

## The History of the 'Black Dog' as a Description for Depression

### The Black Dog by Fred Curtis

*Myths get thought in man unbeknownst to him,*

(Claude Lèvi Strauss (the 1977 Massey Lectures)

There are no words powerful enough to describe the feelings of the victim of psychotic depression, whatever the cause. Hence the need for a name: being possessed by the *Black Dog* is as good as any.

I suffer from depression. Many poets have done so in the past and many, like Australia's Les Murray, combat melancholy today. Being depressed is not a pleasant experience, but there is an upside: depression helps the afflicted to be aware of the unconscious mind, keeping him in touch with the deeper, darker and enigmatic world as exemplified by dreams, an asset vital to the creative writer.

As a poet and during periods of acute depression, I have often written about the *black dog* and will resort to extracts from this work to help clarify what it means to me. The first piece that I penned whilst under his influence is a prose poem combining my own experience of melancholy with that of a friend – sadly, the latter's dulled spirit resulted in his suicide. Here are the concluding lines:

... the *black dog* of depression  
has you in its spell,  
A ferret mesmerising a rabbit.

Thirteen floors above the city street  
your shoes rest on the ledge besides you  
as you stand on the parapet in stockinged feet.  
Your business suit and old school tie  
are as immaculate as always,  
but the shirt sticks to your skin  
where sweat is chilled by a westerly breeze.  
The sides of your unbuttoned jacket flap like flightless wings,

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the early morning air is fragrant  
and blows through your hair.

The view is spectacular  
and clumps of white cloud patrol the skies  
as bird song, scraps of music and the faint growl of traffic  
rise in the up-draught  
to remind you of a life that you reject.

No tears of self-pity wet your eyes,  
there are no regrets, no letter of explanation,  
no cry for help.

One step and you escape into oblivion,  
leaving only your shoes  
to remind us of the agony of your distress  
and human frailty.

What are your thoughts,  
I wonder,  
as the pavement rushes up to greet you?

And the *black dog* has his way.

The adjective 'black' and its many companions including: dark, dismal, dreary, sombre, murky, funereal, gloomy, shade and shadowy or tropes like the dead of night, the witching hour and black as the pit (Hell), act as ideal references to a state of depression as well as reaction to thoughts on death and the unknown. Black is being enveloped in darkness; it signifies evil in art; as a mortuary colour it is grief, despair, and death. A black cap was once

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worn by judges when passing the death sentence. Magic is the black art. There are black lists, black looks, blackmail, black markets and the Black Mass; *Black Dog* is another name for the blues (and the eighteenth century name for a counterfeit shilling)<sup>1</sup>. Elsewhere, I have written:

... Shadows, sombre as the grave, / Sleeping spectres from the pit / Haunt me swirling, dank and dark ...

to describe my own sense of melancholy, but why 'dog' to describe a disturbed state of mind? Could the explanation of *black dog* lie in the collective unconscious of the race, to the residual fears of our ancestors passed on down the generations like fairy tales (or stories of monsters lurking in the woods, meant to discourage children from straying too far from home)?

When I was a boy, my Suffolk-born grandfather spun me tales about the strange creatures that infested the folklore of his youth. They were awash with witchcraft, demonology, ghosts and the *fäerie* (with its meaning of enchantment or elfin illusion) blended with doses of primitive Christianity. His apt description of one such monster I turned into verse:

At dusk the shadows meet by a church yard gate,  
The moon is dead and the night-air damp  
As slabs of ancient stone in a field of moss  
Are gath'ring mist like a veil of hate.

The gallows stand, up high, where the woods congeal  
And raucous rooks on the topmost bough  
Mimic and mock the creak of a stretching rope,  
Take care, an imp is upon your heel.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ivor H. Evans Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (London Cassell, 1985) pp. 122*

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You feel his fetid touch as he passes by  
Or sense him padding up close behind  
Whilst on the back of your neck his breath  
Is stale, forewarning of incubi.

He's black, he's lean, a fiend with the evil eye  
And blooded jaw, it is said, he's part  
Of monk and part of hound and the devil's spore,  
An awful creature whose spectral cry

Is heard above the shriek of the highest gale;  
He stalks alone when the twilight fades,  
Don't catch his eye or else you will die –  
He's *Shuck*, the *Demon Dog* and the marshland's bale.

(the name of *Shuck* or *Shock* is derived from the Saxon word for demon)<sup>2</sup>

Sightings of spectral dogs have been recorded in Britain since 1127 (the Anglo Saxon Chronicle) and up until the latter half of the Twentieth Century (sometimes the images were in the likeness of a ghostly calf or horse) with or without their heads, often equipped with horns and eyes the size of dinner plates that blazed either red or yellow; such beasts haunted the churchyards and country lanes of isolated villages throughout Britain. These ghastly hounds were portents of death and numbered among them were the Demon of Tidworth; the Black Dog of Winchester; Padfoot of Wakefield; the horned, saucer-eyed Devil's Dandy Dogs of Cornwall; the headless Wish or Yeth Hounds of Dartmoor; Cheny's hounds; Dando and his Dogs,

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<sup>2</sup> *Reader's Digest* Folklore, Myths and Legends of Britain (London 1977) pp. 229

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a possible successor to Odin; Cwn Annwn, the Welsh Hell Hounds; the Gabriel Hounds or Ratchets of 17th. century Lancashire, monstrous dogs with human heads and Trash, Striker or Skriker with backward pointing feet and a horrible howl; the Barguest or Bargest, a goblin, changeling dog with huge teeth and claws that haunted Yorkshire and the Mauthe Doog of the Isle of Man. In East Anglia, *Black or Old Shuck* is also known as Odin's Hound and/or the Devil himself, if not one of Satan's demons<sup>3</sup>. In my grandfather's time, pagan beliefs mixed with the teachings of the Church. Essex remains known as the Witch County and the last known wise man or wizard, George Pickingill, practiced his craft at Canewden up until 1910<sup>4</sup>. It is worth considering at this point that Christianity pervades the English language and customs, it lurks within the psyche of even the most cynical of non-believers, as do the older superstitions. The *Black Shuck* of Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk, those eastern counties that border the Thames estuary and the North Sea, known together as East Anglia, is surely the antecedent or residual memories, of the *Black Dog* employed to describe the anxieties and miseries inflicted on people by acute bouts of depression. Regarding the word 'dog' it is worth considering its past and present usage: a *black dog* used to be thought unlucky; dogs are supposed to howl at the time of someone's death; dogs possess the ability to see ghosts; a dog's life is one that is never left in peace; to go to the dogs is to go to rack and ruin; to die like a dog is to have a miserable end; the dogs of war are the horrors of armed conflict – and an individual's hangdog expression means guilt, shamefaced and/or dejected. On top of this, rabid dogs added yet more to traditional beliefs: the fear of being bitten and as a consequence, suffering a painful death and insanity.

In one attempt to describe the gloom that repeatedly swept over me in a fit of depression, I wrote:

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<sup>3</sup> Bob Trubshaw Black Dogs in Folklore (*At the Edge* [www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/](http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/))

<sup>4</sup> Eric Maple The Complete book of Witchcraft & Demonology (N.Y. A.S.Barnes & Co)

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... And darkness fills the space  
As myth and man embrace.

Entombed with memories obscured  
That flood my soul with shade  
And hint of twilight times endured  
When northern tribes were made  
And pagan wisdom knew  
That foetid fire-drakes flew.

A haunted place of fecund dreams  
Of fearsome demon gods ...

It is not hard to imagine the fears, the paranoia and the superstitions of the uneducated inhabitants of isolated English villages built around church, tavern and coach-house, surrounded by dense forest, deserted moorland or marsh with little infrastructure in the way of communications: poor roads, no railways, neither radio nor television. Deep in their unconscious were woven images of older perils: the very real danger of wolves, their once most prevalent and dangerous beast of prey, perhaps evolving into a belief in such things as changelings and werewolves. It should be noted that the grey wolf is a fearful beast, it can grow up to two metres long, weighing up to 80 kg and once lived throughout Europe, the Americas and Asia. This wolf is a shaggy-coated carnivore that hunts at night, it is a pack animal and the group howling of such beasts would have been unnerving to the sleeping villagers. Furthermore, belief in creatures known as werewolves is found throughout the world. Werewolves<sup>5</sup> (lycanthropes) are said to be a man or woman who turns into a wolf under the influence of a full moon. Being bitten by a werewolf

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<sup>5</sup> Sabine Baring-Gould *The Book of Were Wolves* ([http://about.com/About\\_Literature](http://about.com/About_Literature) also Dr. Simon Sherwood *Apparitions of Black Dogs* (*Paranormal Review* 2002) 22 pp. 3 to 6

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turns the victim into one. This monstrous, mythical canine devours animals, people and corpses under the cover of darkness. In 16th. century France, there were many executions of the loup-garou (werewolves) who, like witches, were burnt alive.

Exposure to such beliefs could well lead to the likes of *Black Shuck*, an ideal image on which to impress the evil spell of the *Black Dog* on innocent minds.

Similarly, we could lay the blame for such superstitions at the feet of the old Norse invaders and their gods<sup>6</sup>, lead by one-eyed, all-father Odin (Woden) and his ghostly hounds of war. The savage warriors that worshipped these northern gods were the murderous thugs and rapists known as berserkers who wore the skins of wolves or bears in battle and must have resembled changelings or huge and diabolical, wolf-like creatures that were possessed by a terrible, possibly alcohol induced, insane, battle fury. It is interesting to find that at the end of the pre-Christian era, Odin was the principal god of these conquerer/settlers of fertile areas like that of East Anglia. While we are about it, we should add the mythical Fenrir, the monstrous Norse wolf, to the list of the *Black Dog's* ancestors. He was the son of the obscure, demonic, changeling god Loki. Fenrir was shackled by an occult chain, Gleipnir, to contain his evil ways. The poets of Iceland and Norway wrote in fear of the day when he breaks loose. Traces of fear and a respect for wolves is retained in our language in phrases like 'cry wolf', 'keep the wolf from the door', 'throw someone to the wolves', 'a wolf in sheep's clothing'.

Tales like that of the dreaded *Black Shuck* should not be viewed in isolation from the wide spread beliefs of witchcraft, demonology and elfin folk. After visiting the 16th. century farmhouse that had been home to my grandfather in 1891, I tried to capture this dread of goblins and their like in a verse addressed to the folklore of the windswept East Anglian flat lands and marshes:

When winds blow cold with Winter's might  
And clouds obscure the moon from sight

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The trolls and orcs commune with night  
And are as one;  
So don't go out, but lockup tight  
Or be undone.

Will o' the Wisp is lurking there  
To light the way and taint the air  
With gnome and goblin, elfin fair,  
To haunt the wood;  
I wish they'd go, they're ev'rywhere,  
I wish they would.

My bed is warm, but feels unsafe  
As by the window branches chafe  
The casement pane and breezes strafe  
My virgin room;  
I lie awake, a bridal waif,  
For my dark groom.

I see his shadow on the wall,  
I hear the fairy footsteps fall  
I feel my skin begin to crawl,  
This is the one,  
He's my enchanter, I'm his thrall,  
I am undone.

According to the Faber Pocket Medical Dictionary, 'depression' is a feeling of gloom, but severe depression is a psychotic state and there is usually a

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<sup>6</sup> HR Ellis Davidson *Gods and Myths of Northern (Europe Penguin UK 1986)pp.25 on*

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predisposition to it in the person's makeup. The sufferer then loses all touch with reality and needs expert help.<sup>7</sup> This does not adequately describe how the experience of a fit of depression feels to the sufferer and is of no use in trying to explain how attacks of such a debilitating disease came to be described as the *Black Dog*:

...The swing of melancholy to and fro  
Is like vast ocean waves that ebb and flow,  
Perhaps a fairy spell or evil eye  
That undermines and questions ego's I.

How do I feel when I am depressed? Firstly, I have not always been aware that I was suffering from depression. Mild symptoms are relatively harmless (Reber lists: a sense of inadequacy, despondency, decrease in activity, pessimism, sadness) things like wanting to stay in bed, a clumsiness when carrying out routine tasks; increased irritability with inanimate things as well as people; a general lack of interest in the world around me, little or no enthusiasm for anyone or anything, including family and/or much loved pursuits like reading and writing or for that matter, work; a withdrawal into myself, sitting in the corner of a room for hours doing nothing (I have written rough verse at these times, I suspect as an escape like that of endlessly watching mindless television, consuming too much alcohol or remaining overlong in bed), not wanting to be in contact with the real world. The other end of the scale reveals an intensity of extreme moods, the gut-wrenching and unexplainable, sickening attacks of anxiety where everything is percolated through a dark filter of illogical feelings of guilt. Black melancholy is an evil curse, an extreme pessimism, that ultimately insists on death as the only truth; the adjective is only too appropriate to the noun. This feeling of utter wretchedness is accompanied by a sense of failure,

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<sup>7</sup> *Elizabeth Forsythe Pocket Medical Dictionary (London Faber & Faber 1990) pp. 81*

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futility, a worthlessness where disinterest is likely to replace thoughts of love. Suicidal ideas start to make sense in solving this despair. The breath of the demonic *Shuck* is upon my neck, I feel his touch, I respond to the *Black Dog's* spell by turning good into bad; day into night; right into wrong; hope into bitter despondency. Angst-driven, I awake to live in a world rendered negative by some dreaded Hell Hound that erupts from the depths of my Self, it is as though the door to my unconscious has been unlocked and I am exposed to the murkier pits therein, the shadows of ancestral dread.

In a day and age where scientific (and for that matter economic) rationalism has confused fact for faith, talk of hobgoblins or demons of any sort becomes subject to ridicule, yet when faced with a melancholy so powerful that it destroys the victim's ability to think, then even on a conscious level human beings will grasp at any straw. However, our demons lurk at the lower, older level of Jung's 'collective unconscious' where feelings are attended and logic and reality serve no purpose. Ancient images emerge, like that of the *black dog* to describe acute depression:

A wind blows through my soul  
Reminding me of those that lived in times now past  
Whose flesh and blood has dried,  
Yet live inside my mind and talk to me in dreams.

Grand-sires I never knew  
Dictate my mood and speak to me in shades that rhyme  
With my despair and make  
My pulses beat in time with tunes of other days

When ghosts of fecund gods  
Had lurked in hedgerow, copse and darkened country lane

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To vainly whisper songs  
Of life and death, the wrongs that stir my righteous blood.

I feel them in my bones  
And visit them in dreams that smell of warm decay,  
Their aching love is mine,  
I share their ancient pain and pine for winds arcane.

Imagination is a powerful thing as is its corollary, the dream-world, all the more potent when surrounded by an ignorance that encourages the peopling of the areas of darkness with creations of mankind's own making. To the traditional followers of the Church, monsters like *Black Shuck* were personifications of the Devil who could possess people (from experience I can claim that 'being possessed' is as good a metaphor for depression as any). In the counties of Christian England, the Devil took on the shape of many nightmare figures, some are interpretations of the old deities: Celtic, Roman and Viking, but remembered as hobgoblins. The Medieval Church used such real or imagined beasts as symbols of morality. The dragon was the personification of evil, so when St. George slew the dragon it symbolised the triumph of Christ over the powers of darkness. The awful history of the treatment of witches provides a glimpse of the power and influence of both Church and State on a gullible, ill-informed, naive and often isolated citizenry. Between 1566 and 1645 in the County of Essex alone, the Witch-Finder General, Mathew Hopkins,<sup>8</sup> executed nineteen women in a single day, ninety are recorded as having died on the scaffold accused of witchcraft. The hanging and torture of innocent men and especially women were on instructions from both Church and State. The Papal Bull, the Hammer of Witches (*Malleus Maleficarum*, 1486), recommended methods of interrogation by torture and the Elizabethan Witchcraft Act of 1563, based upon a previous Act of Henry VIII, declared that death remained the penalty for all

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attempts to conjure up evil spirits. It was not until 1951 that witchcraft ceased to be a crime in England, confirming that such magic has been a dangerous reality as far as the citizenry and parishioners were concerned and innocent people were made scapegoats, yet the evidence is that the population at large resorted to witches and wizards whenever their sense of security was threatened. In this light, a general belief of a countryside haunted by ghostly *black dogs* and the possession of the individual's soul by the Devil might seem farfetched, but it is understandable. The expression, *black dog*, could well have entered and remained in the language via the collective unconscious of the tribe as possession by the Devil, but interpreted by a later and better (?) informed set of victims as inexplicable melancholy.

Psycho-analysis has replaced witchcraft; the Cunning Man and the Wise Woman by psycho-therapists; our spiritual beliefs by reason. We suffer from the cynicism of our age. From time immemorial, according to Jung<sup>9</sup>,

men have had ideas about a supreme being(s) and about the hereafter. Only today do they think they can do without such ideas. Man positively needs convictions that will give a meaning to life, yet science denies it and the Church is inadequate, seemingly faced with its own weakening powers. Modern man does not understand how much his rationalism (which has destroyed his numinous symbols and ideas) has put him at the mercy of the psychic underworld. He has freed himself from superstition (or so he believes), but in the process he has lost his spiritual values to a positively dangerous degree. His moral and spiritual tradition has disintegrated, and he is now paying the price for this break-up in a world-wide disorientation and dissociation. Our present lives are dominated by the Goddess Reason, who is our great and tragic illusion.

Bettelheim<sup>10</sup> agrees:

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Maple pp. 78 - 83

<sup>9</sup> Carl G. Jung *Man and his Symbols* (London Picador 1964) pp. 83 - 87

<sup>10</sup> Bruno Bettelheim *The Uses of Enchantment* (Penguin London 1976) pp. 1 of Intro.

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if we hope to live not just for the moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find (the lost) meaning in our lives.

The blurb on the cover of the Mathews' Fairy Tale Reader<sup>11</sup> claims

fairies to be the gatekeepers to the enchanted realms that psychologists have termed 'the collective unconscious'. Fairy tales can still offer solutions to our own times, not by magic or illusion, but by creative thought.

Mythology, according to Campbell,

is psychology, misread as cosmology, history, and biology. The folk tale is the primer of the picture-language of the soul. Yet by the aid of reason, so we assure ourselves, we have conquered nature. What happens to a primitive society when its spiritual values are exposed to the impact of modern civilization? Its people lose the meaning of their lives, they morally decay<sup>12</sup>

and (I would add) modern man has likewise become easy prey to the *Black Dog*.

It is hard to find much in the way of a definition of *Black Dog*, the OED records: depression of spirit, ill-humour (1826) and Webster declares it to be a noun whose synonyms are sadness, blues, dejection, dumps, gloom, melancholia and melancholy. Neither offer an etymology, despite the fact that long ago in ancient Greece, Hippocrates recognised melancholia. Depression is probably the most common psychiatric complaint of today: according to the Beyondblue organisation<sup>13</sup>, one million Australian adults and one hundred thousand young people live with depression each year, a post modern epidemic of plague proportions. Science has no problem in defining depression, but we need look elsewhere for an explanation and history of the metaphor *Black Dog*.

Spectral shaggy dogs, like the three-headed Cerberus who guarded the entrance to the Underworld, have lived in man's imagination since the dawn of time, and why

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<sup>11</sup> John & Caitlin Mathews *The Fairy Tale Reader* (Aquarian London 1993) back cover

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Campbell *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Fontana London 1993) pp. 86/7

<sup>13</sup> *Beyondblue: the national depression initiative* Fact Sheet About Depression 2004

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not? Some members of the canine family have become known as man's best friends, yet others as the epitome of man-eating evil. They are to be seen in the same light as other mythical beasts: dragons, chimeras, the phoenix and cockatrice or for that matter, Robin Goodfellow and his elfin relatives, the Green Man or any other dark, figment of human imagination as we have striven to understand the great mystery of life and its constant companions, torment and death. In our modern, rational society we know that such creatures do not exist outside of the dream-world, that inner realm that reflects the images created or remembered and distorted by the unconscious mind. Creative writers use these enriched symbols as a form of self-expression and as a subjective means of communication, rather than the dryness of psycho-babble. My grandfather did not believe in the existence of Black Shuck, but neither would he go near a cemetery after dark. His father believed in Shuck as being one and the same as the Devil who lurked at the opposite end of the spectrum to God, but he had not been exposed to modern rationalism. Great granddad accepted the teachings of the Church as well as advice from the local wise woman, he had never heard of psychoanalysis. He did not need to go beyond his beliefs. As a direct descendant of William (1849-1868) and Sam (1869-1948), I find myself at once sceptical, yet possessing feelings that might well have belonged to them. Characteristics acquired over the long ages of mental development? Am I a mixture of the old and new, scientific reasoning and magic sitting side by side in my inner self? I know that under my rational skin there lurks a turmoil of witch's brews, both black and white. I do not have dreams of *black dogs*, Shuck included, but I do have dreams that make use of other powerful symbols as I try to make my way through life without the opiate of formal religion. Psychology recognises the importance of dream imagery, yet we ignore the very symbols that we need to explore and interpret, the picture-language of our tribe that would help us come to grips with death and the meaning of life.

I suspect that ghost images of *black dog's* do not infest our collective or individual

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unconscious. Despite or because of the attraction of agnosticism or even atheism, I believe that evil exists in the world of man. A collective, tribal unconscious makes sense to me. I believe that we suffer from the loss of old beliefs and we have not, as yet, found a satisfactory system of understanding to fill the spiritual void in our lives. Sunday mornings resound to the noise of motor mowers rather than church bells. Sex has replaced love in both postmodernist life and literature. Confession, if it ever takes place, is conducted from a psychiatrist's couch. Marriages fail in record numbers. Drugs in one form or another destroy our youth. World-wide, tribal wars proliferate. Traditional beliefs have been encouraged to die and people are staying away from religion in droves. This and more can be held responsible for the disease of depression, but does it explain the use of the expression, *Black Dog*? The adjective and the noun both carry baggage from the past: death and evil, darkness and Satan. *Black Dog* was once the metaphor for a visitation of the Devil, now it is the calling card of clinical depression. To claim that a fit of melancholy is possession by the Devil is no exaggeration. The great *black dog* is alive and well. As the Nordic poets feared, Fenrir has escaped from the graveyards of the past to haunt those of us who have lost our way in a rational and materialistic world. We live in the era of multinational capitalism, a post industrial, consumer, pleasure/gratifying society lead and encouraged by the media where electronics dominate and bias information and entertainment with images of false hope (exotic lifestyles) and promotional hype. In my life time we seem to have added the post modernist philosophy of 'anything goes' because nothing matters to the modernist's claim on angst. The hereafter has been replaced with the here and now, leaving a spiritual vacuum incapable of resisting the *Black Dog of Depression*.

The mind is a jumble of rational and irrational elements, received ideas that were once explained by fairy tale and myth, a literal interpretation of the word of God and the reality of the Devil, witchcraft and the supernatural. Man's fears were tempered by hope, the belief in the afterlife and the ultimate goodness of the Almighty. These voices are silenced as we continue to embrace technology.

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Rationalism leaves no space for the wisdom of our ancestors, yet deep in our unconscious mind our spirit seeks the old beliefs, but no longer understands the language of the images and symbols that we find there. The expression *black dog* is a residue of old beliefs that linger on in the minds of men.

Is there no way of knowing  
Where I have been, nor  
Where I am going?

If there is life hereafter,  
Who is my God and  
Where is the laughter?

Is it all about trusting?  
A brief span of pain,  
Loving and lusting,

Birth, marriage, death and mourning  
As sunset follows  
Every dawning.

Divine Father in Heaven  
Dormant and unstirred,  
Lukewarm, unleaven,

Show me the point of dying,  
Sickness and decay,  
The self-denying.

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