THE KLEKSOGRAPH

An International Review of Art and the Subconscious

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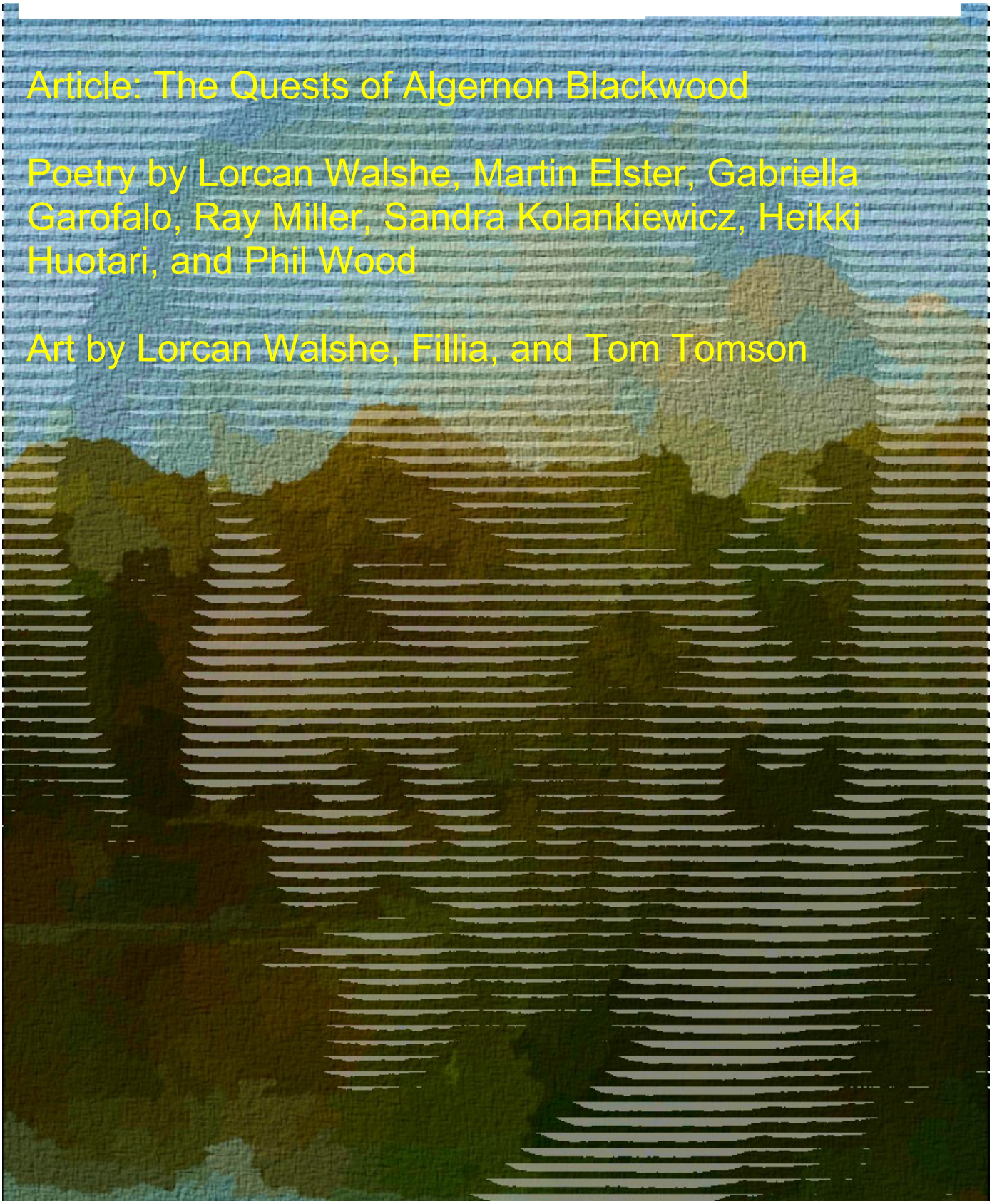

Article: The Quests of Algernon Blackwood

Poetry by Lorcan Walshe, Martin Elster, Gabriella Garofalo, Ray Miller, Sandra Kolankiewicz, Heikki Huotari, and Phil Wood

Art by Lorcan Walshe, Fillia, and Tom Tomson

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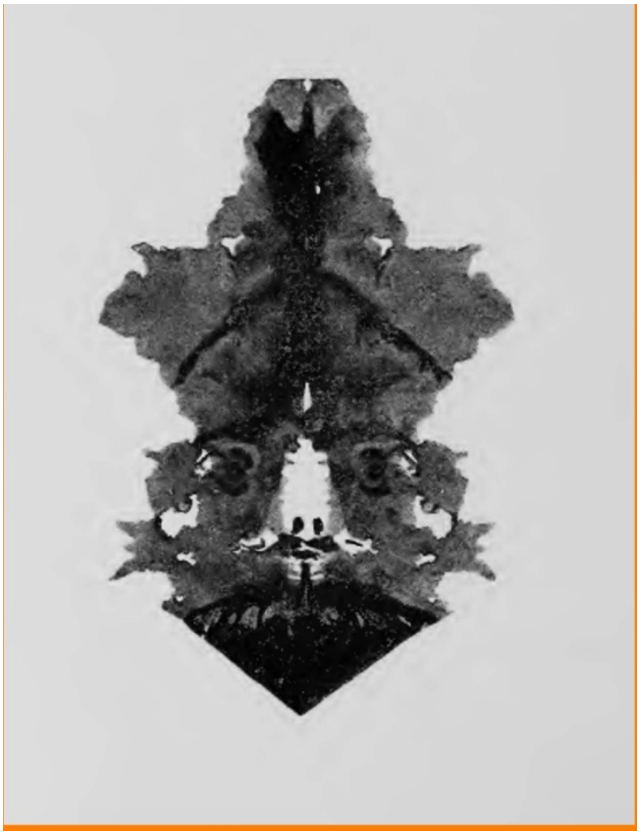
Editor: Peter Van Belle



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In the mid-nineteenth century, Justinus Kerner, published his book of "Kleksographien". Later psychologists used similar ink blots as a means of accessing the subconscious of their patients. The Kleksograph (Klecks is the official German spelling) is dedicated to exploring and celebrating the relationship between the subconscious and art.

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Cover: illustration by Peter Van Belle

All stories and poems in this magazine are works of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons and events is coincidental.
This magazine can be downloaded free from www.kleksograph.be

The Magus, by Lorcan Walshe

Lorcan Walshe
The Prisoner

re•cov•er•y

*an act of **RECOVERING**; the regaining of or possibility*

of regaining something lost or taken away; restoration

or return to health from sickness; restoration

or return to any former and better state or condition

parallels of cloud puffed pink and searing blue
a Monet sky domed the august evening, ached
in harmony with receptive souls, music
in a memory - the magician dropped a card

earth spun on its axis, mystics danced;

strung out on self importance the city ant hill
hummed, mechanically examined swollen arteries
bronzed and shadowed in sinking light

above the rituals warriors withdrew, relaxed
into armchairs and studied each other's faces
for the absence of expectation or recent emotional
lacerations and shared common experience
of esoteric horror in semi-private wars

recent arrivals still demented shed their tears,

shattered with imagination and angry dissipated years
they whispered broken marriages, irretrievable careers
inevitable isolation, unidentifiable fears

some try become saints, others saviours; all endure
a succession of obsessions, each one molested
by hard on hard sell soft flesh fantasies: out
on the open road in this year's porch materialist man
kicks into overdrive with his leather gloved hand
and screams it’s great to be alive, it’s great to be!
beside him a biological miracle has bared her knee

lying on a floor between two speakers, a bach concerto
harnessing the brain, along the edges of the music
god arrives - a fluid presence impossible to explain -
and in a game of hide and seek disappears again;

or standing on a stage explaining a transition
into being and out of flight, enclosing within words
torn images and feelings, encasing within minutes
thirty years of life; then coming down the bared soul
startled as though naked in a dream tries cover its reality
and finds no façade to come clean, instead
a diseased filter makes inhabiting obscene

out on the estate in tweed and blasting confused

and fearless home grown foul, chinless wonder
severs links with all creation and above the blood-lust
screams it's great to be alive, it's great to be! having
increased on last year's bag by another sixty three

dismantling all denial and raging at the genocide,
at the moral floodlights, demented as the barbed wire
breaks to a desperate world of restless flight;

all was a rehearsal then on the curved path of orphan life
for the detached genius in creation, for empathic moments
of cold insight and grieving with the wounded healers
reuniting an ancient and an innocent mind the scarred child
forgave all pretension of angry power of then need to please
and in the vacuum of the moment the prisoner whispers
on his release its great to be alive, its great to be…

The Passing Art by Lorcan Walshe

Martin Elster

When I Set Out for Acamar

(With apologies to Thomas Hardy)

When I set out for Acamar,
    a hundred light years away,
    the galactic winds were at play.
I thirsted for an ice-blue star
when I set out for Acamar
    a hundred light years away.

What I should find at Acamar
    while held in its gravity field,
    AI had not revealed,
nor had my cogitation jar
said what I'd find at Acamar
    while held in its gravity field.

When I came back from Acamar
    with fins and an extra head,
    some gawped, some swooned, some fled—
they said that I had gone too far
when I came back from Acamar
    with fins and an extra head!

Martin Elster
Sue's Odd Experience

Waking at dawn, you stretch and yawn
  and note your nightgown's duller.
And what's with the sheet and the socks on your feet?
  They're not the usual color.

You drive to your place of work, and face
  a door, expecting to see
your name, which is Sue. But the sign says, "Lew."
  Where could your office be?

It's on the next floor up. Perplexed,
  you enter the room and freeze.
Why can't you place a single face,
  each looking ill at ease?

Now back at your flat you see your cat
  which died six weeks ago;
and your ex is here, the guy last year
  you kicked out in the snow.

Soon it's night. You peer at the light
  of the stars and wonder why
you can't discern, in the sky's nocturne,
  Orion or Gemini.

So what do you do on a world that's new
  yet old as heaven and hell?
Stay out of trouble and ask your double
  who lives just parallel?

You run and run until the sun
  starts glowing in the west.
The west? No! No! This crazy show
  is making you distressed.

But there, beside you (come to guide you?)
  stands your doppelgänger.
Look at her choppers! Those teeth are whoppers!
  You're tempted to defang 'er.

And so a battle starts to rattle
  all of hyperspace.
She tries to bite, but you grapple and fight
  until the interface

disappears and all the gears
  of space-time come to a halt,
the cops arrest your twin in jest,
  for there's been no assault —

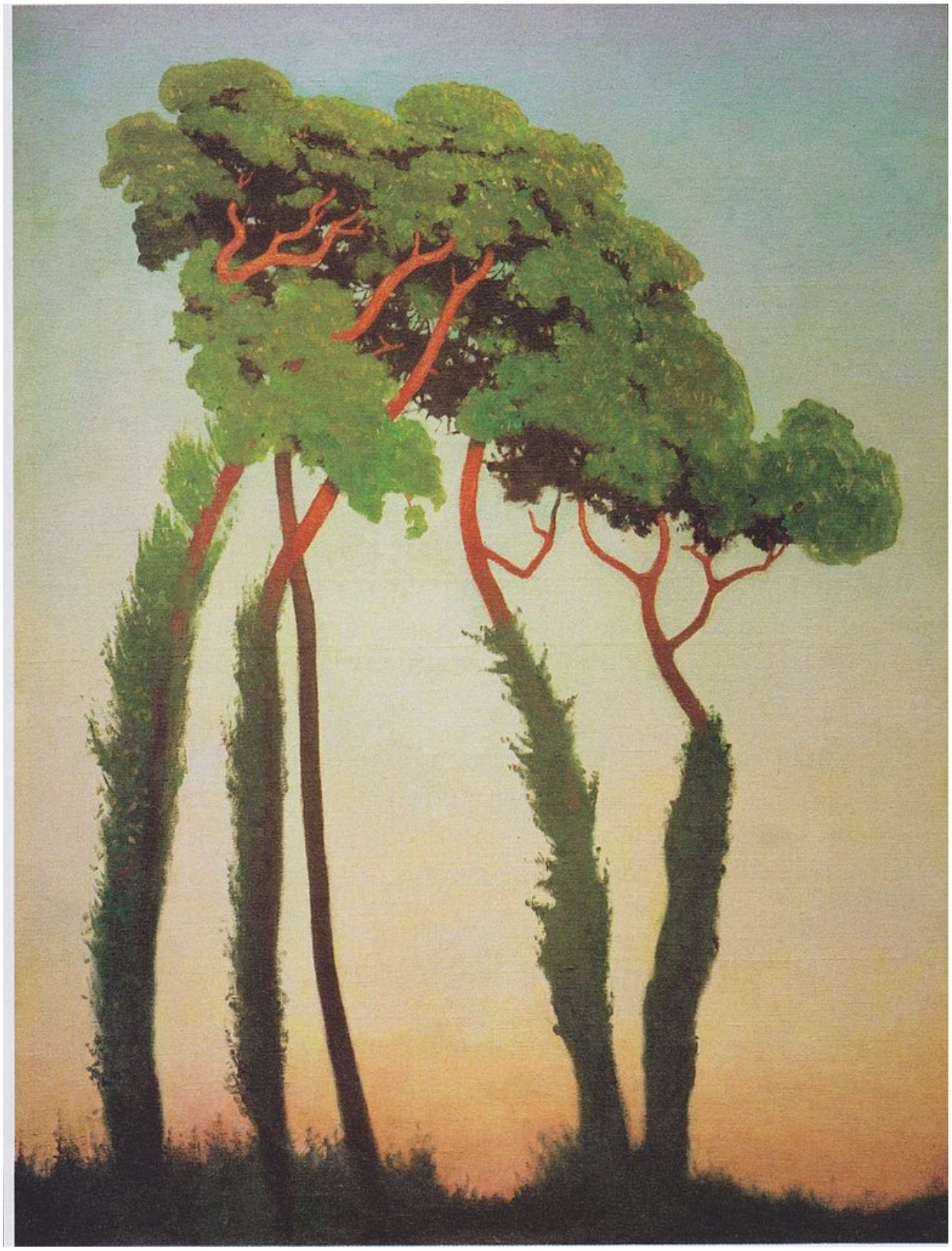
but you're in jail. Can't pay the bail.
  Two guards are guarding your cell.
In a couple of hours a fiend devours
  your body, as if it fell

into a maw which opened, "Ah,"
  and you're free-falling, falling,
dropping, tumbling. Who's that mumbling?
  In the raw and sprawling:

your body. And a kindly hand
  is pressing a damp cloth
against your head. You're on a bed.
  Like the fluttering wings of a moth

your eyelids twitch, then open. "A glitch
  in the app, but now it's better."
Yet will it last? Or will you be cast
  in another saneness shredder

where the zeros and ones, the atoms and suns,
  and the minds of you and Lew,
alert or in slumber, are nothing but number
  to leave you without a clue?



The Last Rays of Light by Felix Vallotton

Martin Elster
The Experiment

Your doctors doctored you so that you might
remain alive immeasurable years
slumbering like a snail all day, all night,
safe in your shell, incapable of tears.
Your dreams, they promised, would be far more splendid
than anything a human could envision.
For the morose, it's what they recommended.
Of course it was, they told you, your decision.

You drifted at your leisure like an eagle,
partook of the most finger-licking fare,
shared forms of love that went beyond illegal,
wallowed in warm lagoons, vaguely aware
of distant rumblings in a dying Earth
echoing through ten trillion plies of mirth.

Paessagio Magico by Fillia, 1932

Gabriella Garofalo

Sorry, heaven, what a sad lack of style

To M. W.

Sorry, heaven, what a sad lack of style
When urging clouds to betray their pledge
With a dissolving moon deep in the heart
Of underground trains where projects end up,
Pluto’s green sanctuary, and at the first hint of light
Her soul runs up the stairs to skip heaven,
A shady promise, or blurred pics of trees blind to snow,
To dreams where a skewed light
Breaks a bet with an Angel, and halts life-
But what if she goes missing for good,
Or crawling into carved-out times,
Her rhythm stalking white days, signs waving in blue?
Well, let's talk it over only if light cries
For comforts or showy comets,
While you stand still in your thirst for sprouts,
Except, my soul, they went missing,
Dismayed at the grasp in your stares,
As you kept on hooking up with lust, desire-
Oh, the things you do for hunger, letters,
A cramped screeching, voices stifling again and again
Tattered stories, and a thwarted happiness-
So, please be gentle to clouds and waves,
As the sky ‘n’ sea are exacting lovers,
From highest weird places they cast
A bolt of something you can hardly call light,
Yet you do-
Naked, of course, but enough for a frilly dress,
Or a botched-up time.

Gabriella Garofalo

‘And how are you?’ she enquires,

To S.

‘And how are you?’ she enquires,
But no answer from rain, clouds,
Waves in a seaside hamlet,
As they’re going on business as ever,
Faithful to themselves, always the same,
While their blue is a taste waiting to be unearthed-
Shoo them elsewhere, lead them astray
To Hecate sowing her seeds
Among scattered comets, messy creatures-
Or maybe keep them with you,
They’re starving for your tales-
And you stop showing off, unworthy heaven,
Stop asking for attention, as your blue isn’t keen
On troubles, children, feuds in her womb,
That hard blue light will halt your soul,
And fill your days with a good dose
Of cold stares in your house-
But don’t you know food tastes bland without them,
Or names written on a whim,
Ambushing you from behind so you give back
What you nicked from hourglasses, clocks,
Time, and an eavesdropping foliage-
So, stop it, blue, you and your dystopian tales,
Bring back the missing, those throngs of clouds
At odds with an abrading sun, and lights hiding away
From unearthed books, emergency alerts,
C’mon, she’ll sort them out in the basement,
Her hunted hands buried away
Lest they reach out to you under no pretext,
Maybe the sky, maybe a soul
Fed up with books, deserted rooms,
Words she grasped to shun a silence scraping the green
Off grass, the dishevelled stars unable to hide

Away from her, a slant shape of light,
The much-prized prey to a faltering glow from volcanoes.

Senso di Gravita by Fillia, 1932

Gabriella Garofalo
Light, blessed light all over the place,

To S.

Light, blessed light all over the place,
Wear it like a mantle while three Angels are nicely shaping
Her soul, so let demise flaunt her sparkling hands,
No use for them now that the sky's got rid
Of all those little dark corners, the lost occasions
He blindly rejected when reason and her mates,
Those predatory hands made the fruits go rotten,
So hide your thirst, don't move, hope is breathing free,
While looking for a shelter for heaven
From those crippled souls glowing in deserted spots,
And that's where you finally find yourself,
Among migrating skies in an endless dispersal,
Wild delirious stares at churches or sunsets,
While your hunger misshapes herself,
A soul so blind to rhyme or reason,
And her skinned voice decrees that shadows
And echoes in your stare dry up-
Yes, cry me a river for all those scattered lights
Who called the sky out, him and his obsessions,
When he threw himself against the green mould
From stinky households, unpredicted changes,
And why can't you see disappearance and prophecies
In your shelters where the wind blows
To Father his green, where seclusion
Of candles begs light to drop by,
And you wolf down, my seed,
Births always inevitable, so very still-
So what? Right, don't ask her to set herself ablaze,
As her slant reply is crooked words, those words
You can't hear ever since heaven banned them
To a sour life, 'cause they dared listen
To missing voices, those that called out
The infinite artist for his wrong colours,

A glass so prone to break up,
And a light she would wear, sort of a worthless mantle,
A nadir from an impossible promise.

Mistero Aerio by Fillia, 1930

Gabriella Garofalo
‘T would be nice, wouldn’t it,

To S.

‘T would be nice, wouldn’t it,
To find fallen leaves, haunted trees
Just for a change, but no, her only food
Is whimsical skies, clouds, or waves,
And hunger’s tricky stuff if you can’t discard
A sick light where your shapes fade away-
Look, immortality’s not a big deal, right,
So let the wind deal with it,

The wise expert in the field,
Who’s never ever blind to voices,
Or the embargo to soul in those stares
Thriving on walls and battered thoughts-
As for you, soul, give up your Etruscan smile,
Stop staring at scents of boulders, surrenders,
Make room for the blue to let life creep in
Among the loops of her mind,
Stop craving for nests to fill up
With small white stones, dry branches,
Warped leaves rewound-
Oh, is that you, heaven, ever wondered
Who gave birth to those stones
When the flow overwhelms you in silence,
Or your only concern is to dodge neuroses
And scowling clouds,
While books, trees, comets fall down,
But it’s such a good omen for you, soul,
As long as a pure impudence, an offence
To all stalking gods stand as your lights,
So, no need to ask for water, redemption,
You only deserve the hopeless friend,
A fire who sets earth ablaze whenever the sky
Reaches out other hands, no,

Not those motherly hands good only for whipping away
Helpless words from nonchalant moons,
The absent memory of the sky in the background-
Don’t worry, soul, to all and sundry admission is free.

portrait photo of Algernon Blackwood, unknown photographer

Peter Van Belle

The Quests of Algernon Blackwood

He's best known for the stories The Willows and The Wendigo. Both are called examples of Nature Horror, yet to the author they weren't entirely meant as entertainment. All of Algernon Blackwood's fiction has supernatural elements, yet he stressed his stories were based on personal experience. To him they were both means by which to deal with his "demons of the past", but also a reflection of his attempts to reach what he called "a higher plane of consciousness". These quests were undertaken through studies of the occult, Buddhism, and psychology. At the same time he escaped from modern life and his demons through long stays in remote parts of Europe and North America.

A Gilded Childhood

Born into an influential Kentish family in 1869, Algernon Blackwood was destined for public office. He was related to the Lord Mayor of London and the Governor-General of Canada, and his sister would marry an Australian governor. Moreover the British Empire was at its zenith when he grew up. Yet a peculiar family circumstance steered him in a different direction.

Algernon's dad had undergone a religious conversion after the Crimean War. Alcohol and other pleasures were forbidden in the home, and the main hall of the manor was used for religious gatherings, where preachers, often American, would roar their sermons of fire and brimstone. Not surprisingly, Algernon became very religious, but also obsessed with guilt and fear of punishment.

A telling incident is an anecdote he related in his autobiography Episodes Before Thirty. At Wellington School he'd taken a book of poetry from a friend and put his own name on the frontispiece. This was discovered and he was summoned to the head master's office. When confronted with the facts, he denied his intention was to steal. He maintained his innocence even in his autobiography, but blamed this incident for his lifelong fear of punishment in one form or another. In many cases such a fear is caused by the subconscious sense of having transgressed, and this wasn't the last time he would invite punishment.

Algernon considered his father a saint, not because of his piety, but because of his kindness. He also instilled a love of nature in his son, taking him on long walks in the countryside. What he didn't realize is that this provided him with an escape from the suffocating piety at home. Another instance of kindness would inspire Algernon to write a play: one Christmas his father had an old railway carriage installed in the garden for the children to play in. This became the inspiration for Algernon's play for children, The Starlight Express.

His doubts about Christianity came one night. He woke up with a feeling of being choked. He prayed to God to spare him, with no effect. In the end a doctor had to be sent for. Significant that his sensation was of suffocation, which could mean his ailment was symbolic.

The next stage of his childhood development took place in the Black Forest in Germany, where he boarded with the Moravian Brotherhood, also called the Herrhuter, from the Saxon village where the movement started. At the time this Protestant movement, with social aspects, was very popular in Eastern Europe and they're even mentioned in Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov.

His education here once again underlined the dichotomy in Algernon's childhood: religion and oppression versus nature and freedom. Though strict in its religious practices, the Moravian Brotherhood also stressed individual development and outdoor activities such as hiking and camping, two of Algernon's lifelong passions.

His secret spiritual rebellion manifested itself in a strange practice when he was home. He would sneak out of the house at night and hold ceremonies at a pond in the garden. Often he was joined by an older sister, and he marvelled at how her character at night was completely different from that during the day.

A chance event led to his abandonment of Christianity. A family friend had left the book Yoga Aphorisms by Pantajali on a table in the hall. This is a work on Hindu philosophy and meditation. His father's circle equated Eastern philosophies to devil worship, and the friend had brought it along as an illustration. Algernon started reading it, and was immediately overwhelmed by the feeling that here were beliefs that suited him better, free from guilt and fear. Again it is significant that he recalls his reading being interrupted by his father's voice, thereby linking his interest in non-Christian beliefs to his father's disapproval. He also added that, after reading it, he returned it to the exact same spot, even though no one had missed it.

Village scene in Black Forest - Max Ferrars - source: Library of Congress

A book which had his father's approval, but with the opposite effect, would inform his later supernatural fiction. This was Pember's Earth's Earliest Ages. To Pember the vogue for the occult, spiritism, and the new religion of Theosopy, was a sign of the return of the Nephilim, mythical creatures mentioned in the apocryphal Book of Henoch. In Hebrew mythology they were giants, offspring of angels and earthly women, seducing mankind with technology and wealth. The source of this legend was the contact between the ancient Israelites and the Phoenicians. With their technological advancement and wealth, they appeared as demi-gods to the former. Reading it, Algernon became fascinated by Theosophy, with its invisible gurus from Tibet, its teachings on karma and reincarnation. Even more personally appealing was that it promised extending one's mental faculties beyond that of an ordinary human.

From conversations, his father began to suspect his son was straying from the fold. So he told him a story – which he claimed was true – about an epileptic who'd gone to wizard for a cure. The wizard had given him a locket to wear round his neck, but warned him never to open it. From then on the epileptic fits ceased. One day, however, curiosity got the better of him and he opened the locket. Inside was a piece of parchment. When the man read it, he fell down dead. On it was written: "Don't take him until he's dead." Though the story frightened the young Algernon, it also increased his interest in the occult.

At the time he also came into contact with Fechner's ideas. Gustav Fechner is, together with Wilhelm Wundt, Jean-Martin Charcot, and William James, one of the founders of psychological research. He was the first to conduct psychological experiments, and tried to make psychology into a quantified science. Yet Fechner was at the same time religious, with unorthodox beliefs. He claimed that everything, even the planets and stars, had life and a soul. In fact, body and soul were two aspects of one spiritual reality. And in this natural order humans had a special place, as a link between the earth and the stars.

Perhaps to cure him from his interest in the occult, his father introduced him to the Society of Psychical Research, an organization that investigated spiritism and the supernatural. One of its later members would be Sigmund Freud. One of their tasks was to investigate haunted houses. Though Algernon reported only feeling certain frissons, one sight stayed with him all his life: the look of terror on the face of a woman who'd accompanied him one night.

Formally, he started reading Agriculture at Edinburgh University, but he came under the spell of the Professor of Medicine, a hypnotist, who held spiritist seances at home. During one of these sessions, Algernon became convinced he was a native American in a previous life, and an Aztec, Incan, Ancient Egyptian, and Atlantean before that. He heard a voice prophetize that he would return to North America, and that he would come close to success, but never reach it.

Herbert Silberer's brilliantly titled Coincidence, or the Goblin Tricks of the Subconscious (Der Zufall, oder die Koboldstreiche des Unbewustseins) explains what process is at work here. He'd been to Canada, and had seen the native Americans, likely the Algonquin. In his autobiography he tells of being underwhelmed by them, yet in his stories they're referenced time and again, even when, in The Willows, they have nothing to do with the story itself. So clearly they did strike a chord within his psyche, likely because they seemed more at home in nature, his favourite environment. Equally, his interest in the occult was a quest to enter a world in which his libido (I use the word in the broad sense, that is, to mean everything that gives one pleasure) could express itself without restrictions.

As to failures, they became a pattern in his life. Silberer called the proces the Coincidence Affected, nowadays we call it a self-fulfilling prophecy. The subconscious believes the psyche will fail, and unbeknown to the consciousness, affects the person's behaviour to ensure that failure.

Two fellow students at Edinburgh left a deep mark on him. The first was an Indian student who later became the inspiration for John Silence, a psychic detective in a series of haunted house stories, as well as the hero of his eponymous novel Jules le Vallon. A more personally significant friend was a young doctor, an athiest suffering from an incurable disease. He requested Algernon stay with him through his last days. Algernon was very affected by his friend's courage, and mentions his beauty.

Misadventures in Canada

He'd passed through the halls of education, and with a stipend of a hundred pounds a year, and letters of introduction from his father, he confidently left Britain for Canada, certain to make a career in its civil service. When he arrived, he was invited to become the secretary of head of the Canadian Post Office. He scuppered this opportunity at a ball of Canadian high society, where he behaved awkwardly, and wouldn't dance with the daughters of local bigwigs. They took it as a snub and he was blackballed.

So he started writing for a magazine by day, and giving French lessons in the evening. His editor, a Mr. Whitrow taught him how to type, and wanted to join his French lessons. Algernon told him most of his students turn up drunk. Their friendship dimmed when he told Whitrow he wanted to write an article on Hegel and Buddhism, adding he was a Buddhist himself. His writings do reveal a knowledge of the core tenets of Buddhism, similar to what others like Arthur Schoppenhauer and Rudyard Kipling knew, but I feel he

fell into the trap many in the West fell into at the time: believing Buddhism hid all kinds of occult teachings.

He moved further west, to Ontaria, where he started a dairy farm and guest house. Typically, he failed to draw up a contract with the farmer. Six months later the business went bankrupt, with a loss of two thousand pounds, of which he recuperated six hundred when the farm was foreclosed. Revealingly he writes feeling relieved when the farm is taken off his hands.

Toronto circa 1900 - source Library of Congress

A similar scenario with the bar he took over in Toronto, with the added embarrassment of having his father find out (he was prominent in the Temperance Movement). In his autobiography Algernon writes that up until that time he'd never been in a bar, or a theatre, at a racetrack, or held a woman. The latter would, as far as I can tell, never happen. His partner in the business was an actor called Kay, a cheerful and optimistic man. He introduced him to Billy Bingham, a huckster who taught them a trick of the trade: many

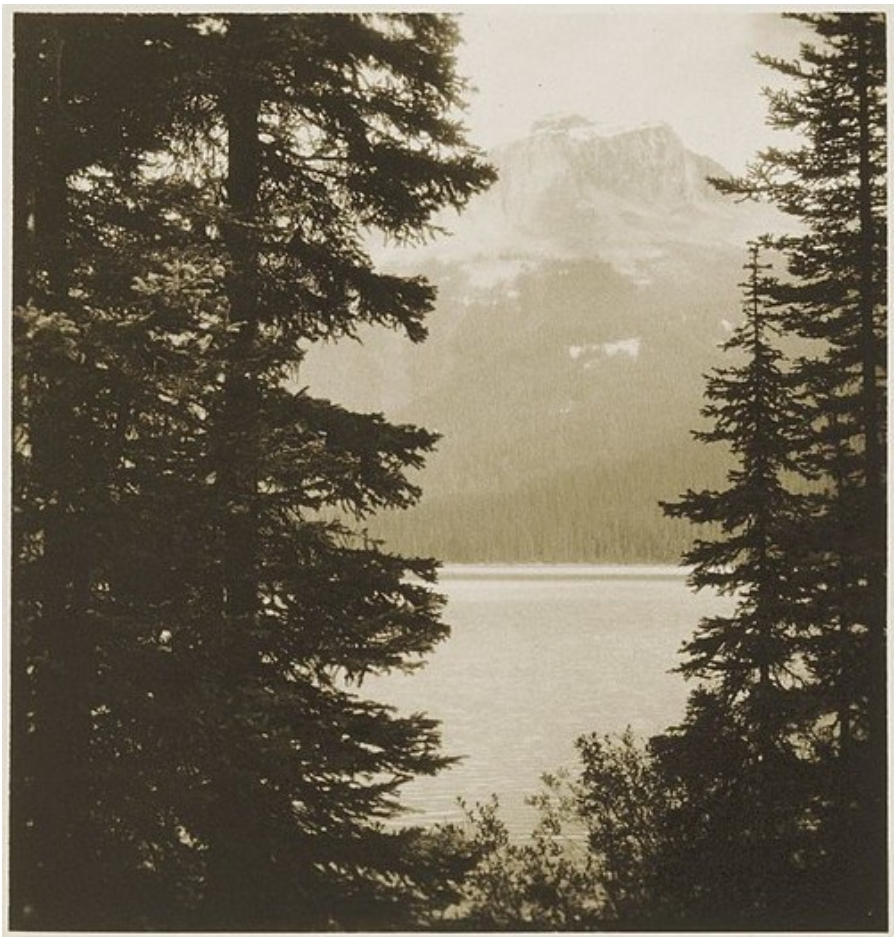
costumers expect the barman to drink along with them, so to avoid getting drunk, they should keep a bottle of tea behind the bar, to pour their own drinks from. Algernon also noticed an amusing trick alcoholics use to drink from shot glasses when their hands are shaking: they place the glass in the middle of their handkerchief, then slowly pull at the corners until the glass reaches their lips.

The business fails, and once again Algernon is relieved to be rid of it. By that time he notices Canada isn't the land of opportunity after all: many of his fellow Britons, even the educated ones, can only find work as farmhands.

The country has one great thing to offer him though, its nature. Even while running his businesses, he went camping in the wilderness at night or at the weekends. Away from civilization he could dismiss his failures as the workings of karma, and he could attain the equanimity encouraged by Buddhism. He remained interested in the occult as well, and founded the Toronto chapter of the Theosophical Society.

Around that time he also went on an expedition with professor John Prince to study the Algonquin. It was then when he first heard about the Wendigo.

His time in Canada closed with the happiest time of his life, a five-month retreat, alone with Kay, to an island in a lake. There he learned how to operate a canoe, and in the evenings he would meditate while Kay studied his roles. The weekends were less pleasant as then the lake shores would be populated by campers from Toronto. In nature he also never felt the need to create anything, not even writing.



His father, in a letter, urged him to return to Toronto, but Algernon had a better idea. He and his friend would make it in the biggest city of the Western Hemisphere: New York.

New York Inferno

In his autobiography, Episodes Before Thirty, Algernon writes that he experienced all forms of horror in the city. His experiences there, and one relationship in particular, take up most of his autobiography, and left its mark on him both physically and mentally.

Algernon and Kay arrived in New York in 1892 with just sixty dollars. They rented a room in a boarding house, but have to share it with a third Englishman Algernon calls Boyde (real name: Arthur John Bigge). The first horror that assailed Algernon was the vermin that teems in the boarding house. They're also short on food, and have to feed off condiments in bars.

Manhattan circa 1890 - source: Library of Congress

As they left Canada, Kay had advised him to go into journalism, so Algernon went to work at a newspaper, reporting from “The Tombs”, a notorious police court in a rough neighbourhood. He witnesses policemen beating up suspects, fabricating evidence to frame the innocent, and taking bribes to let the guilty off. His fellow journalists teach him all the tricks of the trade, but he finds the work distressing. His only escapes are the fading memories of Canada, the meetings of the local branch of the Theosophical Society, and his new friend Boyde.

Kay was away, and Boyde didn’t work, so Algernon was the only breadwinner. The terrible living conditions make Algernon ill, however, and he has to stay in bed. Boyde is away most of the day, and Algernon is left with little food, which he warms on the gas light. He starts to hallucinate, seeing coloured swirls in the sky through a rent in the wall. He later claimed many of the ideas for his stories came from that periode. A German doctor, Otto Huebner, treats him free of charge, and shares his interest in Theosophy, but the doctor clams up when Boyde’s around. At times he drops hints to Algernon about his character.

His ill-health was his second horror, but the worst horror was Boyde. His friend’s strange deportment frightened him. One day he finds a torn cheque on the floor with his signature, crudely forged. It was meant to transfer what little money he had left to Boyde’s account. He then discovered a letter from Kay, sending money for Algernon. When he presents these items to Boyde, the latter goes to the dressing table and gets out a straight razor. Algernon bluffs his way out of the situation by claiming the police are outside the door, whereupon Boyde bursts into tears. Algernon makes him write a confession, but he notices at night, while pretending to sleep, Boyde trying to steal it from him.

A family friend paid a visit and was shocked by his condition. Disease and malnutrition have left him emaciated. He tells Algernon Boyde has been cadging money off his relatives, claiming that Algernon spends his money on all sorts of debauchery. Yet Algernon refused to throw him out.

In a telling passage he mentioned being frightened of a large spider in the room. Spiders in dreams often symbolize suffocating relationships. Just after this passage he relates of the sudden appearance of a lady who claims to be Boyde’s wife. He describes her as a nightmare, with her make-up and perfume. She tells him to give up Boyde, and that he’s ruining their marriage. To quote his reaction: “...It was simply that I needed him, rotten as he was…”

By now he was so frail, Boyde has to support him when they went for walks in the park. His German doctor, and the artists he posed for – to earn some money – tell him Boyde’s a swindler, spreading slanderous rumours about him. Then he discovered Boyde has

been intercepting letters from his family. Yet, the same night, he felt a strange bliss when watching Boyde sleep.

He broke off the relationship over something trivial, at least on the surface. Boyde shaved his moustache off. That night Algernon started kicking him and told him to leave in the morning. When he woke up he discovered Boyde has stolen most of his possessions. The police tell him they can't waste time on this matter; they'll come as soon as he finds him himself.

The German doctor helps him in his quest for Boyde and invites him into his home. There he discovers the reason for the doctor's poverty: he is an opium addict. In his miserable state, he joins the doctor in shooting up, and in the consequent state of euphoria he becomes convinced of the reality of what he learned of the occult, and once again is willing to forgive Boyde. Gradually though, they wean each other off the drug.

He tracks Boyde down, though the police take the credit once the story hits the newspapers. A scandal among British immigrants is a field day for the American press. Soon afterwards, another young Briton tries to move in with Algernon. He describes him as "blushing and giggling." But when he throws him out, he's overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and shame, just as he felt with Boyde.

We need to address what Algernon really felt about those friends. Often in his autobiography he hints of certain rumours about him among his neighbours. Was he in a same-sex relationship with men like Kay, Boyde, and others? The difficulty is that even if he was, he could not admit it. Throughout his life homosexuality was a criminal offence. I see three possibilities: either he was in same-sex relationships, but didn't admit it, or he felt same-sex impulses, but either was so ashamed of them, or frightened of the consequences, he could not express them, or he felt them, but couldn't identify them, so they remained in his subconscious. The latter used to be called "latent homosexuality."

Fortunately, Kay moved in again, together with a French absinthe-addict called Louis. Some nights the trio scared the neighbours and landlady by holding what Louis called a Black Mass, chanting while prancing round a small statue in the middle of the room.

They try their luck at gold-prospecting in Canada. Of course they need a native guide, but Algernon described him as having "his natural evil temper." They become so paranoid about their guide, they post guards to protect the party from him. The expedition turned out to be a fool's errand: the gold was not in the local river, but in the rocks, and needed to be extracted through industrial means. So they returned to New York, where Algernon tried his hand at acting as well as freelance journalism.

There he acquired a new friend. Alfred Louis was a former British politician, who moved to America after suffering a mental breakdown. They meet on benches in the park, where the old man recites poems to him.

Another misadventure followed. He went into the perfume business with a Scotsman he calls Brodie (real name: William Henderson). It turned out the Scotsman plagiarized the formula, at which the business collapses. The apartment they share burns out, and they're both investigated for insurance fraud. Algernon was reduced to sleeping on park benches, a fate he felt he deserved.

Yet he was still well-connected, and this saves him. He was taken on by the New York Times, then he was hired as secretary by a banker called Speyer. Now he was back on his feet, Alfred Louis advised him to return home.

The Mystic

Algernon arrived in Liverpool in 1899. His experiences in Canada would help him in his writing, but those in New York would have a more subtle, yet profound effect on his personality. It marked him physically as well: illness and malnutrition left him permanently thin, though he'd lose his frailty through lots of outdoor activities.

In 1900 he made his first attempt to take a canoe down the Danube to the Black Sea. After a series of mishaps caused by a lack of knowledge of the rapids, he abandoned the undertaking in Hungary. That year saw also the publication of his first story, A Haunted Isle. A supernatural story that showcased the fear he had of the Algonquin in Canada.

The story is set in a large, empty cabin on an island in a lake. The narrator has been warned of the local Algonquin, but now he has to spend a night alone in the place.

"… But though the island was completely deserted and silent, the rocks and trees that had echoed human laughter and voices almost every hour of the day for two months could not fail to retain some memories of it all; and I was not surprised to fancy I heard a shout or cry as I passed from rock to rock, and more than once to imagine that I heard my own name called aloud."

The phenomenon described above has both an occult and psychological explanation. The supernatural cause is the imprint of the souls of the holidaymakers on the cabin and the island. The psychological explanation is that the mind projects memories and associations onto the outside world, much as perceptions are always experienced outside the senses, that is, we don't hear or see inside our heads, but out in the world.

The narrator then tells of the night, when he becomes convinced people are in the cabin. He says something is working on his subconscious, something that made him shun a particular room. Algernon had read books on psychology in New York, and believed that it, like the occult, would be the key to unlocking new faculties of the mind.

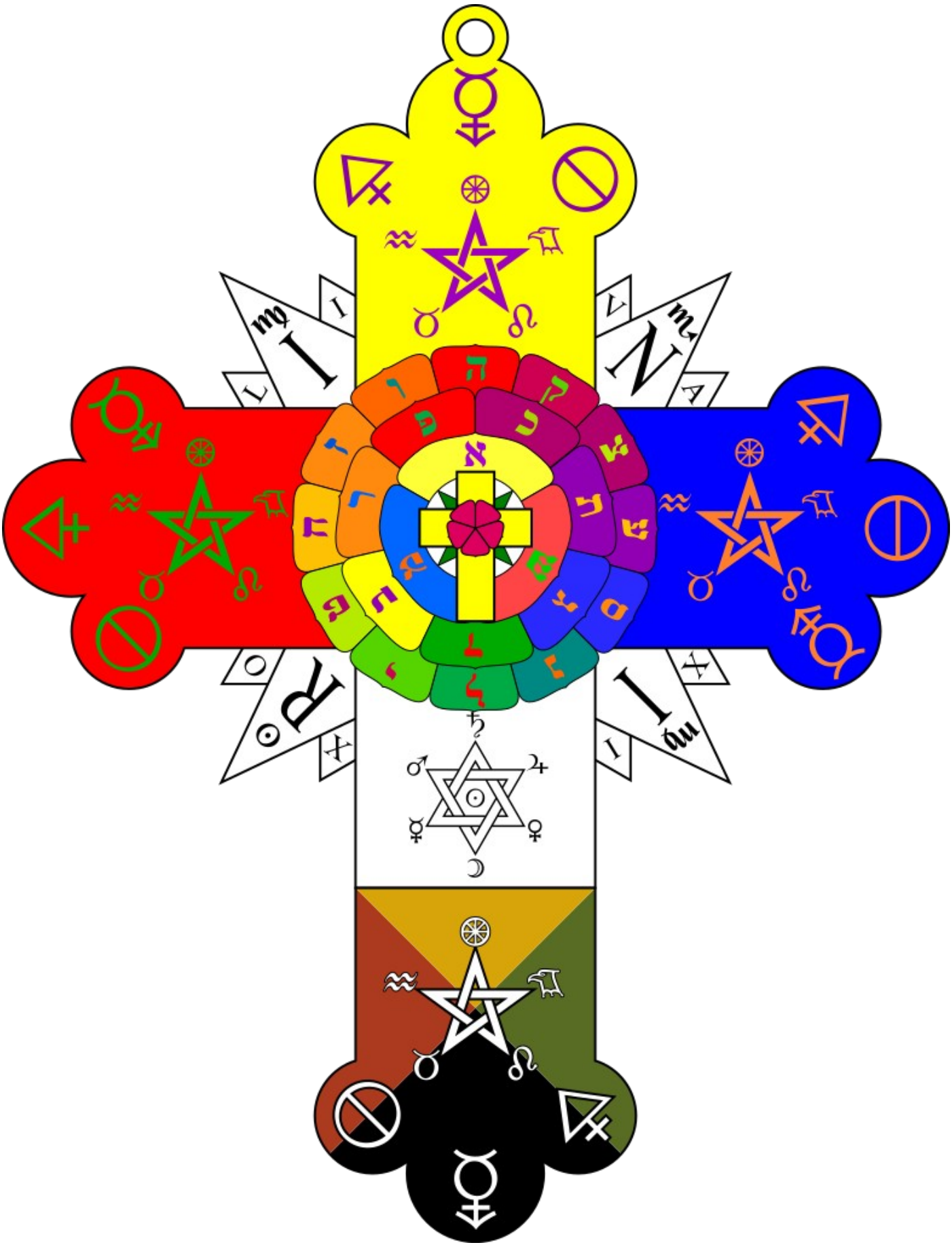
From the darkened cabin, he twice sees a canoe with two tribesmen. One is unusually large. The narrator grabs his rifle, but then realizes he's observing the scene on a psychic level. He cannot intervene. The tribesmen enter the cabin, but seem not to notice him, even though they pass right by him. They go upstairs to the shunned room and he hears a scream. Just at that moment, a thunderstorm breaks. The tribesmen pass him, dragging a scalped corpse along. Its face is his own. At this the narrator faints.

When he leaves the island the next morning, he sees the very same tribesmen from his vision circle the island. As I mentioned before, Algernon Blackwood always claimed his stories were based on real events. We see here how he took his fear of the Algonquin, and mixed it with what he learned about psychology and the occult, and finished with a story that expressed his fear of punishment. He admitted himself that most of his occult experiences involved the fear of a violent end.

To immerse himself further into the occult, he joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Its London chapter had recently been reformed by William Butler Yeats after its original head, Samuel Mathers, tried to impose Aleister Crowley on them. There are some similarities between Crowley and Blackwood. Both came from strict religious backgrounds and both were fascinated by the occult and Eastern thought. Yet whereas Algernon's rebellion had been muted, likely due to his sense of guilt, in Crowley, it turned into a reverse Christianity, demonism, if not outright Satanism. Yet, at heart, both remained religious.

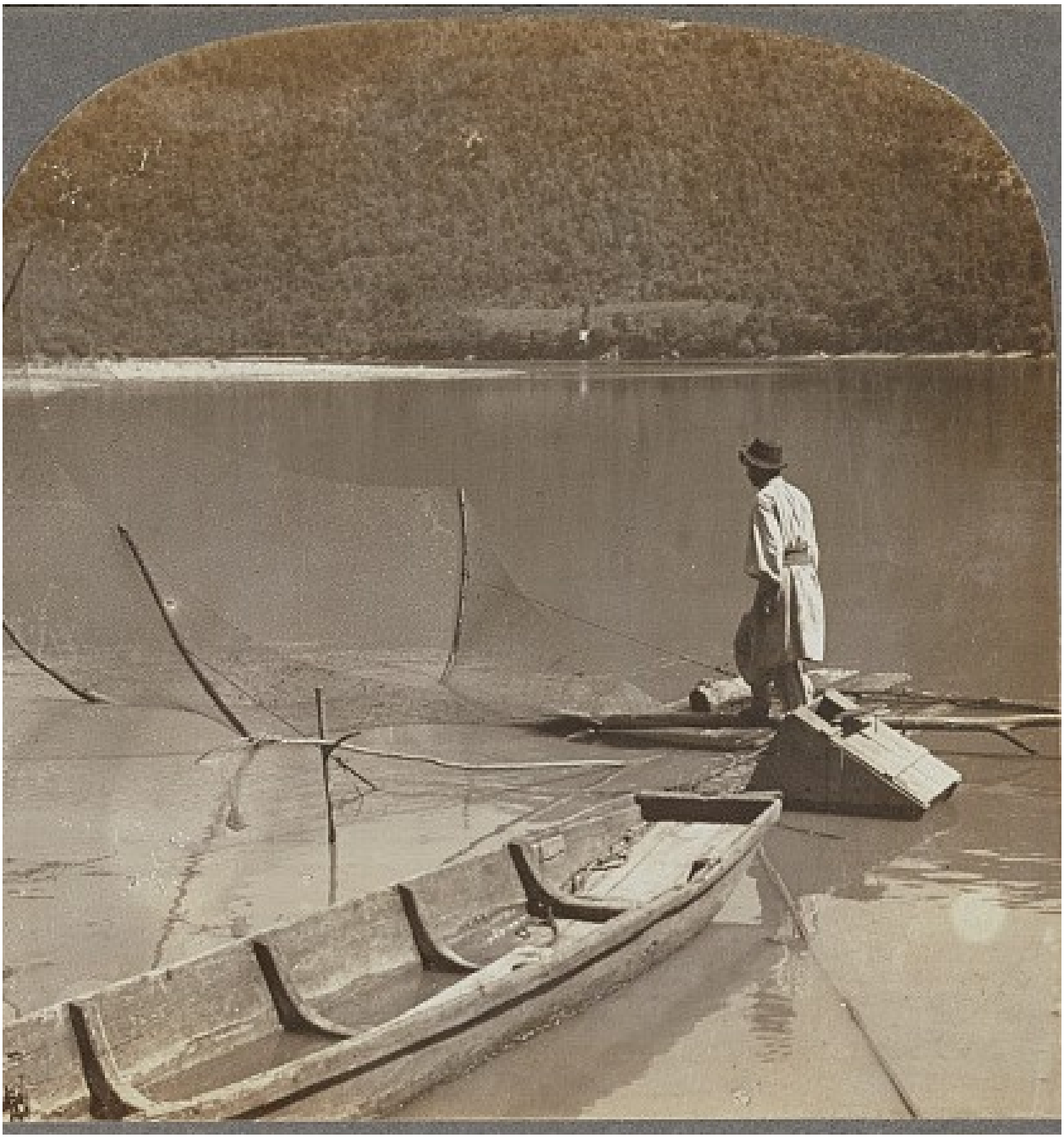
Algernon threw himself into his studies, and quickly reached the level of Philosophus, much higher than his fellow supernatural writer, Arthur Machen, writer of The Great God Pan, who'd been in the lodge longer. When asked about Algernon, Machen made a quip about him taking things too literally, which suggests their differences about the supernatural. Both would drift away from the Order as it descended into infighting, power struggles, and sexual scandals.

Algernon made his final attempt at running a business. He partners with the owner of a dried milk business, but this time it doesn't go bankrupt, but he leaves it, just as it is about to become a success.



Rose-Cross of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn

In June 1905 he makes a second attempt to canoe down the Danube, and once again fails to clear the rapids and is stranded in Hungary. During the voyage he stumbles upon three drowned corpses. This experience would form the basis for his most famous story: The Willows.



The Danube in Hungary, early 20th century - source: Library of Congress

The Willows

The story is set along the Danube near Bratislava, then known under its German name Pressburg. The narrator describes a desolate swamp completely covered in willow bushes, which in the strong wind "give the impression that the entire plain is alive." This sentence sets up the fundamental process behind the story: the uneasy effect on the mind of seeing an inanimate object move. Subconsciously it concludes the object has volition, and therefore projects life and intelligence on it.

The uneasy atmosphere is enhanced and given a magical quality by the poetic descriptions of the river, a Great Personage that sings to the moon and shouts when the rains fall flat on its face. Algernon devotes many paragraphs on the river, and often calls it "she".

The narrator's companion is called "the Swede", a huge, muscular man of nature, not given to fancies. This character serves as a contrast to the narrator's emotions.

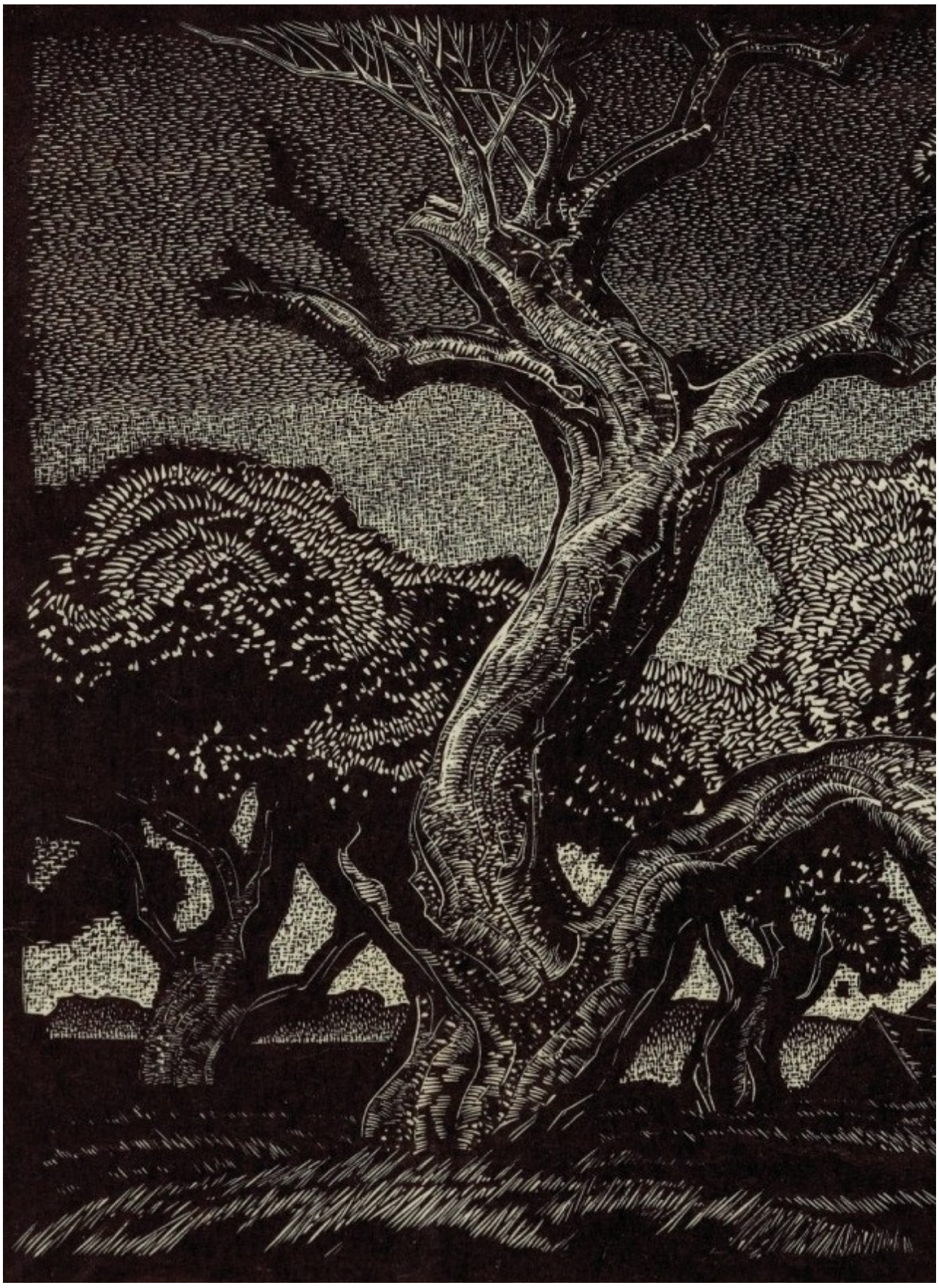
They set up camp on a small and shrinking island in the rising river. The narrator feels they've trespassed into an alien world, manifested by the swaying willows. He falls prey to feelings of insignificance alternating with awe.

They have their first scare that evening when a corpse floats by, turning to look at them. The Swede then says it must be an otter. A man in a small boat shouts at them from a distance, then crosses himself.

That night they hear a booming sound. The narrator tells of the island being on the frontier of an alien world. In his autobiography Algernon had told of a travelling companion in Canada who would hold ceremonies whenever they set up camp, and warned against camping near the edges of lakes or rivers, as those were gates to other worlds.

The narrator suddenly wakes up. When he leaves his tent he sees giant, bronze-coloured beings rising from the willows, spiralling into columns that rise into the darkness. He feels such awe he's almost on the point of worshipping them, but then a gust of wind blows him over, and the vision disappears. Later that night, close to dawn, he wakes up to hear pattering outside the tent, and something pressing against its sides.

At breakfast the Swede articulates his own fears: the powers or gods of the island want a sacrifice. They discover funnel-shaped imprints around their tents, and that their paddle has been scraped so thin it would've snapped if they'd used it on the river. Their canoe is similarly damaged. Now it's the Swede who's fantasizing, and he chides the narrator for remaining rational.



An Old Orchard, by Franklin Carmichael

The wind dies down, yet the willows still move. As evening falls they hear a gong-like sound, at first far away, but it comes closer until it sounds as if it comes from within. The Swede says the sound comes from the fourth dimension, and that the island is a peep-hole through which dwellers of outer space spy on this world. In time their own minds will be drawn away from Earth, sending them into insanity. Their only chance of survival lies in keeping their minds still, as the hostile beings can only feel their minds.

Once the narrator stills his mind, his fear of the willows diminishes, and he starts berating the Swede. Just then they hear a cry overhead, and something coming down in the darkness.

To keep the fire going, they go looking for dry wood. They go hand in hand. When the narrator looks back at the camp, he sees a strange creature by the light of the fire. It looks like a collection of animals merged into one, the size and shape of the willows, but rounded on top. It rapidly approaches them, and as it is upon them, they collapse against the willows. The narrator feels his consciousness expand, and he fears he's losing it. The grip of the Swede on his arm brings him back.

They return to their camp to find the tents down and imprints everywhere. They go to sleep, with their feet against the canoe. The narrator wakes up later with something pressing against the tent again. The Swede has gone. The narrator calls for him, but his voice is drowned out by a buzzing sound. He discovers the Swede by the shore, about to enter the river. When the narrator pulls him back, the Swede first utters a buzzing sound, then speaks of "going into them" and "taking the way of wind and water". The narrator drags him back to the camp and holds him down. After a while, the Swede opens his eyes, says "they've found another victim" and collapses.

The next morning everything's quiet. After breakfast they go looking for the victim. They find a black object caught in willow roots by the water's edge. As they approach, the river bank collapses and they fall against it. A buzzing erupts from the blackened corpse of a fisherman, passes them, and fades into the sky. When they then try to drag the corpse onto land to give it a burial, they see it's covered in the same funnel-shaped imprints they saw around their camp. The river sweeps the corpse from their grasp and it moves away, like the otter they saw the first evening on the island.

H. P. Lovecraft called it the best story ever written, and it's obvious how it influenced his own stories of otherworldly beings spying and intruding into our world. His dwellers of outer space are more corporeal though, and he lacks Algernon Blackwood's delight in nature. Yet through Lovecraft's admiration, The Willows started a whole tradition of horror and fantasy stories.

In fact, its publication was a stroke of luck: a chance meeting between Algernon and a fellow journalist Angus Hamilton, who showed a set of his stories to the publisher Eveleigh Nash. It appeared in 1907 in the collection The Listener and Other Stories. This success prompted him to start his John Silence stories.

Carl Jung always felt that a person's creative output gave a better picture of their psyche than dreams. With what we know of Algernon's background, we can surmise what this story means, and what it meant to him. In this, though, we shouldn't fall for the autobiographical fallacy: to identify the narrator with the author, despite what Algernon Blackwood himself said.

The most remarkable aspect of the story is that it seems a cautionary tale about becoming too close to nature. That this awakens beings hiding in the landscape who don't take kindly to human trespass. The basic assumption of this is that humanity is separate from nature. To hunter-gatherers, the spirits in nature are a way to gain control over it: they can be placated through sacrifices, or avoided through taboos, but to someone who's raised under a god of civilization, the spirits of nature are automatically hostile. Of course these beings are in fact forces within the psyche of the beholder being projected onto the landscape. And because these forces aren't under the control of the conscious mind, they also stand for his lack of control of nature. But to return to Algernon himself. What was he couldn't control about himself? I think this is clear from what happened in New York.

The Wendigo

In this story, written in Switzerland in 1910, Algernon is even more explicit in his refutation of any psychological explanation of the events. He does this by proving the two most rational characters wrong, Doctor Cathcart and his nephew Simpson.

The Wendigo is a creature from Algonquin mythology. It possesses human beings, making them crave human flesh. Clearly its origin is the threat of cannibalism during times of starvation, which weren't rare in Canada with its long and harsh winters. It's also associated with intense greed, a symbolic hunger, and was said to smell of decay. In modern times psychologists thought it might be a specific psychosis among native Americans, what is called a culture-bound affliction, though others dispute this, as there are few historical cases of cannibalism among the Algonquin. The Wendigo of Algernon's Blackwood's story has nothing to do with cannibalism though.

The tale starts with the observation that Doctor Cathcart doesn't mention it in his writings, ostensibly because he was too intimately involved. The real reason is that it can't be explained through science. He's one of a party of moose hunters trekking through

the wilderness north of Ontario, together with his nephew Simpson, and two Canadian backwoodsmen, Hank Davis and Défago, a French-Canadian, their most experienced guide. The hunting party is despondent as they can't find any moose. Défago seems to know why, but won't tell them.

We next come to a passage where we see Algernon at his most racist. He describes the language between Hank and Défago as belonging in an African-American bar, but uses the racially insulting term for African-Americans instead of the then more neutral word, Negro. When they're joined by their native cook, Algernon writes that his name is Punk, and that he belongs to a dying race. Some critics have claimed the story demonizes the Algonquin, but I doubt this was his intention. In another short story, The Valley of the Beasts, Native Americans are portrayed as being wiser and kinder than the white colonists. The Wendigo itself is portrayed as separate from humanity.

Hank decides to split the party up. He and the doctor will head one way, Simpson and Défago will canoe across the nearby lake, and Punk will remain at the main camp. Défago is visibly frightened by the thought of crossing the lake. When Cathcart mentions this, Hank scoffs that Défago believes in fairy-tales, but stops in his explanation when he sees the cook listening in.

The party goes to sleep. What follows is a beautiful description of the wilderness at night, but also mentioned how the white men couldn't smell the coming winter. The cook, however, wakes up, goes to the lake, and sniffs the air. Algernon writes that he possess animal-like senses. A thin odour comes across the lake, disturbing Défago in his sleep.

The passage, much condensed here, originates from a trope, still prevalent in popular culture, of tribal people having special senses and abilities. In the nineteenth century this was used to explain why local people could survive in conditions that killed European colonisers. It was then further stated that this meant these local people were deficient in other mental capacities. This idea wasn't just applied to non-white people: the Irish, the Saami in northern Europe, and other peoples were often described in the same terms. The idea had been debunked even as it gained currency. Wilhelm Wundt, one of founders of modern psychology, had already concluded from his research that, even though there were differences in mental faculties between individuals, this was not the case among groups. Of course, convenient ideas die hard.

The next morning everybody's in better spirits and they set off. Simpson and Défago get on well as they paddle across the lake. Yet Simpson has the uncomfortable realization that only Défago stands between him and certain death. It's just them against "the titan of the wilderness".

In Algonquin Park, Winter by Tom Tomson, 1914-1915

Once across the lake, Défago starts blazing a trail and giving instructions to Simpson. When they reach a larger lake, they set up camp, and Défago goes off to gather firewood. The next passage illustrates Simpson's feelings:

"Any moment, it seemed, the woodland gods, who are to be worshipped in silence and loneliness, might stretch their mighty and terrific outlines among the trees."

When Défago returns, Simpson tells him about his feelings. Défago replies that many a mind has succumbed to the fever of the wilderness. Algernon devotes many sentences on the relationship between the two, yet he fails to portray Défago in depth. We fail to gain any empathy for him, which rather dampens the impact of his grotesque fate.

At Simpson's request Défago begins to sing a song, but suddenly stops and sniffs the air. Both are disturbed, but Défago then reassures him that the song makes him imagine things. Simpson himself puts it down to the scenery affecting their subconscious. Twice Défago asks Simpson if he can smell anything. Simpson says no. Défago then explains he was singing a song about the Wendigo. When Simpson asks about it, Défago grows frightened, says it's a swift beast, terrible to look at. They lie down in their tent, and Simpson senses the trees crowding around them, as they did in The Willows.

Simpson awakes in a fright. He hears a strange sound, but then realizes it's Défago weeping. Simpson feels a wave of tenderness coming over him, touches Défago and asks what's the matter. Then it seems Défago has fallen asleep again. As dawn nears they're awake again, Défago huddled against Simpson, terrified of something outside. Simpson notices Défago's feet are almost out of the tent and how it seems something is pulling them. Then he hears a roaring voice in the sky calling Défago "as of something lonely and untamed, wild and of abominable power".

Défago runs off, shouting about his burning feet of fire. Simpson's in shock, but smells this strange animal odour that's slowly dissipating. He runs out of the tent, calling out to Défago. Once he calms down he starts a sweep of the area and comes across Défago's tracks in the snow alongside those of a large animal. The stretch between both tracks increase, as if through ever greater leaps, as if Défago is being lifted up, until they disappear.

The night strikes horror into Simpson, and he returns to his tent, looking over his shoulder, because he thinks something's following him. Suddenly he hears Défago's voice overhead, shouting "this fiery height! Oh, my feet of fire!"

The panic of the wilderness overcomes Simpson. He runs about at first, but then heads back for the tent, hearing whispers and seeing indistinct figures among the trees. All night he sits by the fire with his gun at the ready.

Algernon then explains Simpson's subconscious guided him back to the canoe. The next day with the aid of his compass he reaches the main camp. At first he tells Cathcart that Défago ran off in a mania. Once the party has crossed the lake, he tells them what'd happened. Cathcart explains it away as the effect of loneliness and bewilderment on the psyche. Once they reach the tent, Hank proposes they go look for Défago, but because Simpson's exhausted, he stays with the tent. Hank and Cathcart return after a while. Fresh snow has fallen, so they couldn't find the tracks. Hank then reveals natives had told him they'd seen the Wendigo along the shores of the larger lake, but he dismisses it as a metaphor for madness. Cathcart elaborates on the metaphor, though he too appears agitated. The Wendigo is the Call of the Wild personified. Its voice resembles the sounds of nature, and it affects the feet because nature induces wanderlust, and the eyes because nature induces a lust for the beautiful. It burns off its victim's feet and replaces them with its own.

Exasperated, Hank leaps up and yells, "That's for Défago," he adds. Suddenly something large flies overhead, and they hear Défago utter his cry once again. Simpson tells the others that it is exactly what he heard before, then he stands up and shouts: "Défago, come down." They hear something large fall down among the trees, then heavy footsteps. Hank grabs his knife.

Défago staggers into the light. "You called me," he says to Simpson in a dried-up voice. Simpson can't remember what Défago said, but he remembers the overpowering smell of decay, just like on the night Défago ran off. Cathcart reassures everybody the figure is Défago, yet his features are distorted, animal-like. Cathcart explains this as the effect of low-pressure at high altitudes.

Hank retreats to the tent, telling them it isn't Défago. He keeps his knife ready. Cathcart confronts Défago, demands to know what happened. Défago smiles, but his face has little humanity left. He just says: "I've seen the Wendigo."

Hank cries from the tent: "Look at his feet!"

Simpson catches a glimpse of round, black stumps at the ends of Défago's legs, before the latter runs off again. Simpson wants to follow him, but is held back. He breaks down, weeping about "people on fire." While Cathcart stands guard, Hank and he go to sleep.

In the morning, Simpson, a divinity student and stand-in for Algernon Blackwood, explains that "Potencies lurking behind the souls of man, not evil perhaps in themselves, yet instinctively hostile to humanity as it exists." This seems to be a reference to the subconscious.

When they return to the main camp, they discover the real Défago. Hank runs and embraces him. Défago's mind, however, has been completely wiped. He remembers nothing, can only eat moss, and complains of burning feet. They are, in fact, frost-bitten, which can feel like burning. He dies after a few weeks.

The cook explains he saw him approach the camp one evening. Now the others have arrived, the cook hastes away, to put as much distance between him and the man who saw the Wendigo.

At first glance, the story has the same premise as The Willows, about venturing too close to nature, becoming too one with it. Yet Simpson's explanation seems to push it more in the direction of what my conclusion was about The Willows. Simpson basically says Défago became half-animal because of a force within him, a force released by his long stays in nature. Simpson, and perhaps Algernon, can't take the next step, that of Darwinism, in saying nature has many faces, and one of them is human. Again, I feel this is because Algernon did not trust himself enough to give in to his true nature.

From Quests to Missions

In Switzerland, Algernon spent his days hiking or skiing, and his evenings writing. Apart from his writing for magazines, he started a series of autobiographical novels, each with supernatural elements, and a didactic purpose. At the end of his time in New York, he'd already felt a sense of being on a mission to spread his philosophy, a mixture of Theosophy and occultism, to a wider audience. This new role, as preacher, may in part be due to the neglect he'd suffered because of Boyde.

His first novels were all about childhood in one way or another. Jimbo was about his own childhood, while The Education of Uncle Paul was about a middle-aged man who befriends three children, and is initiated into magic by them. This novel was read by CS Lewis as a teenager, it influenced his Chronicles of Narnia. Yet Algernon's novel has the man and the children leave their bodies to escape into the fairy land, which is clearly a reference to astral travel, a technique he would've learned in the Golden Dawn. The basis for the novel was Algernon's stay with his cousin Arthur Hampden and his family. Like a later novel, A Prisoner in Fairyland, the main character ends up permanently residing in another world.

One aspect of this novel points to the most important relationship Algernon had after the Boyde episode. The main character falls in love with a countess called Maya. Of course the ending of the novel prevents this relationship from developing. Maya was, in fact, the nickname of the Baroness Knoop. Her husband was a philanthropist, but very jealous and controlling. He wouldn't even let guests stay overnight at his house, but, tellingly, allowed his wife to travel alone with Algernon. She not only inspired him, but introduced him to the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. She was so enthusiastic about Algernon's work, she sent copies of his novels to Rilke. In 1912 he visited the Knoops in Egypt, and, with his typical ruggedness, wandered the desert at night and slept in a sleeping bag during the day.

Stephen Graham in his autobiography describes their relationship as "a love affair without physical expression." Curiously though, the Baroness Knoop never mentioned Algernon in her memoirs, and she's no exception. Many of the people Algernon mentions in his letters don't mention him. It seems he wasn't as memorable to them.

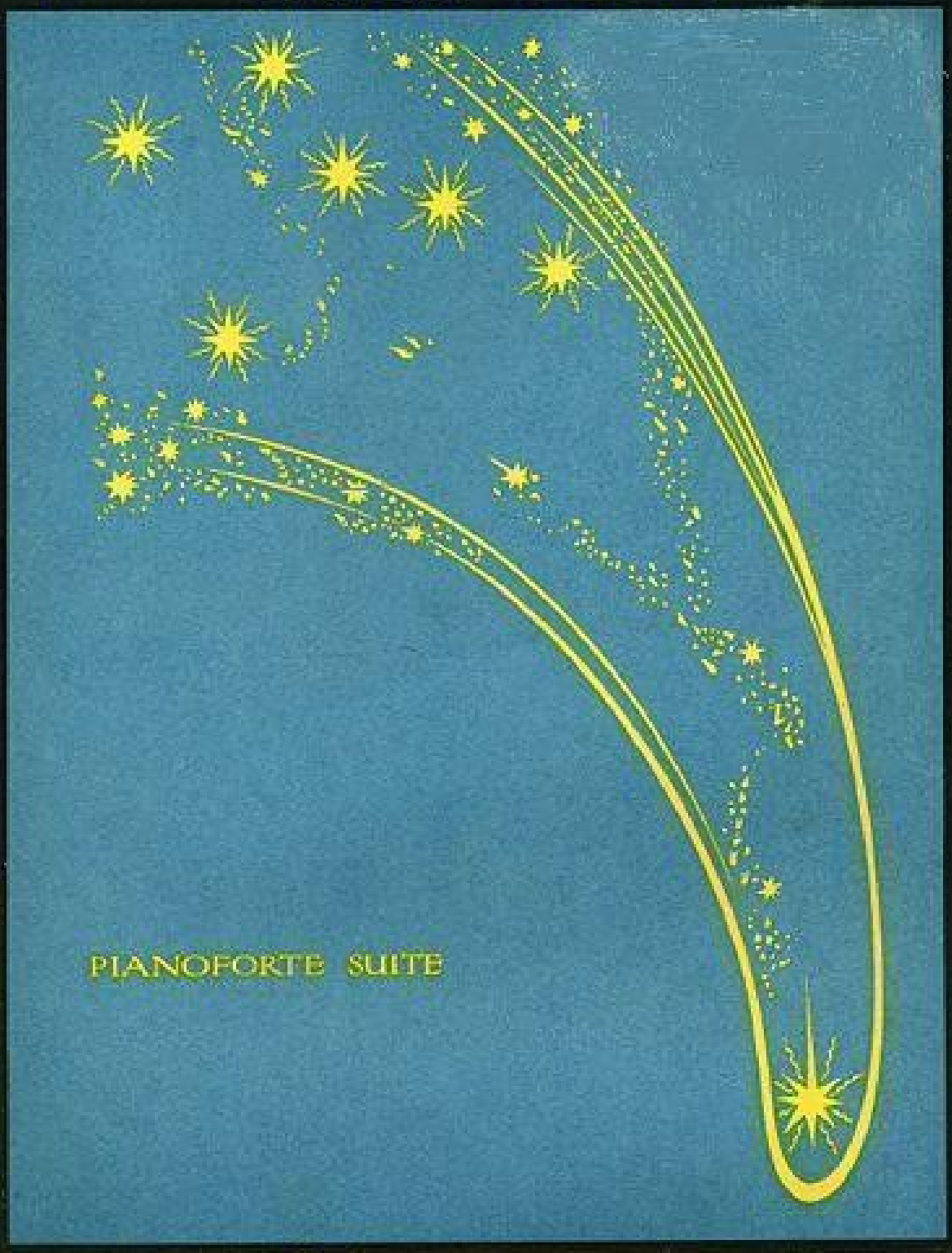
Just before World War I he established a winter home in the Saanenmoser valley near Gstaad. It would remain his most favourite place, and its where his ashes were scattered. At the time he also started working on the play The Starlight Express, based on the railway carriage his father had bought as a Christmas present. He collaborated with Violette Pear on this, but work was interrupted by the outbreak of war.

Algernon immediately volunteered his services for the fledgling secret service, and like Arthur Machen, also wrote supernatural patriotic stories. In one of them, a wounded soldier is visited by a mysterious lady, who afterwards turns out to be Brittania. Others stressed the universal spirit of the inhabitants of the British Empire, united against a common foe, a convenient idea at the time. In 1916 he managed to set up an intelligence-gathering network in Switzerland, but he resigned as the responsibility for the lives of the agents became too much for him.

He returned to working on The Starlight Express, for which Edward Elgar wrote songs, based on Algernon's poems from A Prisoner of Fairyland. Neither was happy with the production though; Elgar even refusing to conduct the music. After the opening night, it was panned by the critics, who correctly noted that Algernon was shoehorning his philosophy into a play for children. The artist as prophet had gotten the better of the artist as entertainer.

THE STARLIGHT EXPRESS

EDWARD ELGAR



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Despite this, Algernon was becoming more successful and famous, often invited to soirees, as his storytelling provided much entertainment. 1916 also saw the publication of his favourite novel, Jules le Vallon. The main character recalls his previous lives, and seeks to fulfil what Fechner proposed: humanity becoming completely in tune with the elements and the stars. Through experiments he tries to focus his psychic energy with that of a woman and child into his own mind to gain superhuman powers. The endeavour fails, as the child absorbs all the energies.

The Bright Messenger was the sequel to Jules le Vallon, telling the story of the child. It was highly praised when it was published, with Henry Miller claiming it was the best novel about psychology ever. The title character has two personalities, one of an ordinary Swiss peasant boy, the other of a wise superman, able to control not just the minds of others, but even the elements, through tapping into a universal reservoir of consciousness. These, and other concepts from the novel, suggests Algernon was aware of the theories of Carl Jung. This presented a bit of a mystery to me. The idea of two personalities had been one of Jung's earliest ideas, but the idea of the collective subconscious was very new. 1916 was the first year that Jung used the term. Algernon said he read a lot about psychology, so perhaps he had read Jung's newest articles.

This novel was followed by The Human Chord, another concept from the Golden Dawn, and from Hebrew and Eastern philosophies, about "words of power." In it, the protagonist tries to discover the true name of the biblical Yahweh, as this would give him superhuman powers. A similar novel is The Centaur, inspired by his pre-war visit to Tiflis, Georgia, about a man who's perfectly in tune with nature. Both novels were very successful.

The novels mentioned are all dedicated to "M.S.K", likely to be Maya Knoop. At the time he assisted her in caring for refugee children. From this period dates his never-performed play Karma, about a love triangle where a man and a married woman remember being lovers in previous lives. At the end of the war, Algernon worked as a "searcher" in Rheims, France, someone who questions the wounded about the fates of the missing. After the Armistice he returned to Britain where he stayed at Birkenhall Mansion. He now was a celebrity, yet still tried to reach a state of spiritual superiority.

The opportunity seemed to present itself in 1922, when Lady Rothermere told him about an Armenian guru she was supporting: GI Gurdjieff, who'd settled in Tiflis, and then Paris. Algernon joined his commune in Fountainbleau, where he practised Gurjieff's technique that particularly suited him: to work to the point of physical exhaustion and so reach a trance-like state. Katherine Mansfield was also a follower at the time, but I don't think this technique would've done her any good, as she suffered from tuberculosis at the time.

Algernon, meanwhile, worked on Episodes Before Thirty, his only autobiography. He thought it would be his final large work. He remained a regular contributor to magazines, both for children and adults, and his friendship with the publisher Basil Blackwell helped his publications. Around that time the Baroness Knoop became a widow. If her marital status had been the only obstacle to his starting a physical relationship with her, they would've married, but instead she remarried to someone else. She also had a new house built and invited many guests, to compensate for her isolation of the previous years. Algernon was one of her regulars. The death of her second husband, however, broke her spirit. She became reclusive, and her relationship to Algernon withered.

Algernon himself had met a Doctor Nesfield and made a pact with him to hold to a strict exercise regime and to live to a hundred. They also underwent Voroneff's monkey gland cure, in which slivers from monkey testicles were injected into the scrotum, supposedly to restore vigour. Another artist who tried it, in his case to restore his virility, was William Butler Yeats.

Cornelia Lunt had been the girlfriend of Alfred Louis, the old man who'd been so dear to Algernon in New York. Alfred had died, and Algernon moved in with her. Tellingly, he referred to her as Madre and she to him as Figlio. He'd previously lived with older women, one of whom wanted to adopt him. To psychoanalysts this would suggest he suffered from a mother-complex. Jung claimed that those men who suffered from this had two ways of expressing it: philandering (which some say Jung practised) or homosexuality (though Jung stressed that not all gay men suffered from a mother-complex).

1930 saw the publication of his last work for children: The Fruit Stoners. He also started working in a new medium: radio. He hiked through Switzerland, France and Spain and published his final novel, The Water Performance, based on the rituals he held as a child with his older sister. In 1938 he was in Austria during the Anschluss, its annexation by nazi-Germany and was disgusted by what he witnessed.

No surprise then that in 1939 he again volunteered for the secret service, but was rejected because of his age. He did serve as a fire watch on Hampstead Heath. During the Blitz his nephew's house, where he was staying, was destroyed, and with it, many of his private papers. His radio work continued, though it brought in little money.

In 1944 he was contacted by August Derleth, who also championed the work of H.P. Lovecraft. He's undoubtedly responsible for the continued interest in Algernon Blackwood's short stories. After the war, Algernon did some early television broadcasts, which can be seen on Youtube.

Yet the two projects he was most interested at the time: a renewed staging of The Starlight Express, and the reworking of The Willows as a play, never came to fruition. It's clear how important both tales were to him: the former because it portrayed the most beautiful part of his childhood, and the latter because its view on nature. By this time he'd lost his faith in the supernatural and reincarnation, however. He told this much to Gerald Gough of the Society of the Inner Light, adding it was because he'd never found evidence of either.

In 1948 he received the OBE, though, as a Conservative, he held the then Labour government responsible for the demise of the Empire. His health problems were becoming debilitating, and his memory was slipping. In 1951 he suffered a series of strokes that confined him to bed, and in December of that year he died in his sleep. He was cremated and his ashes were scattered in Saanenmoser.

A Silent Triumph

Algernon Blackwood had encouraged the psychologist Peter Penzoldt to write a study on supernatural fiction, while at the same time objecting to the label of a supernatural writer. In the chapter devoted to Algernon's stories. Penzoldt writes about his childhood dichotomy between oppression and freedom. Freedom, Algernon gained through nature and writing, and his asexuality was evidence of the sublimation of his libido. Sublimation is a term in psychology (though first used by the philosopher Nietzsche) for the substitution of an unacceptable urge (to the individual or society) by an acceptable pursuit. Yet Penzoldt never mentions the Boyde incident. To me it seems that this period in his life made him fear his impulses, and seek ways of avoiding them. In nature they left him alone, but he still had to be wary of them, while in writing he could shape the life he had wanted.

Sources:

Episodes Before Thirty, Algernon Blackwood

The Bright Messenger, Algernon Blackwood

The Willows, Algernon Blackwood

The Wendigo, Algernon Blackwood

Algernon Blackwood, An Extraordinary Life, Mike Ashley, Carrob and Graf, 2001

The Supernatural in Fiction, Peter Penzoldt, P. Nevill, 1952

Supernatural Horror in Literature, H.P Lovecraft

illustration by Tom Tomson, perhaps apt for the sort of life Algernon Blackwood wanted

Ray Miller

The Church on the Way to the Park

has the smaller graves cotted front of shop,

next to the churchyard path and flowering beds

like a maternity ward in which mothers forgot

about Imogen Rose - Born Asleep,

Jasmine Crystal - Tread Carefully,

Here Lies Our World. So I plead with the girls

not to go running after squirrels over graves,

even those at the back all lichen-stained.

We've a lengthy exchange over whether

we are seen or heard by the dead

while they use a tombstone as a misericord.

The bells might begin any minute, of course,

ten thousand feet hastening to squeeze

through a narrow gate before it’s locked

and bolted for evermore, each rook’s caw

from the steepling trees a call to quicken.

The Malvern stone is crazily paved,

yet erect, straight-lined and dignified,

as if an ape were draped in a collar and tie.

It hankers for home, staring at the recumbent hills,

from which it were hewn in Victoria’s time.

I’ve half a mind to go inside and watch dust

refuse to settle in a shaft of coloured light,

but these girls are made of a different hue.

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Sandra Kolankiewicz

Like the Drowning Need

Even if my choice is wrong, something
better can happen, how chance becomes
the only difference between then
and now, when yesterday's a tendril
barely wrapped around my current efforts
and tomorrow's vine reaches toward me
but can't stand up on its own, needs to climb
toward the sun like the drowning need
to submerge someone to reach air and
claim for themselves a solid bottom.

Sandra Kolankiewicz

The Cover of Darkness

Mr. Johnson's Christmas lights stay on till
dawn, my bedroom ablaze behind the blinds.
He catches me up in his season like
a celebrant late to Mass, a party
goer who dreams through the invite, forced house
to house enrobed, trying to guess which bright
living room full of people is hers. Down
the street, a tree strung with garland twinkles,
adorning a front porch next to a house
dripping blue icicles, a giant wreath
on the corner filling the yard, lit with
blinking stars, all silent and dark by twelve
save the man next door who resists the night,
might not realize he discourages bats
roused from their winter sleep when we took
the crates of ornaments from eves, or
that wildlife need the cover of darkness.

Flight of the Witches by Francisco de Goya, 1798

Sandra Kolankiewicz

Haunted House

I remember him only as the one
who wore the top hat, but for him that was
a defining time when he stood in front
of all of us, announced Welcome to my
haunted house!, fundraiser for the Ladies
at the Hospital, the high school drama
club and outsiders like him who found them
selves in something large and intimate, a
Let's have a show! moment of hopeful
optimism for three weeks every night
until All Souls. After, nothing inspired
that feeling of fifty pairs of eyes on
him for the ten-minute round repeated
four times a night, the closest to being
there in a vial that took him to jail.

Heikki Huotari
In Gilead Embalmed

If your face is a flower to me then I'll come to you for sustenance. As when I'm on my best behavior messengers arrive with contradictory reports some nerves converge. Don't smile and the world won't smile with you, have an attitude or have an attitude in self defense or in defense of less deserving persons. Sensitives be delicate and rocket scientists abide. As random planet is to astronaut so signal is to noise, existence is the opposite of Pop-pop. Brace or not for impact, everything is relativity and striving after wind. How beautiful upon the cratered surface are the pointed feet of spiders. Of my recollection to the best, fermented blood of martyrs my nepenthe, although of sparkle multi-modal every body heavenly is on one side of blind. Negation's my M.O. because why not – an odd or even number of them love me not, not not or not not not. There's never too much detail. May the hard of hearing modulate their volume properly. Their features formed into a smile, how happy these colluding states of mind.

Heikki Huotari

Dragging Their Tails Behind Them

Asking to be known as they instead of she, the ship of Theseus is Doppler shifting awkwardly para bailar La Bamba. As the narcoleptic princess kisses princes with insomnia, all's fair in detestation or all's calibration and a striving after accuracy or the devil's in the subatomic particles. I'd like to comb a coconut, to camouflage the cowlick, to see in my future self-fulfilling prophecies, to be with probability point nine or probability point one. I'm not extant but between nonexistences. The paragons of virtue and the wise, their inner ears behind their eyes, their thoughts and prayers are in the mail or this is finally what there were no words for.

Phil Wood
Advice

I went upstairs and forgot
to switch the lamp light
off in the living room.

I could not sleep because
of worries. The next day
I dozed downstairs.

The day after that
I moved my living room
upstairs and waited

on the sofa. My worries
almost dead. 'Why not remove
all the bulbs?' they said.

Nocturne by William Degouve de Nuncques

Phil Wood

The Tales from A Hypnotherapist: The Machirologist

She studied coincidence
after her car skidded into Pastor Kris,
shattered a shop window, and caused
the pastor's brother, a surgeon, to amputate
her hand (the one tattooed with poppies).
The Kris is the dagger to ward off demons.

Exactly a year later, her husband, uniformed
at breakfast, spreading butter over
her left breast with his Kukri -
'a Gurkha's parting gift' - muttered
“some are born to endless night.”
His prosthetic hand was precise.

The notch near the grip
of the Kukri directs blood away
from the handle - she’d played
Lady Macbeth in university, read about
method acting, kept smiling. The insurgents
planted her husband's hands in poppy fields.

After the divorce, her lover, a shaman in his head,
bequeathed to her an ancient Kila.
“Just in case”. He gave up on acting life
and became a pastor, just after
his life-changing car accident. She embedded
the blade in saffron rice. The spirits fled

until exactly five years into her studies
she mapped happenstance
to a second-hand shop in Soho.
The window was smiling seduction:
subtle, serrated, sweet.
Like the way she had acted in Macbeth.

Almost penniless, she was unable to purchase
the Kujang - the dagger that upheld
the world's balance - but desire
shattered glass, severed her surviving hand.
The owner was a surgeon (partially retired).
She had gained prosthetic precision.

CONTRIBUTORS

Lorcan Walshe is a professional artist and lives and works in Dublin Ireland. His website is www.lorcanwalshe.com. After a long career as a painter he is currently dividing his time between painting and writing. He has finished my first novel (not yet published) and is currently working on an illustrated book on the Major Arcana images in Tarot cards. He has published articles on art and also a few poems.

The winner of the 2022 Helen Schaible International Sonnet Contest, **Martin Elster** comes from Hartford, CT, where he studied percussion and composition at the Hartt School of Music and performed with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra. Martin, whose poetry has been strongly influenced by his musical sensibilities, has written two books, the latest of which is Celestial Euphony (Plum White Press, 2019).

Born in Italy some decades ago, **Gabriella Garofalo** fell in love with the English language at six, started writing poems (in Italian) at six and is the author of these books “Lo sguardo di Orfeo”; “L’inverno di vetro”; “Di altre stelle polari”; “Casa di erba”; “Blue Branches”; “A Blue Soul”.

Fillia, real name Luigi Colombo (1904-1936) was an Italian Futurist painter. One of his concepts was L’Aeropittura, painting a landscape from the vantage point of an airplane.

Peter Van Belle is the editor of The Klecksograph and has published poems and short stories in Great Britain, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, the US, and Belgium. As a child he lived in the US, but now he lives in Belgium.

Tom Tomson (1877-1917), a self-taught painter, grew up in Ontario and worked as a guide in Algonquin Park. He was associated with the Group of Seven, also called The Algonquin School. He was found dead in mysterious circumstances in Canoe Lake, Algonquin Park.

Ray Miller is a Socialist, Aston Villa supporter and faithful husband. Life’s been a disappointment.

Sandra Kolankiewicz’s work has been accepted at Fortnightly Review, Consequence, Hoxie Gorge, and Free State Review.

Heikki Huotari attended a one-room school and spent summers on a forest-fire lookout tower. Since retiring from academia/mathematics he has published poems in numerous journals and in five poetry collections. His manuscript, To Justify The Butterfly, won second prize, and publication, in the 2022 James Tate Chapbook Competition.

Phil Wood was born in Wales. He studied English Literature at Aberystwyth University. He has worked in statistics, education, shipping, and a biscuit factory. He enjoys watercolour painting, bird watching, and chess. His writing can be found in various places, including recently : London Grip, Noon Journal of the Short Poem, and a featured collaboration with photographer John Winder at Abergavenny Small Press.

END OF ISSUE ELEVEN OF THE KLEKSOGRAPH

Singing Man by Ernst Barlach, 1928