is nearest to me. His eyes are closed and his upward-looking face has a strong resemblance to Dürer's self-portrait of himself as a bearded Christ. Christ in a pink T-shirt that reads NOTHING BUT NET. His face is beautiful. He starts to gyrate his body without moving his feet and continues to look up through closed eyelids to some place only he can see.

Mesmerised by this large, tall figure swaying gently in his beatific reverie, I am missing the flow of other performers onto and through the stage area. They pass between the audience, weaving them into their ritual. And, like my dream, they encompass a wide range of cultures, costumes and difference. Two of them are dressed in antique belly-dancing attire. As they move in rippling underwater motion to one another, the cowry shells and silver coins on their clothing and on their wrists and ankles tinkle and rattle to a rhythm marked out by the metronomes of their waist-long plaits. My eyes flit between these seductive harpies and the inner beauty that Christ-in-slow-motion seems to be experiencing as he gently undulates in a continuous beam of light. The bass player is noticeable for a purple sequined mask that completely hides his identity and, seen in conjunction with the red cape or bedspread that falls from his shoulders, he becomes a Mexican wrestler-relation of Batman. In contrast, the female violinist's attire is quite drained of colour. Jeans and a neutral wool sweater, with a brown fur hat as the only exotic embellishment, she also seems in her own world and plays as if alone in her living room.

Then I see a naked girl kneeling on the stage pointing three flashlights of different colours at her pale flesh. How did she position herself there without me being aware?

So many satellites of movement and stillness scattered throughout the audience and the clear stage area. The girl has a Munch-like sense of desire and loss about her. Withdrawn into her own tri-coloured streamers of light she could be mourning her own profanity stripped bare, a counterbalance to the rocking totem pole of Christ.

All these people have been setting up a kaleidoscopic sense of pattern, colour and ritualistic movement- a shifting backdrop for another figure who steps forward and comes close to the microphone and takes hold of it erotically. This figure is a Queen of the Night. The fringe of beads on his skull cap sways against his eyebrows and the longer fringes of the oriental scarf tied around his hips, move against his darkly shining PVC trousers. With the eyelashes of a giraffe and red glitter on his dipping eyelids, he is in part an amalgam of Nijinsky prepared by Bakst for Scherehezeade, part Klaus Kinski in a moment of calm aboard his monkey-strewn raft in *Aguirre Wrath of God*, and part escapee from the Eldorado club in Weimar-era Berlin. In a somewhat husky, rasping voice he begins to sing 'Amazing Grace'. The song is familiar, it is one I learnt by heart as a child. It is a song with dark beginnings in the days of eighteenth century slavery that is now popular with African Americans. In this clawed-out rendering the lyrics seem to have shifted- nothing here is quite as it appears.

While the singer stands tall in his high-heeled boots, the other disparate performers around him work together without looking at one another. The belly dancers perform a peacock courtship, sometimes mirroring one another, sometimes not. Dürer-Christ continues to be controlled by an invisible centrifugal force. His eyes, lit by the red light from above stay closed, as do the red glittered ones of the singer at the microphone and those of the naked woman who at this moment holds a red coloured beam of light to her ear. Red over red over red. As all these individuals settle into their own rhythm for the duration of the opening song, a moth-like figure flits through and past and between them all. A young girl dressed all in white, she is perhaps a runaway bride from a Reverend Moon mass marital ceremony. Dressed in a tiered white dress with long white sleeves, she exudes an optimistic energy separate from everything else happening on stage as she propels herself through the audience.

Weimar-Klaus fades out his singing and slowly steps back as a mysterious hooded, androgynous figure simultaneously emerges on the other side of the stage area. Dressed in an almost full-length hooded robe of ochre-gold, the figure advances like a fallen, earthbound angel through the crowd towards the microphone. The hood falls back and the light that catches scarlet-painted lips reveals a young woman. This Golden Girl, with her heavy laced boots, sings in Spanish. Starting softly at first, she becomes ever bolder and clearer. The belly dancers and the Runaway Bride have conjoined in a rhythmic interlacing accompanied by the shaking of castanets and coins on costumes. The naked girl lies on the floor gazing vacantly into her pool of loneliness as she points the three flashlights of red, yellow and green across her breasts. And Christ remains rooted to his spot, still possessed equally by an inner calling and the magnetic pull of the music in the room.

As the Golden Girl completes her song and melts back into the audience, Kinski-Nijinsky reappears, the beads on his costume sending out multiple tiny flashes of light. The song is 'Greatest Love of All':

'I decided long ago never to walk in anyone's shadow...'

He sings in a voice that dredges up memories of long nights-until-daylight spent in an atmosphere of smoke and sweat and melting cosmetics.

This is a spectacle that oscillates between stillness and movement, balance and counter-balance, love and eroticism. Separate tableaux of different cultural and emotional moments are played out in parallel. Gender and sexuality, history and the contemporary are deliberately confused and allowed to contradict one another. A controlled explosion of sound, movement, colour and texture- glimpses into One Thousand and One Nights told in twenty two minutes by a group of post-apocalyptic gypsies.

There is a cinematic completeness to my day. A dream foreshadowed all that I am now seeing, where the ordinary and the exotic are allowed to collide and co-exist; where there is a still centre that seems at odds with all that is spinning past it but which provides the anchor post for everything else. There is integration and isolation and I see again the two images of the city I observed earlier- neither better than the other, just different perspectives of a view.

Golden Girl comes up to join Kinski-Nijinsky for the final song- and they sing together in the language that has been hovering about the room in the initial music and in the movements and gestures of so many of the dancers. A familiar refrain begins and they start to sing Lili Marleen in Arabic. The smiling Runaway Bride begins to flutter backwards and forwards between audience and stage with renewed urgency and the belly-dancers perform as alter egos of one another, responding in a loving and sometimes passionate way until one of them kneels and leans far back, her bare midriff undulating as if trying to give birth. Christ's arms start to rise up and he wobbles a little in his unseeing state. He is the tremulous point around which this stage has been turning in erratic decreasing and increasing circles. The familiarity of the song, the unfamiliarity of hearing it in this language, the togetherness of the couple as they sing and the trajectories of all the performers around them can be seen as a drawing in movement. The underlying structure of this drawing is like the linear pattern on an Islamic tile- it can be read in a number of different configurations.

Golden Girl replaces her hood. The music fades and Dürer-Christ opens his eyes and slowly walks off stage, resuming normality without any loss of balance. The girl that has been naked throughout has miraculously sheathed herself in a black slip dress. Klaus and his Golden Girl raise their arms and clap the audience. The performers all leave and the piano recording with which the evening began resumes again. There is a loud, excited ripple of post-performance response as the crowd files out in a processional frieze. And as I too rise to leave the emptying space, I see for the first time a large banner on the wall on which is emblazoned in large continuous black handwriting:

**I_hope_everything
you_love
dies_in_your_arms**

These words have been written in response to the performances 'Aladlona 2 (I love you green)' by Discoteca Flaming Star and 'NUR DAS NICHT' by Jutta Koether which took place at The Kitchen in New York on the night of March 26th, 2006.