THE KLEKSOGRAPH

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Article: Strindberg's Inferno

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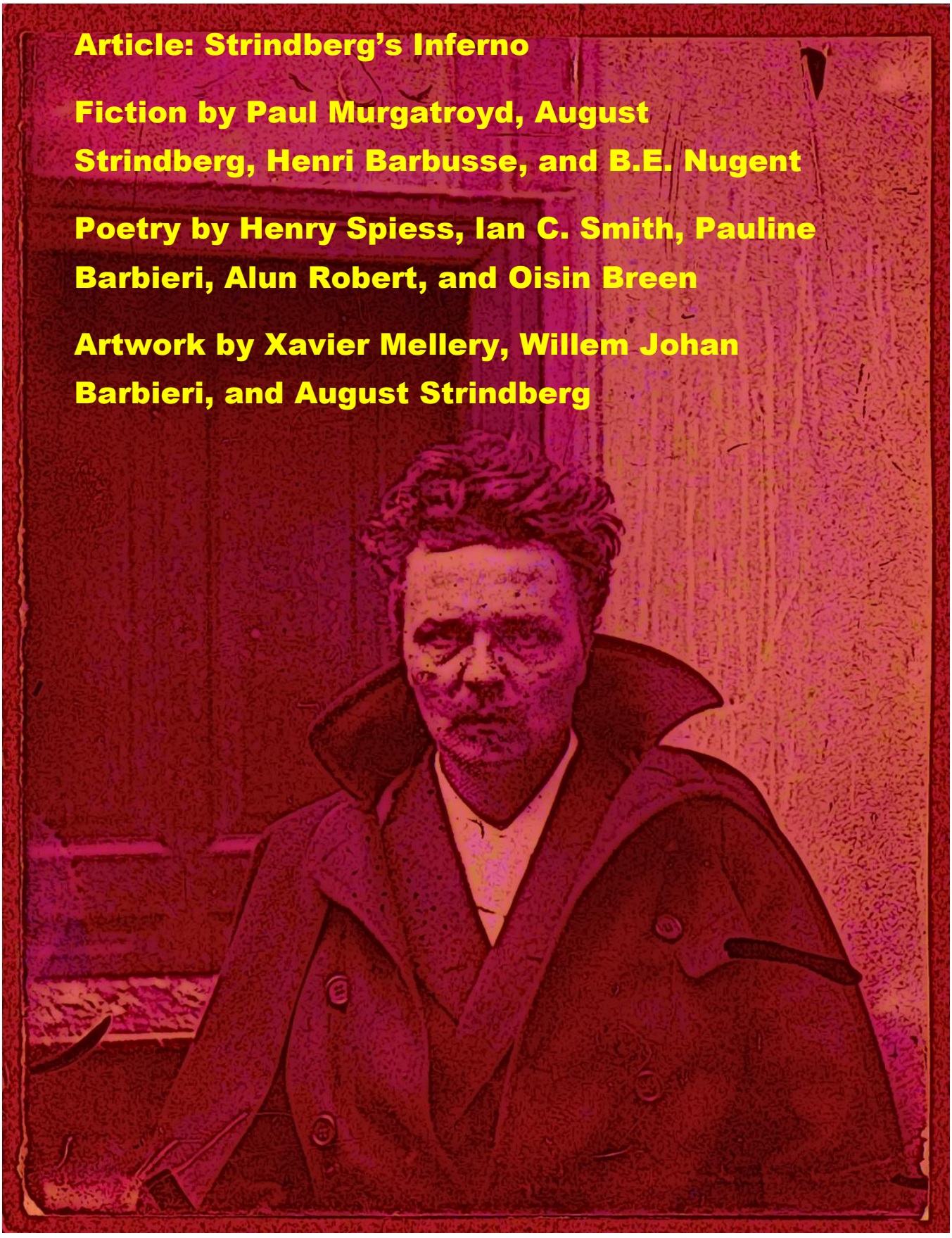

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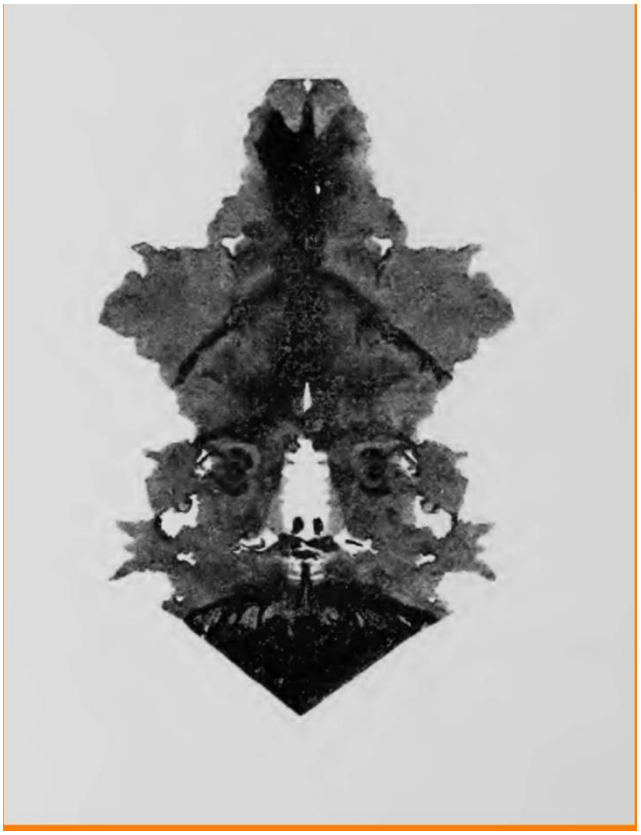
Editor: Peter Van Belle



ISSUE 6

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

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Front Cover: August Strindberg in 1893

This magazine can be downloaded free from www.kleksograph.be

Paul Murgatroyd
Hecuba

As the glorious, godlike king Polymestor strides into the tent, smiling, the women and girls drag him down, cover his mouth, trap his arms and legs.

Hecuba stabs his right eye with her brooch, again and again, stabs it to slush.

Spray and spatter of blood.

He bucks and mews, shits himself.

She stabs on and on, until the brooch-pin snaps, then tears at the other eye with her talons, slicing, gouging.

Now she sucks the eyeball out, bites through the cord from the socket and swallows.

Her screech of triumph alerts the king's guards, and they charge in, into crimson spindrift.

*

After ten dreary years of war the sacred city of Troy has been captured and sacked by the Greeks, but its old queen Hecuba has now avenged the death of the son she loves so much, her youngest son. He wasn't old enough to fight, so she and Priam had sent him for safekeeping to their friend and ally king Polymestor. They sent treasure with him too, so he could live like a prince if Troy was taken. But on the previous night the boy's ghost had appeared to Hecuba in a dream, his face pale and spattered with blood. After a scalding sigh he said: 'Mother, I'm dead. Polymestor killed me. He was like an uncle to me, but today, when he heard about the fall of our poor Troy, he stabbed me to death. For the gold. It hurt, mother, it really hurt. The last thing I saw as I lay there dying was him gazing at the gold with greedy, glittering eyes, and smiling…He'll come to the Greek camp tomorrow, to congratulate them on their victory, and ask you if you've got any more treasure hidden in Troy, and promise to pass it on to me. When he enters the captives' tent, pretending I'm alive and well, avenge me. Tell the other women, they'll help you, hold him down. *Please* do this for me, mother, give me peace, I can't rest easy unavenged. *Please* get revenge for your son.'

Menelaos findet Helene by Alexander Rotthaug

Hecuba has got revenge for her son.

But it's not enough. Not nearly enough. She wanted to kill his killer.

*

The haggard old woman lies on the ground by Polymestor's ship, one eye swollen shut, blood and mucus oozing from her broken nose. She is weeping bitter tears and brooding.

My son, my beautiful boy. So young, hadn't *had* a life yet. Him murdered on top of everything else. My Priam dead, all the other children dead, Hector mutilated, home destroyed, Troy destroyed…Greek barbarians! Savages out of the west, looting ,raping, killing all the men, even killed the dogs…Corpses everywhere, bloated, brains leaking out, that sweet stench, the – how *could* the gods let them wipe out Troy, our glorious civilization? What have we *done*? Kill me now, you gods, please kill me, so I won't see those terrible sights any more…blood entrails squirming maggots crows bolting down flesh the eyeless baby that steaming heart nailed to the temple door that poor girl's vagina cut off by that butcher and stuck on his top lip as he pranced around laughing…

Hecuba groans and sobs. She prays to heaven again, desperate for death, as the only way out of her misery, the gaping hole in her life, all the hideous sights she can't shut out.

Then she hears Polymestor roar: 'What – not dead? Kill the cow, now! Stone her!'

Hecuba smiles.

*

Agamemnon, the Greek commander, frowned as the captain of the guard reported the blinding of his king. Then he snarled: 'I trust you've killed the bitch. I've always said they're animals, these Trojans, not human at all, need exterminating.'

The captain took a deep breath. 'Well…I can hardly believe it, but I saw it with my own eyes…The king told us to stone her to death, so we threw rocks and stones at her, but somehow they all fell short. We hurled another volley at her, but they fell short too. Then we shot arrows at her and threw spears, but they were all turned aside…Some god must have taken pity on her and protected her.'

Agamemnon snorted. ‘Some god! What god would protect a godless savage like that? Oriental scum!’

‘Oh no, it *must* have been a god, because suddenly she turned into a swan. The most beautiful swan I’ve ever seen. Silvery plumage, golden beak, eyes of fire. Not of this world, a marvel…’

The captain shook his head. ‘The swan soared up into the air and circled us, flew around us nine times. It was crying, real tears, and it sang a lament, in human speech. For the city of Troy and all its dead…But then something even stranger happened. Suddenly it wasn’t just Trojan names, there were lots of others, names I’d never heard before – Hiba, Adara, Nanking, Dina, Jasmina, Kabul, Idlib. I forget all the others. Then the swan flew off, still weeping and grieving.’

Illustrious Agamemnon, lord of men, said in reply: ‘I’m not having that shit going round, a story like that about that Trojan bitch, the mother of the cunt who started the whole fucking war. She did *not* turn into a beautiful swan and escape. Tell your men they never saw that. Something quite different happened…I’ll come up with something. I’ll get the herald to announce it, and they will confirm it. Or I’ll cut their balls off.’

*

Apollodorus Epitome 5.23: Hecuba turned into a bitch, and Helenus buried her at the place now called The Bitch’s Tomb.

Quintus Smyrnaeus Posthomerica 14.347ff.: Then an eerie portent was shown to mortal men. The wife of much-lamented Priam changed from a human being into a hateful bitch. The soldiers gathered around her in amazement, and a god turned her into stone, a sight to horrify later generations.

Ovid Metamorphoses 13.565ff.: The Thracians were incensed at the terrible damage Hecuba did to their king. They began to attack her, hurling stones and weapons at her. But with hoarse growls she snapped at the rocks they threw, and when she opened her mouth and tried to speak, instead of uttering words she barked. For a long time after that she wandered the plains of Thrace, howling mournfully, still remembering her misfortunes.

HENRY SPIESS

TU ES NOMADE, VAGABONDE

It's strange that a poet who only left his native town to study in Paris, then returned home and never left, should write a poem about a nomad. It ties in with the idea of escape, a common theme in poetry. Twilight is here seen as a mother symbol, rocking the nomad to sleep, but the night itself is what the nomad fears.

Tu es nomade, vagabonde
et ton regard n'est pas d'ici
ni ton amour, ni ton souci
ni ta peine à jamais profonde.

L'air qui passe, la flamme et l'eau
sont ta demeure, ta patrie,
et tu redoutes, douce amie,
le feu qui tremble au foyer clos.

Ah! départs et chemins du monde!
Tréteaux claires et masques dorés!
Tu es nomade, vagabonde,
et rien en toi se peut durer.

Car tu poursuis, vers quelles fêtes
de tristesse ou d'âpre plaisir,
sans qu'un regret vienne fléchir
ton coeur errant qui rien n'arrête.

Blue crépuscule aux mains pensives,
silencieux et tendre ami,
berce ton âme d'aujourd'hui
selon tes mains persuasives.

Vois son trouble, vois son désir
et son tourment, peine aprés peine …
Ah! berce-la, pour endormir
son effroi de la nuit prochaine;

Et lui laisse enfin, t'en allant,
un peu d'espoir qui se prolonge,
tendre ami, crépuscule errant,
blue crépuscule, ami des songes

from L'amour offensé

You’re a nomad, my vagabond

You’re a nomad, my vagabond
and your look doesn’t belong here
nor your love, or your worries
nor your pain, forever deep.

The passing air, the flame and water
are your abode, your country
and you fear, my sweet friend
the fire that trembles in closed hearths.

Oh, departures and the roads of the world,
shiny torture racks and gilded masks
you’re a nomad, my vagabond
and nothing about you can endure.

Because you rush to feasts
of sadness where bitter pleasure
without regret comes to bend
you wandering, ceaseless heart

Blue twilight, with pensive hands,
silent and tender friend,
rocks your present soul
to the rhythm of your persuading hands

Look at his confusion, his desire
and torment, trouble upon troubles
oh! Rock, to make it sleeping
his fear of the approaching night

And leave him, finally, upon going
a bit of enduring hope
tender soul, wandering twilight
blue twilight, friend of dreams

translated from French by Peter Van Belle

A Winter's Day by Xavier Mellery

Red Light District by Willem Johan Barbieri

Inferno by August Strindberg

PETER VAN BELLE
STRINDBERG'S INFERNO

Där hänger i boklådfönstret
En tunnklädd liten bok
Det är ett urtaget hjärte
Som dinglar där på sin krok

(In the bookshop's window hangs
A thin-clad little book
That's my heart, ripped out,
Dangling from its hook)
August Strindberg

In November 1894, at the Gare du Nord in Paris, a short man with red hair and piercing blue eyes said goodbye to his dark-haired wife. He promised they would meet again in a short while. In fact, he intended never to see her again.

The man was Johan August Strindberg, a world famous playwright. The farewell to his wife Frida was also a farewell to literature. From now on he would devote himself to chemical experiments. It would be as if Martin Amis had stopped writing after the publication of Time's Arrow to do biological research. This comparison is not random: Martin Amis was born in 1949, Strindberg a hundred years before.

His chemical experiments would descend into attempts at making gold, and his mind would fall into an abyss of hallucinations and delusions. Yet out of this period would come a set of plays that would influence generations of writers and film makers, among them Jean Paul Sartre, Franz Kafka, Bruno Schulz, Samuel Beckett, John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O' Neill, and Ingmar Bergman.

The Growth of Genius

As the son of a Stockholm spice merchant he was ostensibly born in a comfortable setting, yet the first chapter of his autobiographical novel, The Servant Girl's Son, is titled Fear and Hunger. His father was often depressed, especially after his bankruptcy, and would take it out on his children. When he came home they would hide. August was regularly

beaten, even by his older brothers. Twice his parents forced him to confess to a theft he hadn't committed, and when he complained about this to a maid, more punishment followed.

His parents played favorites with other siblings. Yet at times his mother would come to his bed to comfort him. Deeply religious, she would extract promises of chastity from him. At his age this was clearly to prevent him from masturbating.

On her death bed, when August was twelve, she made him reiterate his promise, strengthening it by warning against houses of ill-repute. As a remedy for his desires she suggested prayer. Her death when he was so young led to fears of abandonment, but also to guilt as he kept breaking his promise.

When his father remarried within a year, he was the only one to protest. His stepmother proved to be stingy and August was forced to go to school in clothes too small for him, which led to ridicule from his peers. School was another source of hardship to him. He wrote that his worst nightmares were those in which he was back at school. Many of us who've had terrible school days can sympathize. To make matters worse his first job was teaching at one of his former schools.

Unable to bear the thought of an unjust world, he started to conceive of the idea of Earth being a penal colony. He later encountered the same idea when reading Swedenborg, and used it in the plays he wrote after his Inferno episode. Franz Kafka used the same idea in his stories The Trail, The Verdict, and In the Penal Colony.

So now we see how certain elements of his character emerge from his relationship to his parents. He father was feared at first. Such fathers in ancient times became the template for gods like Yahweh from the Old Testament. To the young August he became symbol of all that was forbidden and unjust. Fear is the emotion of the helpless, and once August became less helpless, this was replaced by hatred. His hatred and defiance grew, not only against his father, but against all representatives of authority.

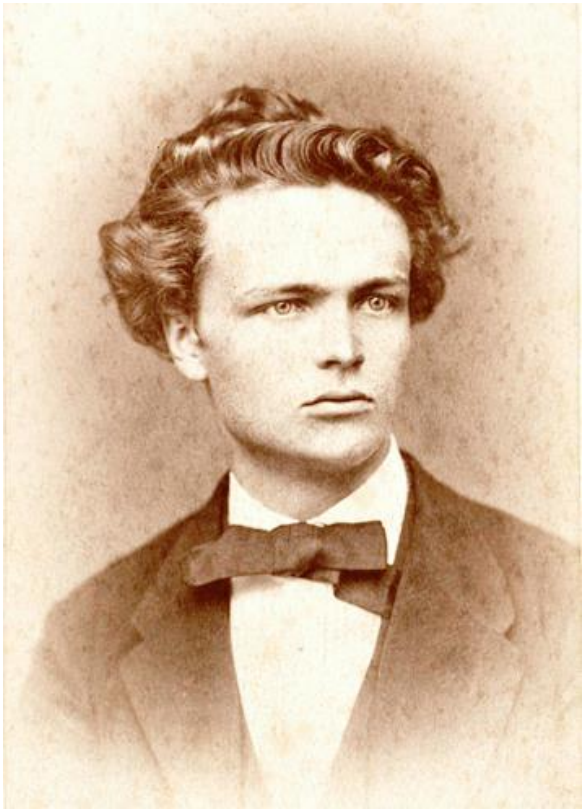
From him he also got the sense of being surrounded by threatening powers. When one has been under threat for a long time, the feeling remains even when the dangers have passed. The mind then conjures up new threats to explain this feeling.

His relationship with his mother formed his concept of womanhood, or at least its ideal. This relationship reached its climax on her death bed, when, in a subconscious incestuous act, she promised him her wedding ring. Later he wrote he felt unsure whether he was looking for mothers or mistresses in women. His first crush – at fifteen – implied the latter. He fell in love with a woman of thirty, a feminist with many suitors and socially his superior.

Having finished school and a stint at teaching, he went to university. He tried to escape from his drab existence through acting, but failed. He tried to commit suicide, one of many attempts. Then he hit upon the idea of writing a comedy. Though it wasn't staged, he kept writing plays. Eventually one of his historical plays, Master Olof, became a success. It even won him a stipend from the King of Sweden. He took up journalism and was given a post at

the Royal Library. To give you an idea of his energy and mental capacities: to catalog its collection of Chinese and Japanese literature, he taught himself both languages.

In writing he became ever more vitriolic, taking aim at all sources of authority, especially universities and the military. As such he became a darling of the young intelligentsia, which allowed him access to the higher echelons of society. This quote from his novel The Red Room is a description of his character at the time:



"Far below him lay the noisy, reawakening town; the steam cranes whirred in the harbor, the iron bars rattled in the iron weighing machine, the whistles of the lock keepers shrilled, the steamers at the pontoon bridge smoked, the omnibuses rumbled over the uneven paving stones; noise and uproar in the fish market, sails and flags on the water outside; the screams of the seagulls, bugle calls from the dockyard, the turning out of the guard, the clattering of wooden shoes on the working men – all this produced an impression of life and bustle, which seemed to rouse the young man's energy; his face assumed an expression of defiance, cheerfulness, and resolution, and as he leaned over the barrier and looked at the town below, he seemed to be watching an enemy; his nostrils expanded, his eyes flashed, and he raised his clenched fist as if he were challenging or threatening the poor town."

Marriage and Rebellion

Siri von Essen was a member of the Swedish-speaking elite of Finland, then part of the Russian Empire. She was married to Baron Wrangel, a distinguished officer in the Swedish army. She was a liberated, intelligent woman, stage actress, and rumored to have many lovers.

Siri von Essen, photographed by Strindberg

Strindberg often voiced an attraction to simple women, like his mother, yet always fell for those who seemed the very opposite. This hints at an internal conflict. Wilhelm Stekel, a contemporary of Freud, called such men 'inzestscheu' (wary of incest); they avoid women who resemble their mothers too much. Freud himself stated that neurotics often direct their desires towards married objects. This allows them to feel jealous, in some cases, the whole point of the relationship. If the object of desire has other lovers, the neurotic can see themselves as saving them from immorality.

First Strindberg worshiped her from afar, building a shrine around her picture. He also visited her husband, which left him intimidated and awestruck. At other times, however, his frustration boiled over into rage at the baroness because of her unattainability. He thought of escaping from his obsession by leaving Sweden. His frustration was so obvious on the boat that an old woman offered him her sleeping pills. When he woke he cajoled the captain into putting him ashore. He dove into the cold October Baltic Sea so as to contract pneumonia. If he couldn't kill himself, then at least he could get the baroness to visit him at his sick bed, to be like a mother to him. Duly feverish, he sent her a letter and took to his bed.

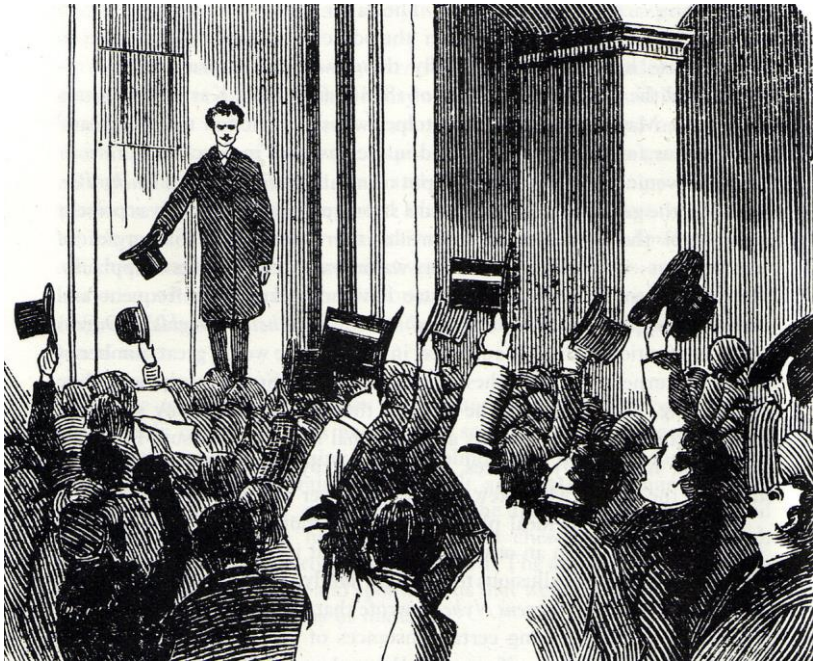
After his convalescence, he declared his love to her, and claimed a physical defect so they could safely sleep together. Yet when she agreed to divorce her husband, he became truculent. In a typical scene from their upcoming marriage, they argued on a train voyage. He was snide, she started to cry. She then put her feet up on the opposite seat, thereby revealing them. Strindberg kissed her feet, and he declared his love to her again. In his letters to her, he would call her Maria (that is, the ideal woman), but the slightest interest in other people, or a

change in behavior, would send him into a jealous rage. Clearly he felt insecure because of her higher social status and experience. Despite their marital troubles they had three children.

Meanwhile, Strindberg's satires, among them The Red Room and a history, The Swedish People, caused much hostility among the Swedish establishment. This hostility only increased his popularity both in Sweden and abroad. To escape all the hubbub, the family moved to Switzerland.

Strindberg with his children - Royal Library Sweden

Matters in Sweden came to a head with the publication, and banning of, the first novel of the cycle Giftas (Married). It was called Dygdens Lön (The Wage of Youth) and contained an attack on Sweden's official church. The public prosecutor sued Strindberg for blasphemy, a charge that carried a maximum penalty of two years prison. Strindberg accepted the challenge and returned to Sweden to stand trial. He was welcomed as a hero and acquitted. His triumph over the Swedish state was complete.



Strindberg's reception in Stockholm in 1884

Yet Strindberg didn't see it that way. Dygdens Lön had contained a manifesto for women's rights, yet many feminists had complained that his demands were too radical. Though the progressives in general had stood by him, he felt feminists had let him down. This, coupled to his marital problems, led to the emergence of his anti-feminism. He started accusing Siri of being a hermaphrodite, that is, sleeping with both men and women. He would also compare her to a spider who devours her mate. She, in turn, resented having to give up her career as an actress for him, and cast doubts on his sanity.

It is true that Strindberg, with his extreme sensitivity, had suffered mental problems at university. During oral exams, for instance, he would suffer from aphasia (the inability to speak). The characters in his plays would display similar mental issues. At one point he even tried to have himself committed to an asylum, but was refused.

Nowadays, he would've likely been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. This condition is marked by unstable relationships, a distorted sense of self, fear of abandonment, and a detachment from reality. There's also alternating euphoria and dysphoria, which in relationships manifests itself in idealization and devaluation of the object of desire. In extreme cases this can lead to psychosis, as it seems to have done with Strindberg.

His years with Siri, however, were the most fecund. He wrote nine plays, nine novels and short story collections, three autobiographical works, and four other non-fiction books, and also made paintings and photograms (exposing plates to the light without a camera). From his frenetic output it's clear he felt he was on a mission, which is often a trait of people who've suffered injustice or persecution in childhood. Out of this period also came the plays that sealed his international success: Fadern (The Father) and Fruken Julie (Miss Julie).

Fadern (the Father):

A cavalry officer discusses a case of adultery with his wife. One of his soldiers claims his child is illegitimate. The couple then get into a heated discussion over the education of their daughter. His wife wants her to become an artist; he wants her to become a teacher. The wife suggests to others her husband is insane because of the vast number of books he's collected. The father casts doubts over whether his daughter is really his. He remembers a time when he was ill and she nursed him like a mother. He realizes he was the weaker partner then, and that she now resists his attempts at dominance. The officer's former nanny steals his key to the secretary desk, which contains his legal papers. His wife barricades the door against him. Discussing the matter with his doctor and priest, they decide he must be put in a straitjacket and taken to prison or an asylum. To prove his sanity, the officer quotes from his books, to prove he's read them. But then he brandishes a gun, which frightens his daughter, who flees. The nanny enters with the straitjacket. She tells him stories of his childhood which lulls him into a sort of trance. Meanwhile she puts the straitjacket on him. When he wakes up, he realizes what's happened, and, after a brief struggle, collapses. The doctor examines him and declares he's died of apoplexy.

Fruken Julie (Miss Julie)

The daughter of a count, seeking to break free from the constraints society puts on her, goes to a dance with her servants. She falls in love with the young butler. He, however, is more interested in his advancement, and wants to use her fortune to start a hotel. Together with his fiancée, the cook Kristin, he drives Miss Julie to suicide. The count is never seen. His presence is symbolized by his gloves and boots.

The stresses and disappointments of marriage and work were exacerbating his mental state. As mentioned before, his subconscious was looking for threats everywhere. For instance, when stress caused stomach problems, he blamed it on cyanide poisoning. Now his main enemies were his wife and the feminists. He even accused Henrik Ibsen of writing a play, The Wild Duck, about his failing marriage. He'd always felt a rivalry with the Norwegian, who had been the trailblazer for Scandinavian art in the rest of Europe. Strindberg always bridled at his mention.

The Father reflects the concerns Siri expressed about Strindberg's state of mind, which worsened his hostility. Divorce became inevitable. Strindberg took it very hard and doubled down on his anti-feminism. In the second part of Giftas he even declared that women were inferior to men. In 1891 he withdrew to an island on the Swedish coast.

In the Black Piglet

In the fall of 1892 he ended his isolation and settled in Berlin, then in the grip of a Nordic mania; some bookshops even displayed his portrait next to that of the recently-dismissed chancellor Otto von Bismarck. As in other European cities, he fell in with a group of Scandinavian artists, among them the Norwegians Edvard Munch and the musician Dagny Juell. The latter was married to the Polish writer Stanislas Przybyswski (1868-1927), a fanatical devotee of Strindberg. At the time he wrote in German, but in 1897 he would become editor of the influential Polish-language journal Zycie (Life).

Stanislas and Dagny

The group met in the winehouse Zum Schwarzen Ferkel (In the Black Piglet – the word has the same double meaning in German as it does in English). Przybyswski called himself a Satanist and sought what he called the Absolute, what is beyond good and evil. One of his books was called Satan's Synagogue. At the same time, he addressed Strindberg as "father". The three artists were clearly influenced by the philosophy of Nietzsche, whose works were becoming popular during the 1890's. Diabolism, however, is a return to religion, with the difference that one now worships the enemy of one's former god, combined with a revolt against authority.

What went on within the group is unclear. What is known is that all three men slept with Dagny, and all three suffered mental problems. Munch depicted the situation in his paintings

titled Jealousy. In them he's in the background with Dagny, while her husband faces the viewer.

Edvard Munch - Jealousy

For Strindberg the period was barren. He wrote just one play. The opposite was true of Munch, who painted portraits of Przybyswski, Strindberg, and many paintings of women that likely featured Dagny Juell.

Strindberg did shape Munch's ideas on women. He named Munch's painting of a woman embracing a man The Vampire. Przybyswski's relationship with women was even more complicated. He abandoned his first wife for Dagny, but then impregnated his first wife again. His plays have a similarity to those of Strindberg, but his characters seem even more prey to their passions. Munch, Przybyswski, and Dagny would all feature in Strindberg's delusions later on.

Edvard Munch – The Vampire (1893)

In 1892 he met the Austrian journalist Frida Uhl, and married her the following year. It seems that this is when his psychosis started to emerge. In 1894 he goes to Paris with his wife, with the intention of abandoning her.

The Inferno

The Experiments

Much of what we now of his psychosis comes from his own works, The Inferno, Legends, and the Blue Books. Many of the visible facts have been corroborated by friends and fellow artists, among them the Norwegian Knut Hamsun. Yet of course we have no way of knowing what Strindberg really thought at the time.

First let's look at what psychosis entails. Important is to realize that it is a symptom, not a condition itself. One external characteristic is social withdrawal. Internal characteristics are delusions of persecution, reference (seeing messages in random things), and grandeur. Other delusions are those of thought broadcasting (receiving thoughts) and thought insertion (being able to influence others with thoughts). Strindberg displayed nearly all these symptoms from 1894 to 1897.

It seems odd to look at this period in detail, as it was completely barren artwise. He claimed to have devoted himself to science, yet it's clear that he was attempting alchemy. This illustrates Carl Jung's point that alchemy is a symbolic process, a distillation of a new personality. After all, it seems that Strindberg at the time was suffering from writer's block, and so he needed to reinvent himself. This gave rise to the theory that his psychosis was actually an experiment. Though, seeing the consequences it had on his health and well-being, I find this unlikely.

Sigmund Freud, in his Discomfort in Culture, claims that psychosis is a rebellion of an ego which has seen its pursuit of happiness frustrated. Strindberg had achieved his goals by 1890: he was famous, celebrated, had married an aristocratic wife, and had triumphed over the Swedish state. Yet the fulfillment of his wishes had been ruined by his sense of social and sexual insecurity.

He starts off The Inferno by telling us he promised to meet his wife soon, but thinking they will never see each other again. He suspects her of conspiring against him, and of being jealous of his accomplishments. He then moves into a room in the Quartier Latin of Paris, near the Sorbonne.

The first experiments with sulfur burn the skin off his hands. He, however, blames invisible hostile forces. He finishes his marriage by claiming he's having an affair in a letter to his wife. It's Christmas, and he tortures himself with thinking how it must be like to be with his wife and child. During the New Year's celebrations he's attacked by groups of rowdy youths. He observes he didn't consider this punishment for past sins at the time, which suggest he did so later on. At night the sound of a Jew's harp keeps him awake.

When he gets his hands treated, he stays at the hospital because he's comforted by the presence of a nurse there. He calls her "mother" and she calls him "my child". Yet at the same time, a counter current emerges: he writes that he's wearing the garb of the dead, that the medicine is poison, and that the hospital is his prison. Also, his delusions of reference

emerge that vindicate his chemical experiments: a book from the hospital apothecary opens automatically on the word phosphorus, and one day he finds himself on the corner of Rue Alibert, the name of a chemist (though this is hardly unusual in the Quartier Latin).

When a letter from a scientific institution arrives, he sees it as further vindication, which reminds him how his family repudiated him. He rejects an attempt at reconciliation by his wife, because he feels he must choose between love and science. He describes the feeling at this act as that of a murderer pleased with his deed.

Through the winter of 1895 he continues his experiments. At times he visits artists and their families, but feels disgusted at their "loose morals". He's more content when observing all the omens around him, like when he sees his initials on a shield topped by a rainbow. He notices the name Orfila everywhere, the name of a French chemist.

The summer and fall of 1895 was a period of happiness. He rejects the invitations of his Scandinavian friends and conceives of a new religion. His inspiration isn't the Bible, but the story of the Buddha, who also abandoned his family to seek enlightenment. He spends his days visiting the Montparnasse cemetery and the Luxembourg gardens (behind the Sorbonne). He declares science bankrupt because it has drawn a line under all that is mysterious. Ironically he was right; within the next decades, scientists like Albert Einstein would open new gateways into fields of research.

Now he believes he can manipulate his friends telepathically. He focuses his thoughts on his daughter with Frida Uhl, hoping she'll fall ill so he'll have an excuse to return to them. As confirmation he sees a heart, a brain, and folded hands when looking at seeds through a microscope.

But then things start to go wrong. He falls out with a friend and the publication of one of his manuscripts is bungled. He hears pianos playing in the rooms around him, and concludes that a gang of Scandinavian feminists is persecuting him. Fortunately he finds a hotel called Orfila, and moves in. It's an old and dark place, but women aren't allowed, and from his window he can see a chapel and a church in the distance. Reading the Book of Job, he believes he's being tested in a similar way.

More omens appear. A coal in the fire looks like the head of a demon, the next day he finds one that looks like two dwarfs embracing, on the third he finds a Madonna and Child. He shows them to a painter who believes they've been made by a sculptor.

Stanislas and Dagny

Other events disturb him though. On the key rack he finds a letter addressed to someone called Uhl (his wife's surname), postmarked Dornach (where she lives). Then he sees a letter postmarked Vienna and bearing a Polish name. This he connects to Stanislas Przybyswski, whom he now considers a deadly enemy. He becomes convinced his erstwhile friends from Berlin are spying on him.

At New Year 1896 he takes in an American artist who's just been evicted from his digs. Yet soon he becomes suspicious, thinking he's envious of him. He also senses the man is draining him of energy. When he reads in a paper about a famous doctor Schlatter in the US who's recently disappeared after curing thousands, he becomes convinced his fellow lodger is the same. When he confronts him, the man scoffs, but disappears soon after.

During the spring he receives a letter from one of his children with Siri. They have all been ill in the hospital. This he links to his own efforts to telepathically influence his daughter with Frida.

Through reading Honoré de Balzac's Séraphita he encounters the teachings of Swedenborg. Swedenborg was a scholar who later became a mystic. He called his doctrine The New Jerusalem, which will sound familiar to those who have read William Blake. Blake was both an adherent and a critic of Swedenborg's ideas. Strindberg now believes Swedenborg and Orfila are watching over him. Added omens are his pillow looking like a marble head, and his bed clothes looking like a reclining Zeus. That is, his improved outlook makes him see positive omens.

But then he hears a piece of Schumann being played on a piano in the hotel, he's convinced this is Stanislas come to murder him (in The Inferno he calls him Popofsky), over of his affair with Dagny. He asks about Stanislas in restaurants, but feels people are being hostile and evasive. He tracks down Edvard Munch in Paris (he refers to him as a "Danish painter"), but gets no satisfactory answer. On the second visit his way is barred by a Great Dane, on the second by a child holding the ten of spades. Munch's unwillingness to confirm his suspicions is seen as revenge for Dagny spurning him for Strindberg. Further proof of the plot is a discovery in the Luxembourg gardens: twigs forming the letters P and J, the couple's initials.

When he hears of Przybyswski's arrest in Berlin for the murder of his first wife and child, Strindberg believes that his telepathic magic directed Przybyswski's murderous intentions away from himself. Przybyswski was indeed accused of murdering his wife and child, but was released through lack of evidence. Many believed he had encouraged her to kill herself though, and he's also suspected of having a hand in the later murder of Dagny Juell in Tblisi, Georgia. Strindberg becomes desperate when he hears of his enemy's release.

He must leave Paris soon. He sees a landscape in the residues of the zinc bath he used for his experiments: wooded hills around a valley with a winding river.

July brings heat and stench. He finds a scrap of paper with the word "marten" then another with the word "vulture". To him Stanislas resembles a marten, and Dagny, a vulture, further proof of their plot to kill him. He contemplates taking cyanide, to beat them to it. Instead he continues in his attempts to make gold.

At night, when he writes, he can hear a man writing on the other side of the wall. He's sure the man is copying his movements. One night, he sees the shadow of a woman on the

wall outside, and he thinks it's Dagny. When he's tired, it's because he's poisoned, and when he's agitated, it means he's being attacked with electricity. Electricity at the time was relatively new, and many people were afraid of it.

He moves to a room in the Rue de la Clef, closer to the Sorbonne. Electricity becomes his main threat now. He believes electrical devices are being set up in the surrounding rooms to kill him. His desperation and helplessness ramp up his religiosity. His assailants are no longer enemies, but tools guided by God. Despite his new-found religion, he feels no remorse for deserting his family. He's the one being punished. He's the martyr. One night he becomes so suspicious and frightened in his room, he goes to sleep in the garden.

Escape

He flees to Dieppe to stay with friends. They're shocked at his appearance: his face is blackened, his cheeks fallen in, his hair is going gray. They take him in, but he feel he doesn't deserve their kindness. Punishment is sure to follow. He makes the family look for hidden electrical devices, but nothing is found.

He's sure he'll be attacked at two o' clock in the morning. When nothing happens, he opens the window, lights candles, and exposes his chest. At once he's hit by an electric shock. He rushes downstairs to a spare bed that's put out for him, but there he's struck again. Finally he falls asleep on the balcony. He's woken by hearing the word "Alp" (troll in German – the German word for nightmare is Alptraum). You notice that Stanislas and Dagny no longer figure in his delusions.

At last he realizes he might be suffering from a mental illness. In July 1896, he returns to Sweden to be treated in the sanatorium of Doctor Eliasson in Ystad, in the very south of the country. He's not an easy patient though. The bed is made of brass with metal springs, and in the room above he discovers a wire net. This convinces him he'll be attacked with electricity again.

1Strindberg during his stay in Ystad

This time a vampire attacks him in the night, and he jumps out the window. When he explains everything to the doctor, he tells him such delusions aren't unusual for someone in his condition. But now he starts to believe the doctor is trying to stop him from making gold, because that might upset the world order.

After a change of rooms and a cold-water cure, his condition improves. He returns to writing and starts work on The Inferno. But when the doctor shows him a stillborn two-month old fetus, he receives an electric shock again and runs away. He seeks out another doctor who brings him back to the sanatorium.

Escape comes through a letter from Frida, who begs him to visit their daughter. He sees it as a chance for redemption, yet he feels no gratitude towards his wife. It's true that the marriage was over. Frida had given birth to a son. She called him Friedrich Strindberg, but the real father was the Munich satirist and author Frank Wedekind, author of Spring's Awakening (about adolescent sexuality) and Pandora's Box. (about a reluctant femme fatale who is murdered by Jack The Ripper).

Seeing Berlin again reminds him of the debauchery of his time there, but the sight of crucifixes along the Danube heighten his resolve. Upon arrival in Dornach he embraces his daughter, but at the same time he feels he must be punished for this bliss. The landscape around the village resembles the one he saw in the zinc bath back in Paris. His daughter is being raised by his mother-in-law, whose compassion will be crucial in the coming weeks. Her mother, however, wants nothing to do with Strindberg, and now she becomes his nemesis. When he sees her portrait in a house in the neighboring village of Saxen, he shakes his fist at it. Two hours later a storm breaks loose. When she falls ill, he interprets it as divine punishment.

His mother-in-law and her sister blame his troubles on dabbling in the occult in 1892. They give him books by Swedenborg. Upon opening it at random he reads a description of a landscape that reminds him of the surroundings of the nearby village of Klam. The descriptions of Hell in the book remind him of his childhood. He considers becoming a catholic, but vacillates between feelings of unworthiness and grandeur.

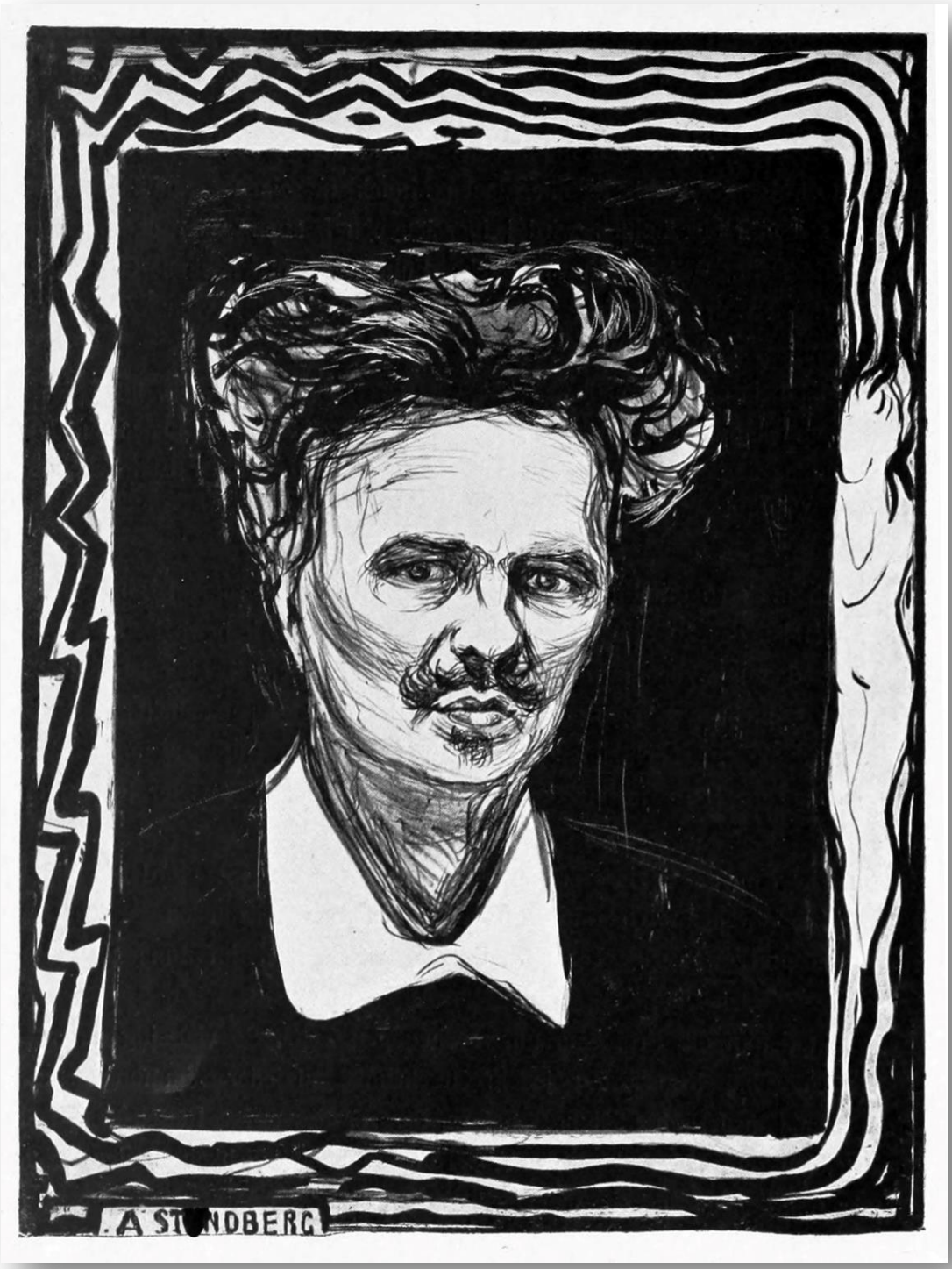
The village of Klam (17th century engraving)

One day he hikes through a ravine near Klam. It has a rock formation called The Turk's Head. Then he notices a miller's lean-to has a broom and a goat's horn by the door. He also discovers a building with six openings like oven doors. A water-mill makes a sound like the traffic in Paris. To him these are all signs of the presence of Satan. This scene he later used in his play To Damascus.

In the Ravine – scene from To Damascus, with Harriet Bosse as The Lady

Once again his room becomes a source of anxiety. The farmyard smells that seep in are offensive, and at night he hears a clock strike thirteen and feels electric currents running through his body. On searching the house he discovers twelve staves that form a pentagram. The following night he's attacked by a passing thunderstorm.

The family moves to Klam. When his mother-in-law tells him of the scandals of the village, how the inhabitants are so weighed down by sin they can't sleep and wander the countryside at night, he associates the village with Swedenborg's hells. He fears the villagers, because they might blame him for his wife's grandmother's illness and stone him.



Edvard Munch’s portrait of Strindberg – notice the woman in the frame whose hair turns to lightining

A shoemaker in the village, a known atheist and blasphemer, is always accompanied by his tame jackdaw. The bird is present at the wake and follows the funeral procession, but then it starts following Strindberg, screaming abuse at him. This ends when local boys kill the bird. On a particularly bad night Strindberg flees the house, but is attacked by dogs. He returns home and tells his mother-in-law he wants to die, to be burnt alive.

The sight of children dancing around a barrel organ one day, provokes his mother-in-law into telling him about a local woman who recently succumbed to a dancing frenzy. He interprets this as his daughter having exorcised one of his demons, which then took possession of the woman. At the same time he once again falls into misogyny: women are witches, instruments of Satan. Further evidence of this he finds in a newspaper article which suggests he was persecuted by feminists in Paris. His mother-in-law gets fed up with him and tells him to leave.

Meanwhile he's received news of his continuing literary success. He returns to Sweden. Staying in the university town of Lund, he suffers more electrical attacks, but also discovers the drawings of Victorien Sardou, a medium who claims to channel the inhabitants of planet Jupiter, among them Swedenborg. Now he publicly renounces atheism and socialism. His mission now is to tell people they shouldn't look for joy in this world, because it is actually the hell in which they have to pay for their sins. This would be the theme of his plays To Damascus and The Dream Play.

He never entered the Catholic Church though. In the epilogue of The Inferno he shows his usual pattern of emotions: consuming passion, doubt, and then repudiation. He writes that he was a false prophet and a bad joke. On the other hand, he's still convinced he's being persecuted.

What Strindberg fails to mention is that during his time in Paris, his fellow Scandinavians, among them Knut Hamsun and Edvard Munch, gathered money to alleviate his poverty. He reacted by saying they did it for the publicity. They never held it against him though. Munch wrote on the back of his portrait of Strindberg the word "Tak" (thank you).

The Aftermath

First about his private life. In 1901 he married the young actress Harriet Bosse. She starred in many of his plays as the leading female role. Yet she chafed under the restraints he imposed on her, and divorced him in 1904. He also sought to make amends with his first wife Siri through her children, recognizing he had treated her unjustly. She had moved to Finland after their divorce. Though she accepted the gesture, they would never meet again. She passed away shortly before Strindberg's death.

Artistically his barren time was over. From 1898 to 1912 he wrote more that fifty works. He himself describes his activity as follows:

"Just as I have pen and paper ready, it breaks loose. The words actually rush down upon me, and my pen works under high pressure to set everything down on paper. When I have written for a while, I feel that I am floating about in space. Then it is as if a higher will that my own causes the pen to glide over the page and writes down words, which seem to me pure inspiration."

Gone was the realism of his previous plays though. Now his works became allegorical. His first play was Till Damascus (To Damascus). The title refers to the apostle Paul, whose conversion occurred on the road to that city. Later he wrote The Dream Play, in which he tries to emulate the structure of a dream. Both plays are also called station plays, because the narrative follows a pattern of stages reminiscent of the stages of the Cross in medieval art. Echoes of these plays can be found in Kafka's The Castle, The Trial, but also in Beckett's Waiting for Godot. We know for certain that Kafka admired Strindberg, because he mentions this in his diaries.

To Damascus:

A man (called ökande (unknown)) has been exiled from his land for blasphemy. He refers to himself as a changeling to a lady he meets in front to a church at a funeral. He's attracted to her because she has his mother's voice. Yet at the same time he tells her his mother hated and beat him. They also meet a learned beggar who had a ring that gave him anything he wanted. He threw it away, but now he wants it returned.

The lady reappears bearing a flower, but the unknown says it's a mandrake, a sign of evil, as well as a medicine against insanity. He tells her not to read his latest book, and refers to the story of Bluebeard as a warning. She's already married, but he asks her to elope with him. He then refers to the story of Medea, who hacked her children to pieces.

They visit her husband, who's a doctor and psychiatrist. The Unknown is afraid and critical of him, and elopes with his wife. They are penniless and live in cabins. The Unknown feels persecuted by invisible forces which hound him from place to place. He's always expecting punishment.

They arrive at the lady's village in a ravine. The Unknown perceives the smithy as a gate to Hell and a rock formation as the profile of doctor. He realizes it's because of his guilt. They live with her parents for a while, and the lady's mother makes her read the Unknown's latest book. He falls into a fever, is treated by monks, and becomes religious.

The Unknown now becomes a megalomaniac, believes he can make gold and change the world order. He abandons the lady. Having succeeded in making gold, he's invited to a banquet in his honor by a group of scientists. These, however, turn out to be frauds, and the Unknown is arrested when he can't pay for the banquet. He returns to the monastery.

There he is confronted with all his sins and the people he wronged. He expresses the wish to become a monk. In a final confrontation he has to do battle with an evil spirit who reminds him of his misdeeds. When he discovers his son has become “a worshiper of Venus” he dies a symbolic death.

Now he’s become a monk. One of his fellow monks is the doctor. The prior-confessor shows him how many artists in the past underwent radical conversions. The evil spirit returns though, now taking the part of the lady and returns him to his starting point. Instead of a funeral, they now witness a baptism, then a marriage. The play ends with the confessor covering the Unknown with a burial shroud.

Harriet Bosse as The Lady

The Dream Play

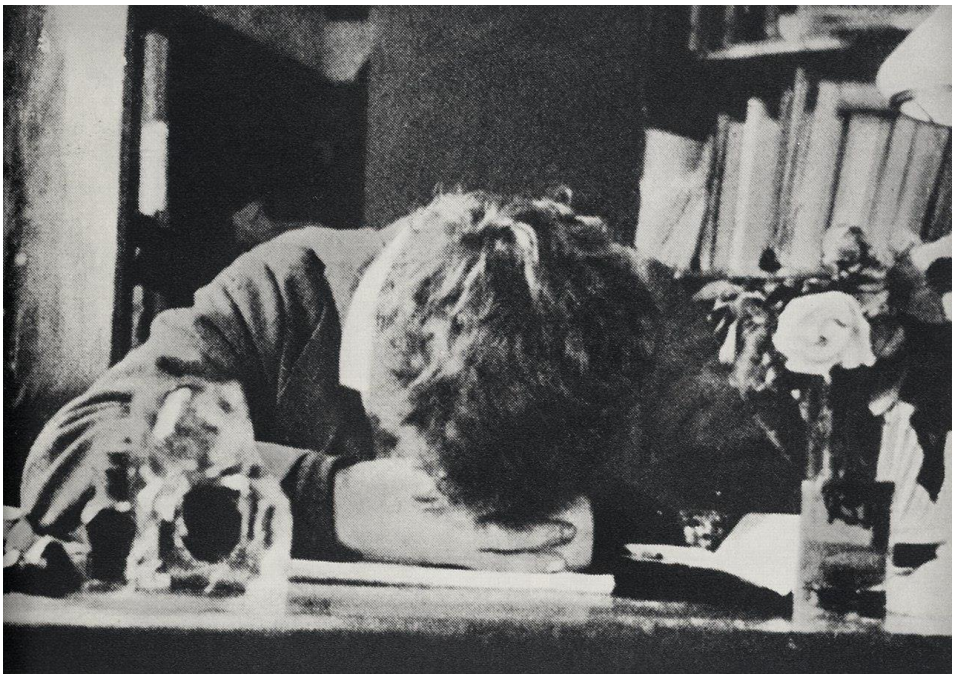
The daughter of the Hindu god Indra witnesses and participates in a series of disjointed and illogical scenes in which humanities spiritual sufferings are revealed. The symbol at the heart of the play is a growing castle with a flower bud crowning its dome. There are recurring characters, like a man with a bouquet of flowers who waits for a woman to appear. At the end of the play he’s an old man and still waiting. Indra’s daughter discovers the source of humanity’s suffering, but “right-minded” people then want to stone her. At the end of the play the castle burns down and the bud opens into a giant chrysanthemum (symbol of beauty and death). In the background are the faces of people in agony. Suffering is without end, in both senses of the word.

He had overcome his psychosis, but retained its effects on his perceptions. In his Blue Books he constantly returns to the theme of similarities between creatures and parts of the human anatomy, such as the way some crab shields look like faces, etc. In ancient times, with such powers of reference, he would've been considered a shaman. We also need to realize that such mental phenomena are coping methods used by the subconscious, though they can lead to disruption of the individual's life.

On January 22, 1912, his sixty-third birthday, theaters all over Sweden staged his plays. That night, a torchlit procession in his honor filed past his residence in Stockholm, The Blue Tower. He never received the Nobel Prize though, an honor he shares with Tolstoy, and later James Joyce and George Orwell. Perhaps this was due to his anti-feminism, or conversely his championing of workers' rights. Some of his admirers set up a collection for an alternative prize, much to Strindberg's chagrin.

His health was failing though. He'd suffered a bout of pneumonia which never healed and had been diagnosed with stomach cancer. On May 14 of the same year he was dead. According to his wishes no photographs of his body were taken, nor was a death mask made. He was buried with a Bible and a crucifix.

Strindberg asleep at his desk - Royal Library of Sweden



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AUGUST STRINDBERG

HALF A PAGE

If you've read the preceding article, you'll know that Strindberg's marriages ended in divorce, usually caused by his jealousy. In this and the following story, both published in 1903, he finds a solution for his marital problems: the death of his family. Yet both have a beautiful quality, and a humanity, which gives an idea of the complex nature of Strindberg's personality.

The second story contains an incident Strindberg himself experienced during his Inferno episode in Austria. You can find a description of it in the preceding article.

The last haul of furniture was gone; the tenant, a young man wearing a black mourning band in his hat, went through the house making sure nothing had been forgotten. - No, he hadn't forgotten anything, not a thing. He turned to go, determined never to think again of what went on in this house. But look: in the hallway, jammed against the wall next to the telephone, half a piece of paper. Many hands had written on it, some neat with ink, others scribbled in pencil, some even in red.

There it was, the whole beautiful story of what'd happened during those two short years. Everything he'd forgotten was there. A piece of life on half a page.

He picked it up. It was a piece of concept paper, radiant. He put it on the mantelpiece and read.

Her name was the first thing he read: Alice. The most beautiful name at the time. She was his bride. Then the numbers 15 11, like a number from a hymn sheet. Above it was the word "bank". His job, the holy work which gave him bread, a home, and a wife, the foundation of his existence. But it was struck out! The bank had collapsed, but he'd managed to get a job at another, but only after much anxiety.

Then it came! The flower shop, the rented carriage. The engagement, when he had lots of money.

Furniture traders and decorators followed. He was furnishing the house. Then the movers. They moved in.

Then a man's name, struck out. A friend who'd reached a high position in society, but who couldn't bear his fortune. He fell, couldn't be saved, had to move far away. A failure.

Something new in the couple's life. Written in pencil in a woman's hand: "the lady". What lady? Ah yes, the one with the big coat, enters slowly, never crosses the hallway, but goes straight along the corridor to the bedroom. Under her name is "Doctor L".

For the first time the name of a relative appears. “Mama”. His mother-in-law, at first kept a discrete distance so as not to disturb the newly-weds, she was called in their hour of need. She came gladly, because she was needed.

Here the blue and red scribbles start. A job agency: the maid has gone, or a new one needs to be engaged. The chemist. Hm! It grows dark. The coal merchant. Milk is ordered, pasteurized.

Schlächter, the businessman, etc. Everything has to be arranged over the phone now, because the lady of the house is not available. She’s in bed.

He can’t read what follows. Everything becomes dark before his eyes, like a man trying to see on the bottom of the ocean.

The undertaker. Nothing more to be said! A large and a tiny coffin. Written in parenthesis: “from dust”.

Nothing else! It ended in dust, that’s what it did.

Yet he took the piece of sun paper, kissed it, and put it in his breast pocket.

In two minutes he’d lived through two years of his life.

He held his head high as he left the house, a happy, proud man, because he felt he’d possessed all that was beautiful and good. How many poor people have never had the such!

translated from German by Peter Van Belle

August Strindberg
The Sluggard

Conductor Crossberg was fond of lying in bed in the morning, firstly, because he had to conduct the orchestra in the evening, and secondly, because he drank more than one glass of beer before he went home and to bed. He had tried once or twice to get up early, but had found no sense in it. He had called on a friend, but had found him asleep ; he had wanted to pay money into the bank, but had found it still closed ; he had gone to the library to borrow music, but it was not yet open ; he had wanted to use the electric trams, but they had not yet started running. It was impossible to get a cab at this hour of the morning ; he could not even buy a pinch of his favourite snuff; there was nothing at all for him to do. And so he had eventually formed the habit of staying in bed until late; and after all, he had no one to please but himself.

He loved the sun and flowers and children; but he could not live on the sunny side of the street on account of his delicate instruments, which were out of tune almost as soon as they were put into a sunny room.

Therefore, on the first of April, he took rooms which faced north. He was quite sure that there was no mistake about this, for he carried a compass on his watch-chain, and he could find the Great Bear in the evening sky.

So far, so good; but then spring came, and it was so warm that it was really pleasant to live in rooms with a northern aspect. His bedroom joined the sitting-room; he always kept his bedroom in pitch-black darkness by letting down the Venetian blinds; there were no Venetian blinds in the sitting room, because they were not wanted there.

And the early summer came and everything grew green. The conductor had dined at the restaurant "Hazelmount," and had drunk a bottle of Burgundy with his dinner, and therefore he slept long and soundly, especially as the theatre was closed on that day. He slept well, but while he slept it grew so warm in the room that he woke up two or three times, or, at any rate, he thought he did. Once he fancied that his wall-paper was on fire, but that was probably the effect of the Burgundy; another time he felt as if something hot had touched his face, but that was certainly the Burgundy; and so he turned over and fell asleep again.

At half-past nine he got up, dressed, and went into the sitting-room to refresh himself with a glass of milk, which always stood ready for him in the morning.

It was anything but cool in the sitting-room this morning; it was almost warm, too warm. And the cold milk was not cold; it was lukewarm, unpleasantly lukewarm.

The conductor was not a hot-tempered man, but he liked order and method in everything. Therefore he rang for old Louisa, and since he made his first fifty remonstrances always in a very mild tone, he spoke kindly but firmly to her, as she put her head through the door.

" Louisa," he said, " you have given me lukewarm milk."

" Oh ! no, sir," replied Louisa, "it was quite cold, it must have got warm in standing."

" Then you must have had a fire in the room; it's very warm here this morning."

No, Louisa had not had a fire; and she retired into the kitchen, very much hurt.

He forgave her for the milk. But a look round the sitting-room made him feel very depressed. I must tell you that he had built a little private altar in a corner, near the piano, which consisted of a small table with two silver candlesticks, a large photograph of a young woman, and a tall, gold edged champagne glass. This glass was the glass he had used on his wedding-day, and he was a widower now always contained a red rose in memory of and as an offering to her who once had been the sunshine of his life. Whether it was summer or winter, there was always a rose ; and in the winter time it lasted a whole week, that is to say if he trimmed the stem occasionally and put a little salt into the water. Now, he had put a fresh rose into the glass only last night, and to-day it was faded, shrivelled up, dead, with its head drooping. This was a bad omen. He knew what sensitive creatures flowers are, and had noticed that they thrive with some people and not with others. He remembered how sometimes, in his wife's lifetime, her rose, which always stood on her little work-table, had faded and died quite unexpectedly. And he had also noticed that this always happened when his sun was hiding behind a cloud, which after a while would dissolve in large drops to the accompaniment of a low rumbling. Roses must have peace and kind words ; they can't bear harsh voices. They love music, and sometimes he would play to the roses and they opened their buds and smiled.

Now Louisa was a hard woman, and often muttered and growled to herself when she turned out the room. There were days when she was in a very bad temper, so that the milk curdled in the kitchen, and the whole dinner tasted of discord, which the conductor noticed at once; for he was himself like a delicate instrument, whose soul responded to moods and influences which other people did not feel.

He concluded that Louisa had killed the rose; perhaps she had scolded the poor thing, or knocked against the glass, or breathed on the flower angrily, a treatment which it could not bear. Therefore he rang again ; and when Louisa put in her head, he said, not unkindly, but more firmly than before : " What have you done to my rose, Louisa ? "

"Nothing, sir! "

" Nothing? Do you think the flower died without a very good reason ? You can see for yourself that there is no water in the glass ! You must have poured it away ! "

As Louisa had done no such thing, she went into the kitchen and began to cry, for it is disagreeable to be blamed when one is innocent.

Conductor Crossberg, who could not bear to see people crying, said no more, but in the evening he bought a new rose, one which had only just been cut, and, of course, was not wired, for his wife had always had an objection to wired flowers.

And then he went to bed and fell asleep. And again he fancied in his sleep that the wall-paper was on fire, and that his pillow was very hot ; but he went on sleeping.

On the following morning, when he came into the sitting-room, to say his morning prayers before the little altar alas! There lay his rose, all the pink petals scattered by the side of the stem. He was just stretching out his hand to touch the bell, when he saw the photograph of his beloved, half rolled up, lying by the side of the champagne glass.

Louisa could not have done that!

"She, who was my all, my conscience and my muse," he thought in his childlike mind, "she is dissatisfied and angry with me ; what have I done?"

Well, when he put this question to his conscience, he found, as usual, more than one little fault, and he resolved to eradicate his faults, gradually, of course.

Then he had the portrait framed and a glass shade put over the rose, hoping that now things would be all right, but secretly fearing that they would not.

After that he went on a week's journey ; he returned home late at night and went straight to bed. He woke up once, imagining that the hanging lamp was burning.

When he entered the sitting-room late on the following morning, it was downright hot there, and everything looked frightfully shabby. The blinds were faded; the cover on the piano had lost its bright colours; the bound volumes of music looked as if they were deformed ; the oil in the hanging-lamp had evaporated and hung in a trembling drop under the ornament, where the flies used to dance; the water in the water-bottle was warm.

But the saddest thing of all was that her portrait, too, was faded, as faded as autumn leaves. He was very unhappy, and whenever he was very unhappy he went to the piano, or took up his violin, as the case might be. ...

This time he sat down at the piano, with a vague notion of playing the sonata in E minor, Grieg's, of course, which had been her favourite, and was the best and finest, in his opinion, after Beethoven's sonata in D minor; not because E comes after D, but because it was so.

But the piano was very refractory to-day. It was out of tune, and made all sorts of difficulties, so that he began to believe that his eyes and fingers were in a bad temper. But it was not their fault. The piano, quite simply, was out of tune, although a very clever tuner had only just tuned it. It was like a piano bewitched, enchanted.

He seized his violin; he had to tune it, of course. But when he wanted to tighten the E string, the screw refused to work. It had dried up; and when the conductor tried to use force, the string snapped with a sharp sound, and rolled itself up like a dried eel-skin.

It was bewitched!

But the fact that her photograph had faded was really the worst blow, and therefore he threw a veil over the altar. In doing this, he threw a veil over all that was most beautiful in his life; and he became depressed, began to mope, and stopped going out in the evening.

It would be Midsummer soon. The nights were shorter than the days, but since the Venetian blinds kept his bedroom dark, the conductor did not notice it.

At last, one night it was Midsummer night he awoke, because the clock in the sitting-room struck thirteen. There was something uncanny about this, firstly, because thirteen is an unlucky number, and secondly, because no well-behaved clock can strike thirteen. He did not fall asleep again, but he lay in his bed, listening. There was a peculiar ticking noise in the sitting-room, and then a loud bang, as if a piece of furniture had cracked. Directly afterwards he heard stealthy footsteps, and then the clock began to strike again; and it struck and struck, fifty times a hundred times. It really was uncanny ! And now a luminous tuft shot into his bedroom and threw a figure on the wall, a strange figure, something like a fylfot, and it came from the sitting- room. There was a light, then, in the sitting-room? But who had lit it? And there was a tinkling of glasses, just as if guests were there; champagne glasses of cut-crystal; but not a word was uttered. And now he heard more sounds; sounds of canvas being furled, or clothes passed through a mangle, or something of that sort.

The conductor felt compelled to get up and look, and he went, commending his soul into the hands of the Almighty.

Well, first of all he saw Louisa's print-dress disappearing through the kitchen door; then he saw blinds, but blinds which had been pulled up; he saw the dining-table covered with flowers, arranged in glasses; as many flowers as there had been on his wedding-day when he had brought his bride home.

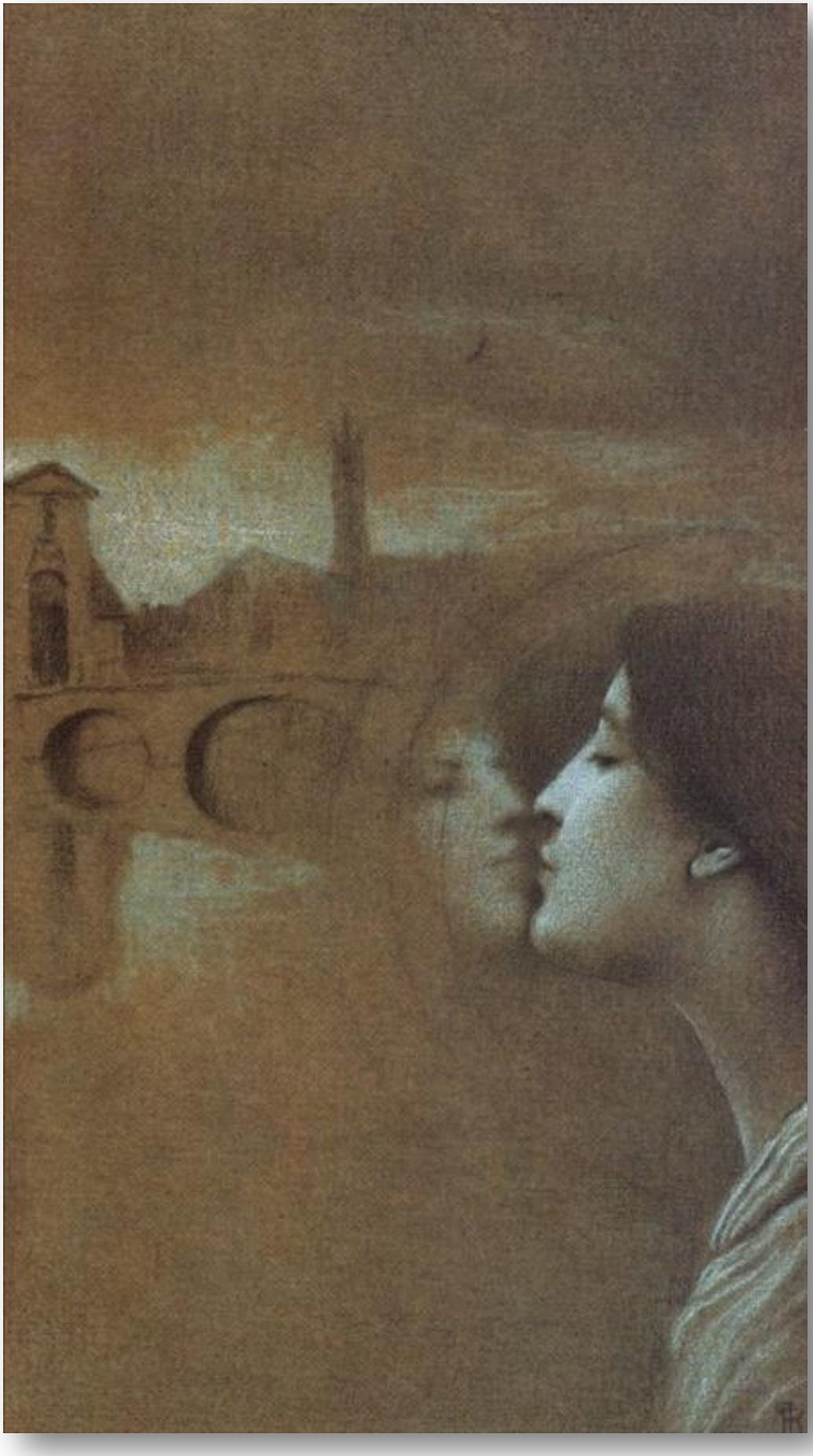
And behold! The sun, the sun shone right into his face, shone on blue fjords and distant woods; it was the sun which had illuminated the sitting-room and played all the little tricks. He blessed the sun which had been up so early in the morning and made a game of the sluggard. And he blessed the memory of her whom he called the sun of his life. It was not a new name, but he could not think of a better one, and as it was, it was good enough.

And on his altar stood a rose, quite fresh, as fresh as she had been before the never-ending work had tired her. Tired, her! Yes, she had not been one of the strong ones; and life with its blows and knocks had been too brutal for her! He had not forgotten how, after a day's cleaning or ironing, she would throw herself on the sofa and say in a complaining little voice, "I am so tired!" Poor little thing, this earth had not been her home, she had only played once, on tour, as it were, and then had gone far away.

"She lacked sunshine," the doctor had said, for at that time they couldn't afford sun, because rooms on the sunny side are so expensive.

But now he had sun without having known it; he stood right in the sunlight, but it was too late. Midsummer was past, and soon the sun would disappear again, stay away for a year and then come back. Things are very strange in this world !

translated by Ellie Schleussner, 1913



My Heart Cries for the Past by Fernand Knopff

from The Golem by Gustav Meyrink – illustration by Hugo Steiner

HENRI BARBUSSE

FINAL CHAPTER FROM *L'ENFER*

Henri Barbusse is best known for his novel, Le Feu (translated as Under Fire), published in 1916. It was a frank account of his experiences as a soldier at the front, revealing not just the horrors of trench warfare, but also how the common soldier was mistreated and exploited by the civilians. L'Enfer (Hell) was published in 1908 and, because of its title, I've included an excerpt in this issue.

The main character moves into a boarding house. He discovers a hidden peephole and through it spies on consecutive boarders. He witnesses scenes of all kinds of love and sex, death and exile. This excerpt is the last chapter, in which he tells of his decision to leave. He's filled with pain and guilt over the life he hasn't lived. At the same time he feels he has discovered a great secret.

I have given notice. I am going away tomorrow evening, I, with my tremendous memory. Whatever may happen, whatever tragedies may be reserved for me in the future, my thought will not be graver or more important when I shall have lived my life with all its weight.

But my whole body is one pain. I cannot stand on my legs any more. I stagger. I fall back on my bed. My eyes close and fill with smarting tears. I want to be crucified on the wall, but I cannot. My body becomes heavier and heavier and filled with sharper pain. My flesh is enraged against me. I hear voices through the wall. The next room vibrates with a distant sound, a mist of sound which scarcely comes through the wall. I shall not be able to listen any more, or look into the room, or hear anything distinctly. And I, who have not cried since my childhood, I cry now like a child because of all that I shall never have. I cry over lost beauty and grandeur. I love everything that I should have embraced.

Here they will pass again, day after day, year after year, all the prisoners of rooms will pass with their kind of eternity. In the twilight when everything fades, they will sit down near the light, in the room full of halos. They will drag themselves to the window's void. Their mouths will join and they will grow tender. They will exchange a first or a last useless glance. They will open their arms, they will caress each other. They will love life and be afraid to disappear. Here below they will seek a perfect union of hearts. Up above they will seek everlastingness among the shades and a God in the clouds.

The monotonous murmur of voices comes through the wall steadily, but I do not catch what is being said. I am like anybody else in a room.

I am lost, just as I was the evening I came here when I took possession of this room used by people who had disappeared and died — before this great change of light took place in my destiny.

Perhaps because of my fever, perhaps because of my lofty pain, I imagine that someone there is declaiming a great poem, that someone is speaking of Prometheus. He has stolen light from the gods. In his entrails he feels the pain, always beginning again, always fresh, gathering from evening to evening, when the vulture steals to him as it would steal to its nest. And you feel that we are all like Prometheus because of desire, but there is neither vulture nor gods.

There is no paradise except that which we create in the great tomb of the churches. There is no hell, no inferno except the frenzy of living. There is no mysterious fire. I have stolen the truth. I have stolen the whole truth. I have seen sacred things, tragic things, pure things, and I was right. I have seen shameful things, and I was right. And so I have entered the kingdom of truth, if, while preserving respect to truth and without soiling it, we can use the expression that deceit and religious blasphemy employ.

Who shall compose the Bible of human desire, the terrible and simple Bible of that which drives us from life to life, the Bible of our doings, our goings, our original fall? Who will dare to tell everything, who will have the genius to see everything?

I believe in a lofty form of poetry, in the work in which beauty will be mingled with beliefs. The more incapable of it I feel myself, the more I believe it to be possible. The sad splendor with which certain memories of mine overwhelm me, shows me that it is possible. Sometimes I myself have been sublime, I myself have been a masterpiece. Sometimes my visions have been mingled with a thrill of evidence so strong and so creative that the whole room has quivered with it like a forest, and there have been moments, in truth, when the silence cried out.

But I have stolen all this, and I have profited by it, thanks to the shamelessness of the truth revealed. At the point in space in which, by accident, I found myself, I had only to open my eyes and to stretch out my mendicant hands to accomplish more than a dream, to accomplish almost a work.

What I have seen is going to disappear, since I shall do nothing with it. I am like a mother the fruit of whose womb will perish after it has been born. What matter? I have heard the annunciation of whatever finer things are to come. Through me has passed, without staying me in my course, the Word which does not lie, and which, said over again, will satisfy. But I have finished. I am lying stretched out, and now that I have ceased to see, my poor eyes close like a healing wound and a scar forms over them. And I seek assuagement for myself.

The last cry I!, as it was the first.

As for me, I have only one recourse, to remember and to believe. To hold on with all my strength to the memory of the tragedy of the Room.

I believe that the only thing which confronts the heart and the reason is the shadow of that which the heart and the reason cry for. I believe that around us there is only one word, the immense word which takes us out of our solitude, NOTHING, I believe that this does not signify our nothingness or our misfortune, but, on the contrary, our realization and our deification, since everything is within us.

translated by Edward J. o' Brien, 1918

IAN C. SMITH

UNEASE

Pepper

Situation grave, sadness like a cloak, we order pumpkin soup in the art café. Our waitress arrives with a pepper mill like a soothsayer's candlestick. Right now I would answer yes to anything. She sprinkles yours, then it's my turn. Brain stuck on blame, trying to read nuance, I let her continue grinding away, something on my mind churning until that soup's pungency becomes too hot to swallow. Needing help, repentance useless, I wonder what's going on, when, how, this might end.

Bassoon

Through the long night I play the bassoon, lonesome notes roaming hallway, rooms. Wind like trouble rushes across the land, rocking this empty house enough to disturb the long-dead, wake them in sorrow from the darkened earth. Then stillness, rain, comes, a cold reality. Mistakes mounting, obsessed with art's solitude, freedom to dream, but not this, I watch from the window on the stair spattered leaves, stones staining black, reach for the arms of a woman, gone. Love retreats from sanity under siege.

Rain

Rain washes our windows like rain in a Hemingway story. Stuck inside, my luck to wander room to room, I pick up a book, read a few pages, put it down, stare into the past, sigh, this rain like a worry, always at memory's edge. I read another page of artfully simplistic prose, a Carver character drinking, in pain. Immediately, I need a drink. Now, in the middle of this damp day. I feel as jittery as a cat before a storm. This much is certain.

The Town by August Strindberg

PAULINE BARBIERI

BIRD MAN

I once looked into a mirror and saw
a man with no face.
His head was contoured and made out
of ochre coloured lace.

And I felt I knew him,
wanted to ask him his name,
when a bald-headed eagle swooped
and took control of the frame.

So the metamorphosis was easy,
a contoured head on both.
I stood in Bryce Canyon, blood red,
dusty, and dry to the throat.

Then I swerved through the pinnacles
amazed by the sound, my voice
boomeranged loudly, jettisoned
features to the ground.

So if you want to meet me,
go to the Indian's land,
look for a crimson headed eagle,
talk gently, then I will land.

B. E. NUGENT

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

There were two boys walking towards each other, both aged about eleven or twelve years old. They were on the same path but travelling in opposite directions. It was Saturday, so no school and almost forty years ago, so little traffic on the road. The good old days we might call them now but, for these two boys, it was just Saturday. There was no-one else on the street. One of the boys, walking towards the row of houses that spat out the sun each morning, was tall for his age, slender in build. The other lad, God bless him, was much shorter and, not wanting to be cruel, could only be described as chubby. It was unusual for their paths to cross because even though the taller boy lived nearby, the fat kid was rarely in the area. It was even rarer that he would be in town alone and not sat in the back of his mother's car waiting while she shopped for the few bits that they had run out of before the big weekly shop. As mentioned, they were about eleven years old, maybe twelve, and so the tall boy had no sense that the exotic east of Japan lay just beyond that row of houses facing him as he walked, upright with his hands balled into fists shoved into his pockets. The other boy, similarly, did not conceive of the wide expanse of ocean that ended with the grandeur of New York's skyline were he to continue on his path. This absence of perspective is, perhaps, understandable when I mention that the events to follow took place in Ireland and, as we know only too well, with its relentless rain and endless pillows of clouds, that was no place to find your bearings with only the track of the sun to give direction.

Neither boy was aware that the incident about to occur would have life changing consequences. Two young Irish lads, of a similar age and each as similar to the other as tall and slender can be with short and heavy, were walking, in a manner that could be described as nonchalant, to wherever they were going, expecting nothing remarkable. There they were, Ireland of about forty years ago, the good old days, and, as mentioned, a residential area. A collection of houses in this part of the world, however small, is called a street and a couple of streets becomes a village. Chuck in a church, a pub, maybe a haberdashery and a set of traffic lights and you have yourself a town. It is possible these two boys were walking along the perimeter of a residential estate in a small town in Munster, the most southern of Ireland's four provinces. Perhaps, just off to the side, there was a little green area where lawless soccer matches occupied the children long into the summers' evenings, ended by the roars of mothers seeking their sons or the confiscation of the football when the owner was on the losing team. In a blink, those summer days came to an end and "The Green", as the patch of grass was called, was reclaimed by the birds and miniature wildlife creatures that survived such close proximity to human settlements. The goal posts became trees once more, harbouring this microcosm of the natural world. We Irish have expectations of an evocative setting, something of the natural world that connects us to our pagan, primitive identities, of which we are so proud, and so I install a bird into our scene. There were probably crows or

some version of such inelegance nearby but my personal preference is for the little robin redbreast, that most delicate of living things, that surely brings more joy than the blackened beaks of the ravens pulling apart the flattened innards of slow-moving vermin who only made it half way across the road. The redbreast I prefer, like that one from my childhood with the misshaped wing, hopping in the back door for crumbs. Fully formed, with an undeveloped right wing, his resourceful scavenging proved most assuredly that nature finds its way, a notion confirmed when the neighbour's cat was seen licking its lips and the robin was seen no more. There was a story from my schooldays, when I was close to the age of these two boys, the details of which I can't recall but it related some allegory of the blood of Jesus staining the feathers covering the heart of the redbreast. The details, as I say, I cannot remember but could, probably, look them up with a simple google search. I choose not to. It is better to remember the nobility of the robin as something vaguely familiar than to have all affection stripped by shining too bright a light on a faded image.

So, back to our story and these two boys walking towards each other along a path on the edge of a housing estate at the perimeter of a small town, with not another living creature in sight apart from a solitary robin redbreast minding its own business on a telephone wire. Along the path, a small stream of dirty water trickled through the loose pebbles that time and weather dislodged from the tarmac roadway. If you prefer, there was a great river bursting through a narrow channel off to the left, with heron on the prowl for the salmon who fitfully cleared the white-topped water on their way to their source of life, to spawn and start again this pursuit of living. It was the kind of place where people said "top of the morning to ya" in an ironic way because they all knew that such expressions were the inventions of Hollywood script writers who had this romantic notion of Ireland and the little people in the pastoral setting of woodlands and birds and all that shit. "Top of the morning to ya" with a wink as acknowledgement that we didn't really talk like that at all. A tall, a tall. And, for luck, a tall. This was the good old Ireland where the Sunday mass was the opium of the people and the parish team the methadone. Nothing like today's big city Ireland, where the streets are lined with syringes and used condoms, where heroin is the opium of the people and methadone is, well, their methadone. And please don't ask how I know it was a used condom.

This is taking longer than expected but, at last, we have our protagonists, two young boys aged eleven or twelve, walking towards each other, lost in thoughtless contemplation. The sun, having risen before him, was now behind the taller boy, casting a glow over the salmon-filled river while a trickle of overflow water ran through the pebbles and syringes and condoms that lined the road, all watched over by a single robin redbreast balanced perfectly on the telephone wire. The smaller lad was carrying a little strapped bag, like a tiny rucksack, coloured light blue but darkening underneath as the water seeped from his swimming togs and the towel he had used to dry himself into the fabric of his little rucksack, slung casually over one shoulder. Oh yes, I forgot to mention, folded inside the small residential estate was the local swimming pool and the chubby kid had spent the previous hour splashing his way up and down the 25 metre length of the pool. Usually, he went

swimming with his older brother or younger cousin, sometimes three or four of his older brothers and the same number of cousins. For reasons that are unclear, none of his companions were with him this day, nor had his mother arrived to collect him as was usually arranged. Most unusually, he walked through the gates of the swimming pool onto the street alone, into what most inhabitants of this small town referred to as “the wrong side of town”. The taller boy lived in this estate with his mother and several older siblings, in a house that was rented from the local council and, though never an architectural trophy, was entirely adequate for the boy and his family. The only misgiving he had was that it was located in “the wrong side of town” and, of this, he was more acutely conscious than the fat boy or any of the locals who did not live in the estate.

There was a story all over town around this time of a white van prowling the area near the swimming pool and kids being dragged into the back and “interfered with”, as was the euphemism most widely used. Similar tales cropped up periodically all over the country and I’m sure you’ve heard them. The idea had taken hold in this town at this time. Parents warned their children to be vigilant, not to wander away from their friends, to stay on well-used paths in populated areas. Parents rehearsed escape routes with their children and practised screaming as loud as they could if they were to be approached in any inappropriate way by strange men driving a white van. Boys and girls, it didn’t matter it seems, though no victims were ever named nor was there any prosecutions of predatory child molesters. So, who knows? That’s not this story. There was no white van, no dangerous stranger looking for solitary children left unattended and available, no statistical improbability of molestation by a stranger given that, statistically, children were far more likely to be raped by a parent or relative or swimming coach or confessor than the unfamiliar plumber asking directions to his next job, no matter how white his van might have been. Again, the two boys, whose lives were to be defined and transformed in the next few moments, were aged only eleven or twelve. Thirteen at most. Sex was only beginning to pre-occupy them but had no bearing on this encounter. They were approaching puberty as surely as they were approaching each other but, at this moment, neither had moved beyond their earliest stages of sexual evolution. Their voices had started to break and their balls had dropped, tufts of hair were appearing on different parts of their bodies, leaving them confused and uncertain and, maybe, a little anxious moving from the bright light of childhood innocence to this darkened room with disembodied voices calling them here and there, finding their way by tentative touch into the unseen. They had become less comfortable with girls, stuttering and blushing when talking to girls who had been in school with them from the start, who had always been around but now were different. All their bodies, the boys and the girls, were changing shape and they came to know the terror the moth must feel just before its transformation from crawling to flying with no explanation. These were the days before the internet and computerised mobile phones that give kids today such easy access to anything and everything, so their exposure to information was limited, limited to what the more brazen might say in the playground or what might be overheard when their presence had gone unnoticed in the sitting room at night

with the Late Late Show on TV and Gay Byrne lifting rocks and stirring muddy water. These were the days when the imagination had to work overtime to convert underwear catalogues and Star Trek episodes into pornography for the uninitiated. These were the days before Star Trek and society discovered pangender politics and divined an anodyne projection of sexuality that made it as visceral and immediate as stripping wallpaper, days when these boys gave thanks for Nichelle Nicols and her impossibly short red skirts and the unlikely circumstance of needing malignant aliens using mind control to force a kiss with her captain that broke all rules of racial segregation at a time when that seemed important to people but these were re-runs and that day had passed for most and these boys were of that age when everything was reduced and distilled into black or white, yes or no, with no shades of dirty grey to permit doubt nor nuance. They were of an age when their worlds were small and simple and they could only see in technicolour black and white that Uhura was the most exquisitely sexual entity in the universe, though they didn't phrase it like that. They just felt uneasy when their mothers came into the room when they were watching Star Trek and thinking of how they would choose to travel the galaxy with this short-skirted embodiment of sexual desire by their sides. They were of an age when they knew their mothers could look inside their heads and see every lustful, carnal desire that they didn't even have names for, just a "funny" feeling in their lower stomachs and, lower than that, tingling in their willies that seemed to stiffen entirely of their own volition, beyond their control until they learned the techniques of furtive masturbation that no-one, not one single person, ever spoke about out loud. They learned to keep their impure thoughts to themselves, essential at a time when they knew their bodies and minds were conspiring together to make sin and every thought seemed to be sinful. They were at the beginning of something they knew little about. The years of acting on their desires were ahead of them and, for now, they said nothing about the changes they were experiencing, fearful of the negative reception for their singular, exceptional indulgence in impure fantasies that offended the explicit policy of the church, which was popular at that time. This all happened before their years of wanting to fuck and be fucked, dominate and be dominated, on the quiet because these desires come from somewhere deep and dark inside and contravene the conventions of acceptable behaviour within the doctrines of the church, in their early years and, later on, progressive sexual politics that became the norm. In adulthood, in darkened rooms, hidden from sight, one or both of these boys might have gone on to devise games and safe words to permit their exploration of the disrespectful and the ugly, trying to remember and then enunciate "Clementine! Clementine!" through clenched teeth with balls on fire from overly liberal dripping of candle wax and hands cuffed to the bedpost. Some things, they never needed to be told, are best left unsaid. For now, none of this was of concern.

The short boy had been dropped off at the swimming pool by his mother just over an hour earlier when he discovered, by their absence, that his cousins were not going to be there. Mobile telephones were something from science fiction so he had no prior warning that he would be alone, but he insisted he would go ahead, have a swim and walk home. His mother

insisted back that it was not a bother, no bother at all at all and she would call back for him in about an hour. But no, the boy insisted again, almost pleading for the leash to be extended just a little bit and his mother could see what it was he wanted and, despite her fears for that part of town and the white van that was reported to be patrolling the area looking for vulnerable children and that he had never walked home alone before and there was so much that was new and Christ Jesus could we not just keep something within our absolute control, despite all that fear and anxiety, she agreed that he would walk the mile and a half to their home on the outskirts of their small town. She had practised with him, after all, what he should do if he were to be approached by any strangers and everyone said she needed to stop coddling him, stop making him a baby, even if he was her baby and the youngest of five boys, and let him grow up just a little bit. She resisted the imperative from her knowledge of the world, she resisted the fleeting impulse to park out of sight to follow at a safe distance and sat in her kitchen. She put on the kettle and watched the kettle because the clock was just behind it on the kitchen wall. Her son, the fat boy, blinked in the waning sun as he walked through the gates of the swimming pool complex and dipped his head, partly to lessen the glare but mostly because that's how he always walked.

The taller boy had not been swimming. In fact, he had never used the swimming pool even though it was practically on his doorstep. He had left home out the back door, along the cracked cement of the path laid through the grass of his back yard, though it was not designed to be cracked. His father was at the front door, pounding his fist against the wood panel that had replaced the glass and professing his drunken love for the boy's mother. This was his fourth day in a row to call, which was at least two more than was usual. He, the boy's father, must have come into money. Tall and straight, which made him appear even taller, the boy walked quickly with a stiff gait past the back of his row of houses, unseen by his father who would have been unable to avoid enlisting his assistance to gain entry to the house that he, the father, had not lived in for almost a decade. There were still fights in the house, as you could only expect with five brothers living in such close proximity, but less damage was done since their father had returned to his parents in the neighbouring estate. The tall boy had learned to survive his brothers and the unpredictable visits of his father. He could mix it with all of them, landing enough solid blows to garner, if not respect, at least circumspection. Sometimes, leaving the house was essential to survival, going for a stiff walk into town or sitting under the goal post trees in the dark, unseen by those preparing the used condoms that would be discarded so casually in the undergrowth of the shrubs dotted through "The Green".

And so, we come to the hub of this incident, the heart of the life changing experience. Some of the following details are just a bit indistinct. Well, not indistinct as such, more that there are contradictory accounts believed by the two boys. The tall boy, in his head, arranged it that the other kid, head down and not watching where he was going, walked straight into him, bouncing him backwards a step or two. The shorter boy was not certain how they collided, accepted he may have failed to notice the obstacle in his path but suspected, at

some level, that the other kid deliberately and forcefully struck him in the head with his shoulder. Given that, even had he raised his head, his topmost extremity would barely have reached the other boy's chest, there is some credence to his uncertain belief that the taller boy may have moved into his path and dipped his shoulder so as to strike him on the forehead and provoke a confrontation. Whichever way, the collision happened, and the taller boy, feeling rightfully aggrieved, uttered something to the eloquent effect of "what the fuck fatso?" The shorter boy had only one certainty in this exchange and that was that he was fatso. It was not new to him and he recognised the descriptive appellation immediately. The rest, he did not recognise. Although he too lived in a house with four older brothers and a father who was a less uninhibited drunk than that of the taller boy facing him with the fist withdrawn from the pocket and raised for express delivery, he had learned that invisibility, despite his rotundness, was the best means of survival. His older brothers, in line with their physical maturity, required more frequent interventions from their parents, allowing the little fat brother to drift through unnoticed, something that stoked anxiety in his mother when she had finished separating his brothers, assessed and treated injuries according to need. While the conflict raged between the other boys in the house, he moved to another room to watch TV and agreed with the growing consensus that Uhura's outfit was demeaning to women and imagined her without it.

"What the fuck fatso?" The fat boy said nothing. The taller boy repeated the four words, placing greater emphasis on the last two. Still, the other boy said nothing. He just stood, motionless, like the concrete footpath had softened enough for his feet to sink a little, and then hardened again, holding his feet, and therefore his legs, upper body and head in a form of paralysis. Thoughts swirled about his head, which he didn't move, just lifted his eyes to look on the face of the angry boy. He thought of things to say, but didn't say them. Trying to formulate a response, his words jumbled about, taking on a sequence that made them incomprehensible inside his head that would not have been improved if spoken aloud. The taller boy wore a grimace and raised his fisted hand higher, drawing it back behind his shoulder, his elbow cocked. He waited momentarily. Nothing. He flung his fist forward with all his might and made sweet connection with his right fist into the left cheek of the boy facing him. They say boxers know when they have delivered a knockout blow from the satisfying crunch of fist against face, with no need to wait for the crumbled body of their opponent to hit the canvas. The tall boy had this feeling as his fist smacked against the fat boy's cheek, unleashing a rage that he could never articulate. Even as his heart beat faster, pounding the inside of his chest, the tension fled from his neck and shoulders and he stood, panting breathlessly, facing the little fat boy. The fat boy's heart, too, was racing. His head had recoiled from the impact of the solid punch but he remained upright, possibly because his feet were encased in concrete. He felt a trickle of blood inside his cheek where his teeth had torn a small cut and turned his tongue to the spot, stopping the flow of blood and leaving him with a taste of iron. He picked up his light blue rucksack and slung it back over his shoulder and stood silently looking at the other boy, with a blank, unreadable expression on

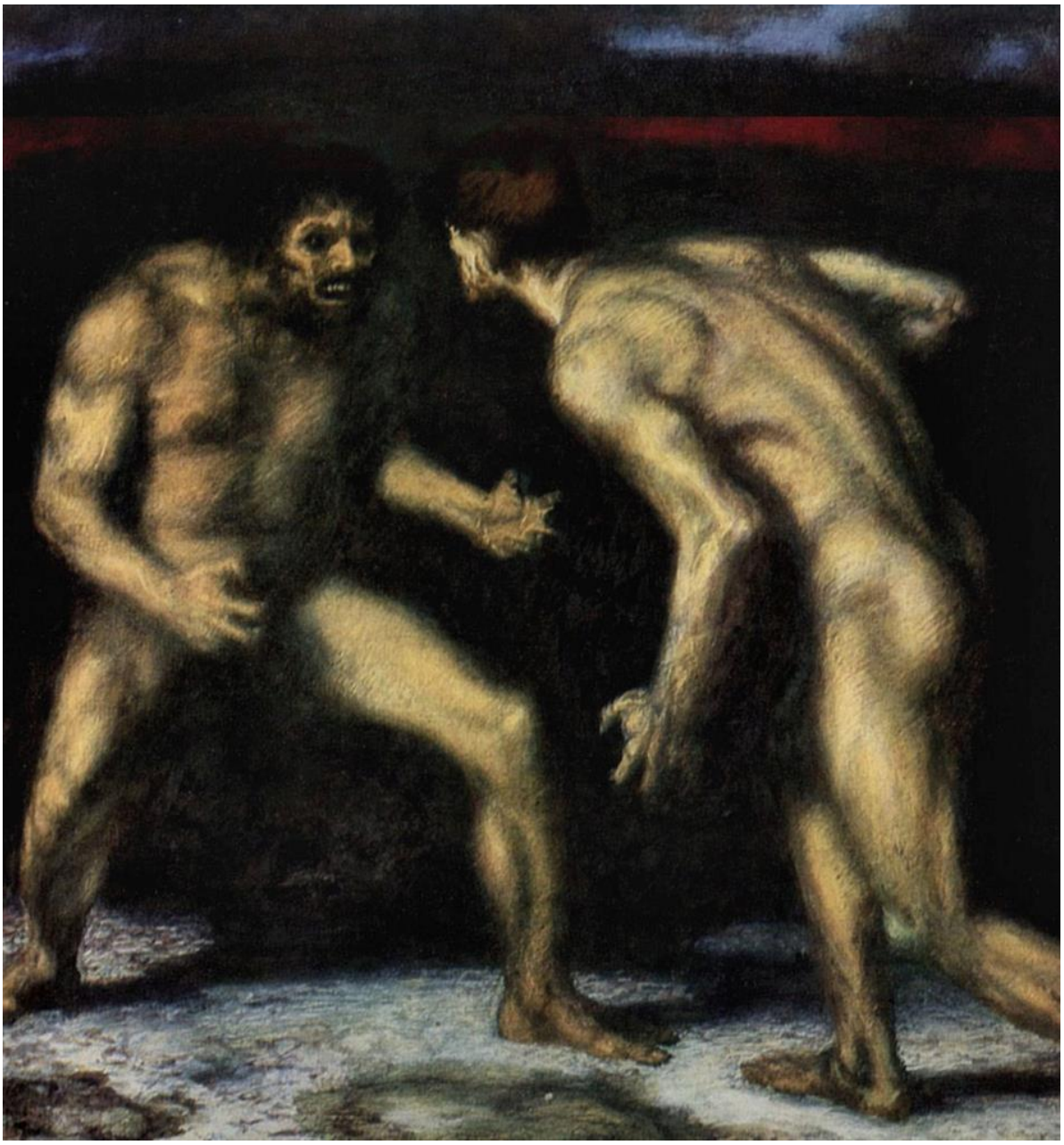
his face. The taller boy stood waiting, seconds stretched to breaking, reading what he could from the ambiguity of the other boy's face. "Are we finished here or is there more?" it seemed to say. But not in a challenging way. Like a genuine enquiry. The smaller boy couldn't see his own face, obviously, but wasn't, as best he remembered, formulating any kind of question. He was processing but it was like reading a text in another language that didn't even share an alphabet. The moment between them was unbearable. The taller boy looked around, his hand still clenched tight in a fist. He, too, was unsure of what to do next, waited for a reaction and, nothing forthcoming, pushed past the other boy who then began to walk slowly away, down towards the main road and his route home. The taller boy stopped a few steps away and shouted "fat bastard" but the other boy didn't break stride, didn't turn around and said nothing in response.

Neither boy ever spoke to anyone about this incident. There were no witnesses, no-one on the street storing the memory with the stock of "really quite shocking" experiences they might share in hushed tones at the school or church gates. No-one there, apart from the robin, which was busy keeping watch for its next meal to appear out of the long grass. The two boys were in different schools, played different games, had different friends, so never properly crossed paths again, except for one brief encounter some years later at the carnival that visited the town every year, when their eyes met for a fleeting moment as one huddle of teenagers passed the other. The memory stirred in recognition, the tall boy was no longer tall but the short fat boy was unchanged. They paused momentarily, as though to say something, anything, but they both looked away and followed their particular crowd to wherever they were going. They never mentioned this incident to anyone, never spoke out loud about what had happened.

So, where does this leave us? Underwhelmed, perhaps? Stretching it a bit to call this life-changing? Not all of life's formative events arrive with alarms and bells ringing. Sure, there is the dramatic upending of tragic bereavement, say, or winning the lottery or, god forbid, the instantaneous demolition of anyone who may have been dragged into the back of that white van. Trauma leaves its indelible mark, altering life's course as surely as an earthquake might change the path of a river, installing a signpost, if not a billboard, to identify the point of divergence, the starting point of this new pathway from there to here. Sometimes, though, these significant life events don't come as a blast, but linger, marinating slowly, more a whisper than a shout. In close, a persistent, insistent, relentless whisper, nagging and unforgiving. Even a glancing impact on a body in motion can change its course to an emphatic degree, though the extent of the deviation may only become clear much further down the road. Neither boy thought very much about their encounter in the days that followed. Sometimes, though, they returned to this relatively insignificant episode in their efforts to crystallise their current selves, make sense of the decisions and habits that formed their, for want of a better word, "personalities".

This little moment stands out in the memories of our two boys, becoming a reference point in adulthood, to be examined and interpreted, the interpretation and remembering becoming a further reference point requiring further examination. And on and on. Forever whispering, like that time, sitting around his mother's deathbed and feeling invisible as the others easily adopted their roles of organiser, ambassador, treasurer and, bless us, chief mourner. Or that time when the school principal gave the dressing down over the teenage offspring getting into a fight and knowingly giving half-truths in response. Yes, he would talk to him but under no circumstances would he disguise his admiration for his son standing up to a bully. Or those times when he struggled to resolve neighbourly conflicts, was dismissed and taken for granted by the brothers, the dodge and avoidance that became a pattern, the jumbled words swallowed before they became a scream. He told himself he held himself in tight rein for fear of what he might do were he ever to unleash the rage. He silently answered the whisper, telling himself that easy-going was not pathological. He almost convinced himself that the fight was just not in him. He rationalised and mitigated to the point of desperation and told himself things that sort of made sense, but maybe not really, and never said out loud, even to his wife, because he still could make no sense of his failure to react to this situation with the tall boy. There were more important, resonant events in his life but the fat boy, decades later, still found he could not articulate this incident with clarity as to its significance, other than an acceptance that it illuminated a fault in his internal wiring, a flaw that permeated so much that followed.

The other lad, the taller boy, too, returned to this incident and, though for different reasons, he also never spoke to anyone about this encounter. The closest he came was that time in rehab when participants were assigned the task of writing something shameful from their past history. He had done worse, caused more hurt and harm, but very few of his misdeeds could match the purity of this single punch, encapsulating the rottenness that was eating him up inside. Each slip of paper was collected by the counsellor, placed in a small metal bin and, unread, a match put to them in a ceremonial cleansing. His thoughts whispered the resilience of the little fat kid, his unwillingness to be drawn into a meaningless scrap, his strength to maintain his dignity and refusal to be demeaned. All this formed a reference point during his recovery. He remembered vividly the exhilaration he felt when landing that punch, the potency of brutal strength that was his to command, how violence released the weight that tightened his neck and shoulders. He remembered all of this when he left the drugs behind and learned to fix cars for a respectable living, when he guided his son and daughter through their times of confusion, keeping them beside him as they stripped engines together and, before that, when he pleaded, begged, his wife to please not do that, don't hit our infants, let's do it differently so as not to be dragged back into that good old dark place where no-one speaks about what is going on.



Two men fighting, from The Struggle for Woman by Franz von Stuck

ALUN ROBERT

FOR ITS ARMISTICE DAY

Massed pipers play a parting lament.
Long trip home for women, and men.
Wounded, broken, battle scarred yet spared.
Children of someone, someone who cared. The
fortuitous played an untouchable hand
evading bullets, avoiding land mines.
Though for them, lucky and blessed,
peace had arrived not a day too soon. As
those maimed and broken play pain for ever,
little reward for them, the sacrifice.
Missing a leg or arm or eye or their mind.
Missing out on a life like you and I. When
fear, terror played in the hearts of all
confronting an enemy much like them.
Guilt for slaughtering in the rage of battle.
Guilt of being spared as comrades fell. For
death plays out the ultimate cost
gone from earth to ethereal fields
not to return and hence for them
it did not matter who won or who lost. To
proletariat who play a tense waiting game,
awaiting news of their loved ones
who put on line their precious lives
not in their parish but in distant fields. While
politicians played their nefarious cards
claiming the gain no matter the cost
to economies broken for economy sake
of false information, news that's fake. In
media and the movies conflict plays out
portraying gory details only the few could bear
with a stench of skirmish abhorrent to those
caught in the middle in their ruined homes. As
diaspora is played by innocent families
vanquished from lands where they had grown
to new battle grounds in some alien ghetto
for a new life of tension, acrid discrimination. Yet
memories play tricks as memories are shared
for days and nights, months and years
en pursuit of a lasting, peace not war.
Massed rejoicing for its Armistice Day.

OISIN BREEN

A MOORLAND RENDERED THROUGH SILICON

My thoughts tangled, warped,
A weave worn heavy, a thicket.
Today, I can only know what I have created,
And it will never be more than a simulacrum.

Here then, as I watch the blackbird, and close in on it,
It is entranced by my footsteps, but also afraid, and most of all a memory:
Its plush and coloured tail:
A fitful requiem to a once long service spent at the apex of predation.

Yet, though I have traded places, over time, with such birds,
Reflections, lingering, in an everlasting ripple, evaporate,
And reincorporate, each and every minute, unto one and other,
Inside me, leaving me all too aware that nakedness undoes me.

And where once sharp keratin tore open flesh to render new breath possible,
Now a nexus of spent breath and silicon holds fast the new order,
And I love, I love, I understand,
And I know I can not amply balance root and seed and sheaf.

I am therefore a weed among a field of fresh blooming flowers,
More comfortable with the howling wind, than the threaded step,
Desperate, as I flit between satisfaction and jealousy,
Terrified the world out there will limit my ability to preserve the world in here.

And in clenching and unclenching my fists,
Unable to hold onto what might be,
I am afraid that my tenuous grasp on reality will become no more
Than an exercise in counting grains and resting sorrowfully on sand.

CONTRIBUTERS

After a long career as a professor of Classics (specialising in Latin literature) **Paul Murgatroyd** retired four years ago and started writing novels and short stories. Seventeen of the latter have been published or accepted for publication, along with three poems in English and over fifty of his Latin poems.

Henry Spiess (1876-1940) a Swiss poet, studied in Paris, but returned to Geneva. Only published three poetry collections.

Xavier Mellery (1845-1921) a Belgian Symbolist painter.

Willem Johan Barbieri: see article in The Kleksograph issue 5

Peter Van Belle is the editor of The Klecksograph. He has also published poems and stories in Great Britain, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, the US, and Belgium.

August Strindberg: see article in this issue.

Fernand Knopff (1858-1921) Belgian Symbolist painter and sculptor.

Hugo Steiner (1880-1945) Czech illustrator

Henri Barbusse (1873-1935) French journalist, poet, and novelist, published l'Enfer in 1908. Despite being a pacifist and 41 years old, he volunteered for the French army in 1914, and took part in combat on the front. Received the Croix de Guerre. Published Le Feu in 1916 detailing the horrors and injustices of the war, which earned him the Prix Goncourt. Became a member of the communist party. Died in Moscow of pneumonia.

Ian C Smith's work has been published in Antipodes, BBC Radio 4 Sounds, cordite, The Dalhousie Review, San Pedro River Review ,Griffith Review, Poetry Salzburg Review, Southword, & The Stony Thursday Book, & Two Thirds North. His seventh book is wonder sadness madness joy, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island.

Pauline Barbieri was shortlisted for the Bridport Poetry Prize by the poet laureate, Sir Andrew Motion and twice for the Exeter Poetry Prize by Jo Shapcott and Lawrence Sail, respectively. She has had six collections of poetry published and was shortlisted for the Cinnamon Press Novel Awards for her book, 'Smoke and Gold'.

B. E. Nugent has been writing creatively since 2018. This is his first publication.

Alun Robert is a prolific creator of lyrical free verse. He has achieved success in poetry competitions across the British Isles and in North America. His work has been published by UK, Irish, Italian, South African, Kenyan, US and Canadian literary magazines, anthologies and webzines.

Oisín Breen is a 36 year-old poet, part-time academic in narratological complexity, and financial journalist. Dublin born Breen's debut collection, ‘Flowers, all sorts in blossom, figs, berries, and fruits, forgotten’ was released Mar. 2020 by Edinburgh’s Hybrid Press.

Primarily a proponent of long-form style-orientated poetry infused with the philosophical, Breen has been published in a number of journals, including the Blue Nib, Books Ireland, the Seattle Star, Modern Literature, the New English Review, La Piccioletta Barca, the Bosphorus Review of Books, Disquiet, Universe, Mono, and Dreich magazine.

END OF ISSUE 6 OF THE KLECKSOGRAPH

The Wave by August Strindberg