

"The Republic of Dreams" by Bruno Schulz

HERE on the Warsaw pavement in these days of tumult, heat and dazzle² I retreat in my mind to the remote city³ of my dreams, I let my vision rise to command that low, sprawling, polymorphic countryside, that greatcoat of God flung down at the sills of heaven like a mottled sheet. For that country submits utterly to heaven, holds heaven over itself in vaulted colors, variform, intricate with cloisters, triforia, stained-glass roses, windows opening onto eternity. Year after year that country grows up into the sky, merges with the dawn redness, turns angelic in the reflected light of the greater atmosphere.

A GOOD way to the south, where the mapped land shifts—fallow from the sun, bronzed and singed by the glow of summer like a ripe pear there it stretches like a cat in the sun, that chosen land, that peculiar province, the town unique in all the world. There is no point in speaking of this place to the profane no point in explaining it is from that long tongue of rolling land over there lapping up breath for the countryside in the summer conflagrations, that boiling island of land facing south, that lone spur sticking up among swarthy Hungarian vineyards, that this one particle of earth detaches itself out of the collective landscape and, tramping alone down an untried path, attempts to be a world in itself. Sealed in a self-sufficient microcosm, that town and its countryside have boldly installed themselves at the very brink of eternity.

THE garden plots at the outskirts of town are planted as if at the world's edge and look

¹ Bruno Schulz, *Letters and Drawings of Bruno Schulz*, ed. Jerzy Ficowski, trans. Walter Arndt (New York: Froom International Pub, 1990): 217-223. All quotations from Schulz are sourced from this book.

² How does a story handle large objects?

³ [Jeffrey Meyers](#): "He bitterly called his hometown Drohóbycz, on the Ukrainian border with Poland and a 'little Texas' center of oil production, 'a rich but empty and colorless vegetation of vulgarity.'"

across their fences into the infinity of the anonymous plain. Just beyond the toll-gates the map of the region turns nameless and cosmic like Canaan. Above that thin forlorn snippet of land a sky deeper and broader than anywhere else, a sky like a vast gaping dome many stories high, full of unfinished frescos and improvisations, swirling draperies and violent ascensions, opens up once again.

HOW to express this in words? Where other towns developed into economies, evolved into statistics, quantified themselves—ours regressed into essence. Nothing happens here by chance, nothing results without deep motive and premeditation. Here events are not ephemeral surface phantoms; they have roots sunk into the deep of things and penetrate the essence.⁴ Here decisions take place every moment, laying down precedents once and for all. Everything that happens here happens only once and is irrevocable.⁵ This is why such weightiness, such heavy emphasis, such sadness inheres in what takes place.⁶

JUST now, for example, the yards are drowning in nettles and weeds, tumbledown moss-grown sheds and outbuildings are up to their armpits in enormous bristly burdocks that grow right to the eaves of the shingled roofs.⁷ The town lives under the sign of the Weed, of wild, avid, fanatical plant life bursting out in cheap, coarse greenery-toxic, rank, parasitic. That greenery glows under the sun's conjury, the maws of the leaves suck in seething chlorophyll; armies of nettles, rampant, voracious,⁸ devour the flower plantings, break into the gardens, spread over the unguarded back walls of houses and barns overnight, run wild in the roadside ditches. It is amazing what insane vitality, feckless and unproductive, lives in this fervid dab of green, this distillate of sun and ground water. From a pinch of chlorophyll it draws out and extrapolates under the blaze of these summer days that luxuriant texture of emptiness, a green pith replicated a hundred times onto millions of leaf surfaces, downy or furred, of veined translucent verdure pulsing with watery plant blood, giving off the pungent herbal smell of the open fields.

IN that season the rear window of the shop's storage room overlooking the yard was

⁴ Marguerite Duras: "When I say suffering, here, I mean the ambiguous ground of happiness."

⁵ Guy Davenport: "Success is the greatest of disappointments. The spirit is most alive when it is lost. Anxiety was Kafka's composure, as despair was Kierkegaard's happiness. Kafka said impatience is our greatest fault."

⁶ Gershom Scholem: "Every attempt to bring about redemption on the level of history without a transfiguration of the messianic idea, leads straight into the abyss."

⁷ Brian Dillon: ". . . the secret affinity between the things of our childhoods, and their later avatars. . ."

⁸ Schulz to Anna Plockier, 19 June 1941: "I know all the guilt is on my side, because the abyss is mine and you are only a sylph who has strayed into my garden, where it becomes my duty to keep your foot from sliding."

blinded by a diaphragm of green⁹ glitter from leaf reflections, gauzy flutterings, wavy foliated greenery, all the monstrous excesses of this hideous backyard fecundity. Sunk in deep shade, the storeroom riffled through all shades of virescence, green reflections spread in undulating paths through its vaulted length like the sibilant murmur of a forest.

THE town had fallen into that wild luxuriance as into a sleep raised to the hundredth power, supine in a daze from the summer's heat and glare, in a thick maze of cobwebs and greenery, empty and shallow of breath.¹⁰ In rooms greenly lit to underwater opacity by the morning glory over the windows, platoons of flies struggled on their last wings, imprisoned forever as in the bottom of a forgotten bottle and locked in a dolorous agony that they proclaimed by drawn-out monotonous lamentations or trumpeting of fury and grief. In time, the window became the gathering place of all that lacework of scattered insectdom for one last premortal sojourn: huge crane-flies, which had long bumped against the walls with a subdued drumming of misdirected flight and made a final torpid landing on a pane;¹¹ whole genealogies of flies and moths, rooted and branching out from this window and spread by slow migration across the glass; pullulating generations of meager winglings, sky-blue, metallic, glassy.

OVER the shop displays, great bright opaque awnings flap lazily in the hot breeze, wavy stripes baking in the blaze.¹² The dead season lords it over the empty squares, the wind-scoured streets. Distant prospects gathered up and shirred by gardens lie in a dazzled faint in the heat-glazed sky, as if they had only just fluttered down, a vast garish cloth, from the hollows of heaven, bright, glowing, rumpled from the flight, and were waiting, already spent,¹³ for a new charge of brilliance in which to renew themselves.

WHAT to do on those days, where to flee from the conflagration, from the incubus laying heavy on the chest in a torrid noontime nightmare?¹⁴ On such days, Mother might hire a cab and, jammed together in its black body, the shop assistants up on the box with the bundles or clutching onto the springs, we would all ride out of town to

⁹ See: a piece of green chalk left by a child who wanted to remind the sky not to rain on her birthday. See also [Diane Seuss](#): "He'd seen that the words / formed from ink melted in the rain."

¹⁰ Susan Sontag: "What am I going to do one minute from now?"

¹¹ Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, in a 1935 introduction to Schulz's work: "His graphics are poems of pedal atrocity."

¹² Thomas Bernhard: "I do not wish to be everlastingly confronted with people like myself, and certainly not in a coffeehouse, where I go to escape from myself."

¹³ Vladimir Nabokov: "The colors go. There is a last glow in the window to which the stairs of the day still lead."

¹⁴ László F. Földényi: "In this universe, everything tilts just a bit, just enough that the trappings of the ordinary universe remain visible while losing their coherence."

Little Hill. We rode into the rolling, hill-studded landscape. The vehicle toiled its long, lonesome way among humped fields, rooting through the hot golden dust of the highway.

THE convex necks of the horses bulged tensely, their glistening hindquarters knotted with honest toil, swept every so often by bushy slaps of the tail. The wheels turned slowly, squeaking on their axles. The old hack passed flat pastures dotted with molehills and broadly humped with reclining cattle, forked and horned, prodigious shapeless lumps of bones, knots, and ridges. There they lay, monumental as barrows, their quiet gaze mirroring remote and shifting horizons.

WE came to a halt at last on Little Hill, next to the squat masonwork tavern.¹⁵ It stood alone, its roof spread out against the sky, on the watershed, the high spine between two opposed territories. The horses strained to struggle up the high edge, then stopped on their own, as if in bemusement, at the pike-gate dividing two worlds. This gate commanded a wide sweep of landscape seamed by highways, pale and opalescent like faded tapestry, breathed on by a vast afflatus of air, sky-blue and vacant. From that distant rolling plain a breeze rose, lifting the horses' manes and floating past under a high clear sky.

HERE we might stop for the night, or Father might make a sign for us to forge on into that landscape, capacious as a map and webbed with highways. Barely visible in the distance before us on the winding roads crawled the vehicles that had come before us, making their way on the bright macadam lined by cherry trees straight to what was then a small inn, wedged in a narrow glen full of the chatter of springs and tumbling waters and muttering leaves.

IN those far-off days our gang of boys first hit on the outlandish and impossible notion of straying even farther, beyond that inn, into no-man's or God's land, of patrolling borders both neutral and disputed, where boundary lines petered out and the compass rose of the winds skittered erratically under a high-arching sky.¹⁶ There we meant to dig in, raise ramparts around us, make ourselves independent of the grownups, pass completely out of the realm of their authority, proclaim¹⁷ the Republic of the Young. Here we would form a new and autonomous legislature, erect a new hierarchy of

¹⁵ Fernando Pessoa: "'Who is the fifth person in this room who extends an arm to interrupt us whenever we're about to feel?'"

¹⁶ Alan Lightman: "In a world where time is a quality, events are recorded by the color of the sky."

¹⁷ Bruno Schulz: "Language is man's metaphysical organ."

standards and values. It was to be a life under the aegis of poetry and adventure, neverending signs and portents. All we needed to do, or so it seemed to us, was push apart the barriers and limits of convention, the old markers imprisoning the course of human affairs, for our lives to be invaded by an elemental power, a great inundation of the unforeseen, a flood of romantic adventures and fabulous happenings. We wanted to surrender our lives to this torrent of the fabulating element, this inspired onrush of historical events, be carried away by its surging waves without a will of our own. The spirit of nature was by its very essence a great storyteller.¹⁸ Out of its core the honeyed discourse¹⁹ of fables and novels, romances²⁰ and epics, flowed in an irresistible stream. The whole atmosphere was absolutely stuffed full of stories. You only needed to lay a trap under this sky full of ghosts to catch one, set a wooden post upright in the wind for strips of narrative to be caught fluttering on its tip.

WE resolved to become self-sufficient, create a new life principle, establish a new age, reconstitute the world-on a small scale, to be sure, for ourselves alone, but after our own tastes and pleasures.

THIS was going to be a stronghold, a blockhouse, a fortified base ruling the neighborhood; part fortress, part theater, part laboratory of visions. All nature would be yoked to its purpose. As in Shakespeare, this unleashed theater spilled over into nature, expanding into reality, soaking up impulses and inspiration from all elements, undulating with the great tidal ebb and flow of natural currents. Here we were going to locate the node of all processes²¹ that course through the body of nature, the point of entry to all story threads and fables shimmering in her great misty soul.²² Like Don Quixote, we wanted to divert the channel of all those histories and romances into our lives, throw open the frontiers to all those intrigues, convolutions, and intricate ventures

¹⁸ Mallarme: "The world is created to wind up as a beautiful book."

¹⁹ Petrarch: "What I desire is that I may be able by reading to renew as often as I wish the pleasure I felt from the discourse itself. So, little Book, I bid you flee the haunts of men and be content to stay with me, true to the title I have given you of *My Secret*: and when I would think upon deep matters, all that you keep in remembrance that was spoken in secret you in secret will tell to me over again.."

²⁰ Konstantin Paustovsky: "The world was ours. Neither time nor space had any limits. ... We could talk to Hugo, Orr, Lermentov, Peter the Great, or Garibaldi. We could declare our love to a 17 year old girl in her brown school uniform, as she nervously fidgeted with her pigtails, or just as easily prostrate ourselves at the feet of Isolde."

²¹ Vladimir Nabokov: "Let us touch this and look at this."

²² Mary Capello: "Obdurate trance that builds like rooms unfit for catacombs. Holy holy holy DJ, Lord of havens and clit. Raven and spud are rife with your glory. Hosanna in the nighest."

that are spun in the great ether when it overreaches itself in the fantastical.²³

WE dreamed the region was being threatened by an unknown danger, was permeated by a mysterious menace.²⁴ Against this peril and hazard we would find safe refuge and shelter in our fortress. The countryside was crisscrossed by packs of wolves, bands of highwaymen infested the forest. We constructed shelters and bulwarks and, shaken by not unpleasant forebodings and delicious shudders, made ready for sieges. Our gates drew fugitives out from under the knives of brigands, and they found haven and sanctuary with us. Carriages chased by wild beasts flew up to our gates at a dead gallop. We played host to mysterious distinguished strangers and lost ourselves in conjectures in our desire to penetrate their disguises.²⁵ In the evenings everyone gathered in the great hall, where, by flickering candlelight, we listened to one tale or revelation after another. There were times when the plot spun through these stories jumped out of the narrative frame²⁶ and stepped among us, live and hungry for prey, and tangled us up in its perilous whorl. Sudden recognitions, unexpected disclosures, an improbable encounter pushed their way into our private lives. We lost the ground beneath our feet, placed in jeopardy by contingencies we ourselves had unleashed. From far away the howling of wolves was carried on the air, we brooded over romantic entanglements, ourselves halfway caught up in their coils, while an inscrutable night rustled on the other side of the window, fraught with shapeless aspirations, ardent,²⁷ incomprehensible confidences, unplumbed, inexhaustible, itself knotted into labyrinthine convolutions.

TODAY those remote dreams come back, and not without reason. The possibility suggests itself that no dreams, however absurd or senseless, are wasted in the universe. Embedded in the dream is a hunger for its own reification, a demand that imposes an

²³ Jorge Luis Borges: "I always imagine them at nightfall, in the dusk of a slum or a vacant lot, in that long, quiet moment when things are gradually left alone, with their backs to the sunset, and when colors are like memories or premonitions of other colors."

²⁴ Maurice Blanchot: "Fascination is the relation the gaze entertains - a relation which is itself neutral and impersonal - with sightless, shapeless depth, the absence one sees because it is blinding."

²⁵ Schulz to Halpern, 5 December 1936: "That's the best way to read—reading oneself, one's own book, between the lines. This is how we used to read in childhood, and that is why the same books, once so rich and full of pith, are like trees stripped bare of leaves when read in adulthood—stripped, that is, of the commentary we used to putty over the gaps. The books we read in childhood don't exist anymore; they sailed off with the wind, leaving bare skeletons behind. Whoever still has in him the memory and marrow of childhood should rewrite these books as he experienced them. Then we would have the real Robinson and the real Gulliver back again."

²⁶ Walter Benjamin: "The function of great criticism is neither... to instruct by means of historical descriptions, nor to educate through comparisons, but to cultivate knowledge by immersing itself in the work."

²⁷ Delmore Schwartz: "And O the sugar of light at night, and the lilies of light or tulips, and the wondrous senses of wine!"

obligation on reality and that grows imperceptibly into a bona fide claim, an I.O.U. clamoring for payment.²⁸ We have long since abandoned our dreams of that fortress²⁹, but here, years later, someone turns up who picks them up and takes them seriously, someone ingenuous and true of heart who understood them literally, took them for coin of the realm, and treated them as things that were plain, unproblematic. I have seen this person, I have spoken with him. His eyes were an improbably vivid sky-blue, not made for looking outward but for steeping themselves in the cerulean essence of dreams. He told me that when he came to the neighborhood I am referring to, that anonymous, virginal no-man's-land, he caught the scent of poetry and adventure at once, perceived the ready contours of myth³⁰ suspended over the site. He discovered in the atmosphere the preformed outlines of this concept, the planes, elevations, and stone tablets of data. He heard a summons, an inner voice, like Noah³¹ did when he received his orders and instructions.

HE was visited by the spirit of this design, which wandered at large in the atmosphere. He proclaimed a Republic of Dreams, a sovereign realm of poetry. On so many acres of land, on a surface sheet of landscape flung down in the woods, he established the exclusive domain of the fictive. He staked out its borders, laid down the foundations for a fortress, and converted the realm into a single great rose garden.³² Guest apartments took shape, cells for solitary contemplation, refectories, dormitories, libraries, cabins tucked away in the park, arbors, pavilions and scenic vistas . . .

THAT man who drags himself to the gates of this fortress, wolves or brigands hot on his trail, is saved. In triumphant procession they usher him in, relieve him of his dusty clothing. Festive, joyous, exhilarated, he enters the Elysian ambience³³ and breathes in the rose-laden sweetness of the air. Off behind him cities and worldly affairs, the days and their fevers, dwindle. He has entered a radiant new holiday regularity, has cast off his own body like a bony carapace, has shed the grimacing mask that had grown onto

²⁸ [Peter K. Gessner](#): "Schulz titled each of the portafolios *Xięga* (or Book), where the X stands for the sound ks. Actually X is no longer a letter in the Polish alphabet, nor was it in Schulz's time and the word *Xięga* is not found in any dictionary, having been replaced by *Księga*. Using *Xięga* is an affectation."

²⁹ Believe me when I say there was no awake at midnight except the books.

³⁰ Marcel Proust: "He would puzzle over what 'he'" actually was; for if there is any similarity between love and dying, it does not lie in the vague clichés that people bandy about, but in the fact that both of these experiences make one probe deeper into the mystery of personality, for fear that it's reality may dissolve."

³¹ Leonard Cohen: "When you're not feeling holy, your loneliness says that you've sinned."

³² Hermann Broch: "Foliage and blossom, fruit, bark and earth were touching his fingers..."

³³ Witold Gombrowicz to Schulz, 1936: "Get back down here on earth! Dance with an ordinary woman! Show how you defend yourself against a chance encounter!"

his face, has completed the liberating metamorphosis.³⁴

THE man with the sky-blue eyes is no architect. He is, rather, a director, a director of cosmic landscapes and sceneries. His art consists in catching nature's intentions in midair, knowing how to read her arcane ambitions.³⁵ For nature is full of potential architecture, rife with plans and construction. Did the master builders of the great ages behave any differently?³⁶ They eavesdropped on the immense pathos of great squares, the dynamic perspectives of distance, the silent pantomime of symmetrical lanes. Long before Versailles, clouds in the immense skies of summer evenings arranged themselves into the kinds of spacious compounds that religious orders live and worship in, ethereal megalomaniacal residences;³⁷ I had tried their hand at stage-setting, piling up towering structures, oversized and world-scale layouts. The grand theater of uncircumscribed air-space is inexhaustible in its ideas, its projects, its aerial preliminaries; it hallucinates an architecture of grandiose inspiration,³⁸ an ethereal, transcendental brand of urbanistics.

HUMAN works have the peculiarity that, once completed, they become hermetic, cut off from nature, consolidated on a base of their own.³⁹ The work of the Blue-eyed One, in contrast, has not cut itself off from the great cosmic contexts;⁴⁰ it is immersed in them half-humanized like a centaur, harnessed to the sublime processes of nature, still unfinished and growing.⁴¹ The man with the sky-blue eyes invites everyone to keep on

³⁴ Schulz to Maria Kasprowiczowa, 25 January 1934: "Moving from one face to another we must rethink and rebuild entirely, we must change all dimensions and postulates. None of the categories that applied when we were talking about one person remain when we stand before another... When I meet a new person, all of my previous experiences, anticipations, and tactics prepared in advance become useless. Between me and each new person the world begins anew."

³⁵ Susan Taubes: "Must produce different free associations..."

³⁶ Schulz to Anna Płockier (Ania), 6 November 1941: "Merely being right does not redeem you in the realm of works of the imagination."

³⁷ Frederic Pajak: "I believe in stuttering and speech, torn to pieces by its own thorns and brambles."

³⁸ Schulz to Witold Gombrowicz, 1936: "It is the mob within us that applauds, dear Witold; the mob, deeply rooted inside, casting spells, gives off its collective grunt, smothers our better knowledge..."

³⁹ Schulz to Anna Plockier, 19 November 1941: "How sad to think that at 30 Mazeppa Street, where I spent so many lovely hours, no one will be left, all of it will become mere legend. I don't know why I feel guilty toward myself, as if I had lost something and it was my own fault."

⁴⁰ Schulz to Anna Płockier (Ania), 6 November 1941: "To my mind, realism, as the exclusive urge to copy reality, is a fiction. No such thing has ever existed. Realism became the incubus and scarecrow of the nonrealists, a veritable medieval Satan daubed in lurid colors on every wall. I would suggest a purely negative term to designate realism: It is a method that endeavors to keep all its means within the confines of certain conventions, and is determined not to break a certain convention we call reality, or common sense, or plausibility."

⁴¹ Schulz to Anna Plockier, 19 June 1941: "Please come, secure and unthreatened as always, and don't spare me. Whatever happens, I endorse you in all your metamorphoses. If you are Circe, I will be Ulysses and I know the herb that will make you powerless. Of course, I may be just bragging, just being provocative."

working, fabricating, jointly creating: We are all of us dreamers by nature, after all, brothers under the sign of the trowel,⁴² destined to be master builders . . .⁴³

⁴² Stanislaw Witkiewicz: "Only within a hierarchy can good deeds acquire the true higher sense of something structured, as the function of a collective consciousness."

⁴³ Roland Barthes to George Perros, 1962: "Be in touch, my dear George, and I beg you, never hold my silences against me."