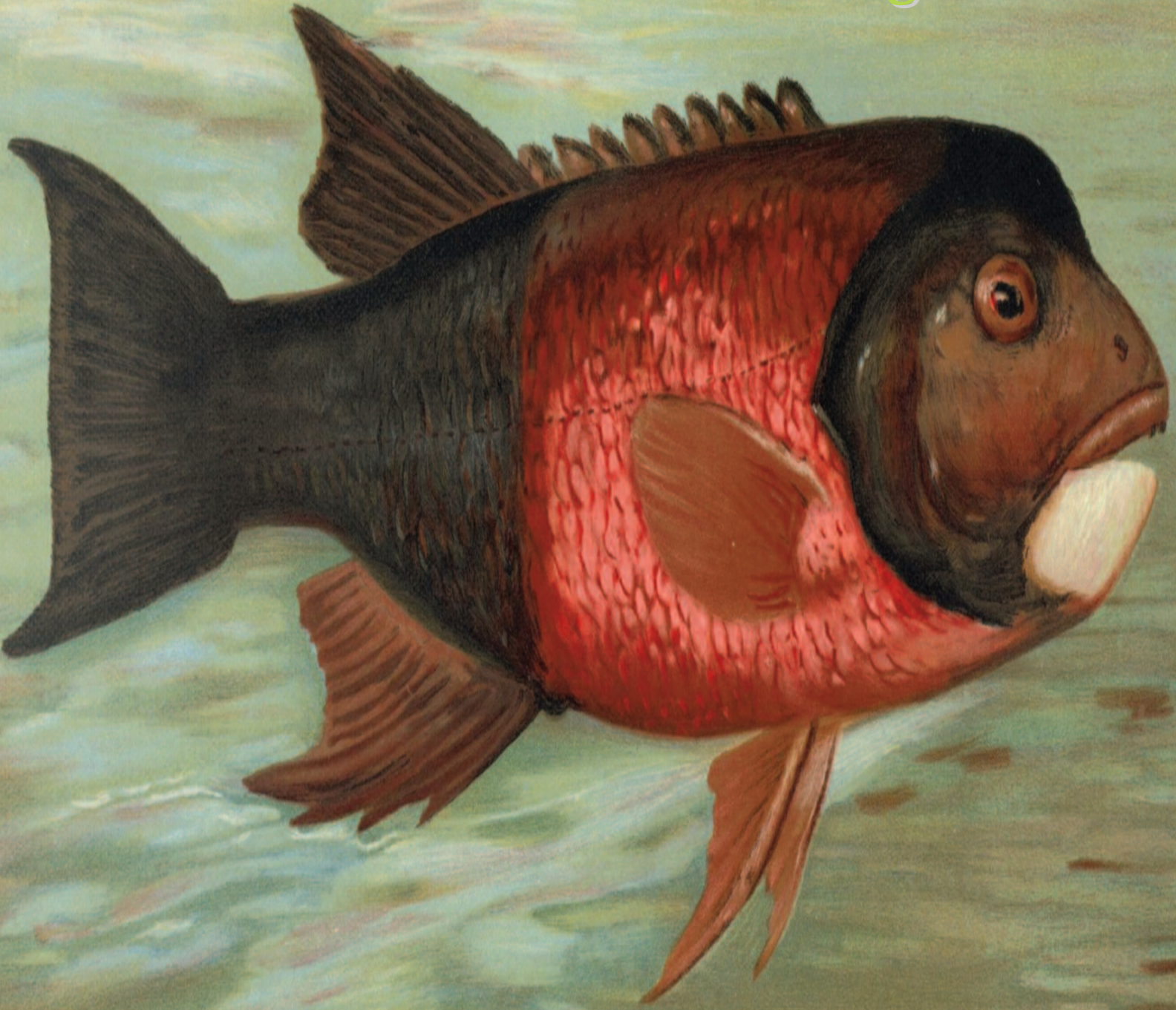


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“Job Search”

I ran into a wall in 2022. Not literally, although that is not beyond me, I am sure. The wall I hit was one of perception.

I’m not a “stay at home dad” anymore.

What do I mean? Well, I’m reasonably sure that you know what an SAHD is. When parents make a joint decision that one will work (go to the job function site) and the other will remain home and care for the children. during the workday. I apologize if you already know all this, or if you think that me explaining it is a kind of ‘ism, but when I began doing it, nearly 20 years ago, it was novel, and I was alone on the playground with my girls and their friends and their friends’ moms. And at birthday parties. And at the library, or the waiting line after school. It was...amazing. Not the being *alone*, because I wasn’t, of course, but the being *there*, for every moment. Making meals, doing chores, helping with lessons, playing, learning with them everything they learned, being asked questions, making memories.

Pretty schmaltzy stuff, I know. Also pretty great. I highly recommend it if you have the opportunity. Even the strange bit at the end, where the pandemic muddled the crisp lines between home, work and school, and occasionally required creative stay-at-home caregiver tag-teaming. Still, getting to be the primary home-parent has been pretty rewarding for me.

And now they’re out, doing their own things. And I stay home. It’s quieter. When I wash dishes, I crank up the tunes – the ones I used to dance with the girls to, while we made peanut-butter saltines. We talk on the phone – a lot. About new things, like how college classes are, or what went on today at work. I listen a lot more. They teach me. And we laugh a lot, and remember things that happened when they were little, not so long ago.

What does it all mean? I hit that wall, dusted myself off, got up again. Now what?

Well, things will never be the same. That’s good and bad. I liked being Dad. And now being Dad means something new. I still get asked questions, but those questions are...curious. Like “Hey, what happens if I do this?” Not “may I do this?” I have to remember to use my words. Words such as “in my opinion,” or “I’ve always found that...” They must make their own ways in the world, not necessari-

ly my way. And I also have learned that sometimes they just want to talk, not get advice. They don't mind if I ask if this such the case, either.

When I started out in this role, my desk was in the living room, in the middle of things. I did my reading and writing after chores or during naps, then during school, and finally late at night when everyone else was asleep. Now, my office, with the books and computer and comfortable chair, is more of a hideaway - with some houseplants I care for and a ticking clock and pictures on the wall and a cup of coffee going cold. It takes a little longer for me to find the groove and be productive, and I can stay on task a bit longer without interruptions.

Truth: I miss the interruptions. The sound of cartoons on the television. The raucous splashing in the bathtub. Snack-time. You can't beat snack-time.

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CAUTION

Here we are as in olden...

“The Girl”

by Katie Joy Blake

I know I'm weak. I've got sticks for arms and legs, weigh 110 pounds out of a bath, and glass jar lids consistently declare a greater show of strength than my feeble wrists. I was the kid hanging from the chin-up bar in the 5th grade in complete stillness yet sweat managed to dot my brow – the doing of my flaccid arms giving their best go at it from the inside. I hung like a pair of shoes over a wire, humiliated and not likely to move without professional help. There was no need for pity back then, however. I was gifted in other ways. I could lay flat in bed for hours on a Saturday morning letting my imagination cut loose - thinking of all the things a unicorn might stack on its horn (socks, donuts, swiss cheese, onion rings, lifesavers, rings, broken racquets, I could go on...). I could tie friendship bracelets a mile a minute, and when I discovered I could make the same knots using hemp, I had more friends than I knew what to do with come high school.

But the weakness that stirs my anxiety even more is the mental weakness. An internal, cerebral weakness. Just take this as an example: when I hike a new trail, my mind immediately declares the summit unreachable and scours my vantage point for places I could lay my body, cuddle up with myself, and freeze overnight. All this under the assumption that

while I cannot make it to the top, I also cannot make it back to my car and that the absolutely only other option is death. I don't envision myself trying to seek food or water. I could never try to bandage a wound (that would be disgusting). I might look for a cave or overhang but only because I'd hate to die beneath the cruel sun. That's how quickly my mind gives up. I do this often. Maybe even weekly. Sometimes just fantasizing about what I would do if a shark bit me (lay like a rag doll until I bleed out) but other times just casually- if I'm too hot, too hungry, too lost. I think about the quickest place to curl into a ball and let it all go. That's not to say I'm suicidal. I have zero desire in my day-to-day living to leave this world. I love my family, my job, and my windowsill of herbs. I am just weak. No desire to dance with the devil. The outcome would be gravely disappointing.

That's why I laughed when I heard about the storm. There weren't enough adjectives for the weathermen to describe it. Super storm wasn't sufficient. Super cell. Storm of the century. Life threatening storm. Stormageddon. These could describe other storms, big storms, but not this one. Not the mammoth. Nothing could describe a storm predicting 40 inches of rain, winds up to 180 mph, condensed into a storm diameter of

just 100 miles. It was going to be sheer, penetrating destruction. And that wasn't even the problem.

“SHHHH!!!!” she hissed out of her teeth. Tears, sweat, and snot mixed all over her face and dripped down in dark circles on her shirt. “THERE'S A MAN DOWN-STAIRS WITH A KNIFE.”

So, this was it. Hilda and the other graduating class high school partygoers frantically assembled into a circle of gossip and adrenaline. I felt a strange quiet in myself. My preparation paid off. Fear would not take over; I could manage this. Hiding was my only option. I couldn't escape, that would require a speed in running that would surely not be emitted from my legs. I couldn't attack, that would be downright suicide and I already mentioned that's not my thing. I would need to hide. If the man with the knife found me, then I would need to be stabbed. And that's how things were going to have to work out.

“He is going on and on about Mizzie. She left him. He is obsessed. His eyes look... it's not good.”

“Who the fuck does he think he is?” someone yelled.

“Grab one of the golf clubs from her dad's closet!” someone else chimed in.

I couldn't believe I was at a party where someone had easily accessible golf clubs. An assort-

ment by the sounds of it. My social rise was nearly incomprehensible given my stifling anxiety but life kept opening chapter after chapter. I always imagined my last one would involve the great outdoors, but alas, there was the storm.

Before Hilda could say another word, I was pushing the drawer of a long sideboard open and shoving the contents under the couch. Through the commotion, I heard her frantically tell the others about how Mazzie's boyfriend had a bad trip on LSD and became a jealous psycho (which made me relieved about my decision to withhold from the dating scene), while I scrunched my body into a pretzel and added it into the cabinet. The door slid shut, but light poured in from the seams and the hole you use to open and close it with just one finger. Not exactly what I expected, but it would do.

"What the hell? What are you doing, Jami?" I was asked. Part of assuming you need to cuddle your body and wait for death is drowning out any of the positive speak, any of the words that might encourage you to do otherwise. So, I did not respond.

Mazzie was at the party too. I knew this much because I saw her brilliant body flutter down the hall in a marigold dress shortly after I arrived. Mazzie was the epitome of a desirable woman. Bubbly eyes, hair with a bounce, a body that was soft and voluptuous. Listen to me go on, clearly even I desire her. Or perhaps I desire to be her. It's hard to say. I should mention, that in addition to not being strong, I

am also not womanly. It's not even a sexy thing, although it's obvious I have no cleavage, big lips, or long eyelashes. I am more like a board than a woman. When I have the honor of holding a baby at work (rare, but every now and then a mother needs to use the bathroom and passes the mushy soul into my arms), I feel bad, their tiny bodies seeking warmth and reassurance resting against my bony chest, my rib cage reminding them that the world is full of scarcity.

Just then the lights flickered. The rush of rain approached like a parade of freight trucks. It drowned out the weakest conversations, the ones whispering in fear. Wind whipped against the siding, whistling, and beating at the same time. The mammoth storm announced itself, the last guest to arrive. The house shook, it also didn't feel like fighting, that was obvious even from inside a cabinet. And then a clamor of footsteps.

"HE SLICED JOHNNY. HE SLICED JOHNNY'S HAND. HE'S A MANIAC. CALL THE POLICE."

Nobody had mentioned the police before because there were way too many alcoholic beverages for the small percentage of guests who were over 21. I mean, the rest of us were close, but I'm pretty sure the law doesn't consider the "almost" justification. When the golf club plan clearly failed, however, calling the police slipped into the number one option. The phone was atop the sideboard and Hilda ran over, her skirt hem

swirling in the open cracks I peered out. I wondered if she forgot I was in the cabinet, which was exactly what I wanted. I made no noise and tried to not stare. Eyes can always feel when eyes are upon them. The lights flashed again, thunder pounded and pounded and pounded, and then came the darkness.

"The phone's dead," she whimpered, dropping the receiver onto the cabinet as all the lights in the house went out. The wood was not wood at all, particle board probably, and it felt like the phone smashed directly into my head.

"HE'S COMING UPSTAIRS!" someone called. "Should we board the door with something? The couch?"

"No. Mazzie isn't here. We can't leave her out there with him."

How noble, I thought. Because I wouldn't be of any use, I felt comfortable staying inside the cabinet. Comfortable might be a stretch, my neck was aching in a way that made my foot numb, and my right shoulder somehow touched my hip.

"She must be in my parent's room," said Hilda. "Let's go."

When the footsteps marched away, I felt the loneliness that I had imagined during all those hikes. The sounds of nature reminding me that it was strong, and I was not. Outside, a tree struggled; its lumbering body creaking and creaking, it's roots untangling from the ground with the sound of popping, until it declared its own death with an

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echoing boom. But after a few slamming doors, the footsteps clamored back in with awful screams and moans. Johnny and Hilda bashed their fists onto the top of the sideboard, much to my chagrin.

“Come on, Jami, we need you out of there!”

I was silent. It wasn't so much a decision as a reaction.

“We need to put Mazzie in there! It's the only spot in the room she can hide! The closet is full of shit!”

I thought about how comfortable it felt to sit still through the chaos while everyone else was running around. I thought about the shark clenching my body while I flopped. I thought about Mazzie and her brilliant breasts and how they would never fit in this compartment.

Johnny tore open the door of the sideboard, revealing my crumpled body. “Come on, Jami, get the fuck out. There's a maniac and he'll plow through the locked door any minute. We don't have time.”

There was blood across Johnny's shirt, dirt and blood on his cheeks. The wound on his hand looked superficial but he had wiped it so vigorously across everything it looked like a gruesome mauling. His face was huge, I had never noticed the width of his jaw. And his eyes were full of desperation. It was embarrassing, but my lips twisted into a smile. I couldn't actually move my body and I still had no words to give. Johnny slammed the drawer shut

and muttered something about hoping I die, which I found alarming since I never wished that upon anyone, even myself. The door was damaged, only closing on an angle now, a triangle of light peered through. I tried to back my head up an inch to shield it from view. The footsteps clamored back towards the other wall where they inched the door open and slipped out one-by-one.

The storm had become so loud that the floor was shaking. It felt like the house was being lifted on one side, vases were sliding off tables, remote controls became projectiles. And with one big crash and rumble, the window above the sideboard blew out into a thousand shards of glass. This provided a forcefield of protection around the cabinet, I thought. Nobody would dare inch close to it now. But it also created a new problem. The wind and rain whipped inside the window at such speeds it penetrated the frail sideboard and began drenching me with a cold, powerful force. The wind blew in and then, every few seconds, sucked itself back out like a vacuum. Could the entire cabinet be sucked out? I provided little weight for it to stay. It was entirely possible. I would need to consider a new hiding place. I remembered the fluffy couch cushions, perhaps I could disguise myself beneath them, but getting there would be a difficult feat that I wasn't sure I was up for. I closed my eyes as the thunder rumbled all around me.

After a few minutes, I was awoken from my stupor by silence.

Storms can do that. They can lull you with fear and then wake you with silence. They don't follow the conventional rules. They do whatever they want. Then, I heard a commotion at the end of the hallway. Voices screaming. It was hard to make out everything. “I'm BLEEDING!” and “RUN!” were particularly clear. I peeked through the finger hole on the cabinet door. The plant in the corner shook and through its plastic leaves I saw flecks of marigold and red lipstick.

The door bashed open with a violent blow. The hinge probably ripped off. “MAZZIE!” a voice screamed, a voice so overly confident that it was trembling, filled to the brim with motivation. A voice that wielded a knife. The footsteps thumped closer. Where were the others? The strong ones? Why were they not coming in to save the day? The footsteps were closer still. I peered out of the hole and saw his leg, Carhartts. Great, I thought - the symbol of might - of adventurous power. And now I realized the forcefield of glass offered little protection against someone wearing shoes, boots to be exact. I was surely doomed and this time my body freaked out. I could hear Mazzie try to withhold her sobs, the inhale louder than she would want. The sweat made my elbow slip and bashed my forehead against the wall.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” he continued, dragging the knife along something out of view.

What a creep, I thought. What

an awful creep. Playing some sort of horror movie charades because his ego was bruised. The most pathetic kind of weakness.

“I want to chat. About your date with Johnny. DID YOU LIKE IT?”

And with one more furrow of my brow after the realization that this man was a legitimate psychopath, the blade of the knife plunged into the top of the sideboard, slicing open my bicep, the bright red blood instantly dripping in lines in all directions. My life flashed before my eyes. My family, my job, my windowsill of herbs. Had I watered the basil today? Who would find it first? Wilted and browning. Probably my mother. She would never let a day go by without calling and checking on me in my first apartment. I saw my childhood, a blur of snuggling tight into her lap for comfort – even when I was far too big – and she never pushed me off, the most welcoming place, and the days of her bandaging my bloody knees (frequent from my attempts to ride a bike or climb a tree or do practically anything) – wiping my tears that she would never allow to be shame – only pain, she said. She was larger than life, in the body of a 5-foot 2-inch woman. When I moved out, I missed her so much I sometimes glanced at my own reflection – I had inherited her mousy brown hair, her pert nose, her tight lips. I wished nothing more than to be held to her chest, hear the pitch of her voice right in that instant. Somewhere perfectly safe. Everything had gone dark except the bright red trails, the

ominous clouds outside the window so full of rage they turned black, my vision cloudy already. He pulled the knife back out so hastily he probably didn't even see the red tip. I slid the door open and rolled my body out, my elbow digging into a shard of glass. Absolutely disgusting, I thought. Now both arms were injured, and I refused to move them; I stood up and they hung limp off my body and made me an easy target -like an injured jelly fish. I saw the door, the beacon to safety, and his giant body in the way. His knife with an actual sharp point and curved edge and serrated teeth. His flashlight whipped around and pointed directly into my eyes. The painful scorch of light was terrible. I didn't want to die in this room. I wanted the quiet of an overhang, the darkness of a hug. He turned to me with a look of rage. And I felt resolute.

“I KNOW WHERE MAZZIE IS,” I proclaimed.

The world stopped. The eye of the storm moving slowly, the fringed border showing wild punches of lightening just a stone's throw away. I heard the rustling of the fake leaves. I heard Mazzie whimper in terror.

I remembered the wind blowing in and being sucked back out and let my imagination carry it to new places. I imagined where her body would fly, the golden hues tossed through the air and landing on the green grass below, cushioned by her voluptuous curves. Her hair spread in beautiful brown waves until the creep of blood muddied them. Her soft skin soak-

ing up the rain. “She jumped out the window.” I said it with such conviction I believed it too.

The man pounded his feet towards me, past me, his long knife scraping my hip, sticking his head out the broken window in excitement. The rain dumped down upon his head, the flashes of lightening illuminating his desire. I whipped back around and looked at Mazzie through the fern. She was strong. She was a woman. I looked at her and told her so with my stare. There should be no shame. Only pain. She came running and with one big blow pushed him right out the window until a thump into the waterlogged grass declared an end to the ordeal. When she steadied herself back upright, her arms wrapped around my body like a barnacle I would never remove.

When the others arrived, they celebrated, so proud of Mazzie and her demonstration of strength. “I pushed him!” she said, still quivering from the fear left in her veins. “I pushed him,” she said again, letting the fact become permanent but without the scar of shame. My sweat-stained hair, my torn shirt, my injury -they all blended into the darkness of the night, allowing me to leave without much fanfare. I would go to my mother's house, and she could bandage my arm. She would hold me into her chest, bony and small. ❖

“On the Threshold

by David Rudd

Wallace woke in the early hours, as he so frequently did. This time it wasn't for the toilet. He'd got up earlier for that ... hadn't he? Or was that the night before? This time, it was a noise from downstairs that had disturbed him. It sounded like someone breaking in.

Nowadays, Wallace was fearful of burglars. He couldn't get over how frail he'd become. In the past he'd have tackled anyone. Had them out on their ear! Now he was just a “poor old codger.” He'd heard people say it: needed a stick to walk, was blind as a bat without his specs, and deaf to boot. And that was aside from his “prostrate” problems, as he termed them.

Wallace looked round for his clock but, without his specs, couldn't read the time anyway. It was certainly still night-time. The sounds downstairs continued. Someone was definitely entering his property, but it was not a break-in; that was the front door he'd heard closing. Had he forgotten to lock it? The other night, he'd even left the gas on, unlit. What was he coming to?

Now there were voices in the hall. Two of them, was it? This was serious. Downstairs, a light clicked on.

“I wouldn't have troubled you, but you did say, if we heard anything....”

“I'm much obliged to you,

Colin.”

The second voice sounded like his son, Robert. Wallace wanted to call out to him but couldn't get his mouth to work. Besides which, his teeth were in the bathroom.

Robert, Wallace now realised, was talking to Colin Brown, Wallace's neighbour. Always checking up on him, were Colin and Sally. Nice enough couple but far too nosy.

“When I heard a few bangs and thumps, I thought I should let you know,” continued Colin. “It sounded ominous.”

The voices grew louder as they reached the staircase. Wallace's stairs ran up the middle of the terraced house, his being one of the few properties that hadn't been modernised.

“Oh, Jesus!” Wallace heard his son exclaim. Unusual to hear him swear!

“You'd best ring Emergency Services,” said Colin. “Is there a pulse?”

Who on earth were they talking about? wondered Wallace. Was there someone on his stairs? Was it the burglar he thought he'd heard earlier? He wanted to shout out but still couldn't get his mouth working. He cursed silently.

He must have fallen asleep again, for he was suddenly conscious of more noise. A vehicle in the street, doors opening and clos-

ing, more people coming into his front room.

“And you are Mr Robert Godfrey,” enquired a female voice, “son of Wallace Godfrey?”

“He's on the stairs,” said Robert. “Just a faint pulse. We tried not to move him.”

“No!” Wallace wanted to shout, but his jaw was slack. They'd got the wrong person! He needed to tell them. He tried to raise himself, but his muscles wouldn't respond. Whoever was on the stairs, it wasn't him! And why hadn't Robert come up to see him, to warn him about this strange body on his stairs? He could have fallen over it!

Just then, Wallace experienced a peculiar sensation. Somehow, he wasn't in his bedroom anymore. He was gazing down at some uniformed people on the stairs, huddled round a body. He could hear Robert and Colin in the background, too. Then he noticed that it was *his* body they were crouched round.

It gave him a jolt that triggered a memory of getting up earlier in the night. He'd been heading for the loo — one of his regular visits — when he'd felt some stabbing pains in his feet which made him lose his balance. He looked down at the small, crumpled figure lying there, like a ... like a poor old codger!

But, if that was *him*, who was

be, watching all this? And who was in his bed? With this thought, he suddenly found himself gazing down at his empty bed. It was very disorienting. Was he dreaming all this, perhaps?

No, he thought, that's not it. He felt untethered, like a helium balloon after its owner has let go the string. He found he could go anywhere, just by thinking of it, as he discovered when he heard a noise outside. Immediately he was at his bedroom window, gazing down at the street below, where he could see one of the ambulance crew fetching something.

Am I dying, then? was Wallace's next thought, which, although not spoken, sounded quite brashly in his head.

The instant after he'd expressed it, another presence in his head seemed to respond: "Good question. I wondered when you'd think of that."

"Who are you?" demanded Wallace. His house was like Piccadilly Circus tonight!

"Don't you recognise your old Dad?" came the reply.

"You! Are you . . . in my head?"

"I'm all around, son. Just like yourself, as you'll find out."

"Are there others here, too?" asked Wallace.

"Others?"

"Mum?"

"Nah. She died in the mental hospital, didn't she?" Again, Wallace had hardly framed these questions before his father's replies were inside his head. His father went on: "That's the thing, see. You need to die *here* for your

spirit to survive. Otherwise, you're gone, for good."

"Does that mean . . . it's just you and me?"

"*When* you go, it is!"

"I'm not dead yet?"

"Nah. On your way, though. That's why you've begun to separate from your body there."

Immediately his father said this, Wallace found himself once again looking down from the top of the stairs. "That's also why we can communicate. But it's crucial you die *before* you leave this house!"

Floating around on his landing, something unusual caught Robert's eye. "Can you . . . *do* stuff as a spirit?" he asked his father. "You know, move objects and that?"

"You can create all kinds of mischief if you've a mind," came the reply. "Polterghosts, that's us. Bert and Wallace—we're a team!"

"So, spreading tacks at the top of the stairs. That'd be you, would it?"

"Now, son. What you saying?"

"That you're a selfish old git, Bert Godfrey," declared Wallace, "and always were — which is why Mum left."

"Mum lost her marbles."

"You smashed all her marbles!"

"Now don't start on all that again."

"You planned this, didn't you?"

"Son, your time's up."

"But you thought you'd hurry things along."

Their talk was halted by raised voices from below. "Thought he was a goner, but now he's rallied,"

said Suzy, the female paramedic. "Better get him to A & E."

At these words, Wallace could feel the exasperation steaming off his father, followed by a sense that his father was no longer there, inside his head. He listened more carefully to the conversation below.

"I need a drink," he heard Robert say. "Anyone else for a cuppa?"

"If you're quick," said Suzy. "We'll get your dad ready for the ambulance."

Robert went off to the kitchen, but no sooner had he entered than Wallace heard him swearing again. Most uncharacteristic! He then heard the back door and kitchen windows being flung open.

Robert returned to the ambulance crew on the stairs. "God! The rotten egg smell in Dad's kitchen. Only left the gas on, hadn't he? I daren't light the stove now. And he's got no electric kettle."

"Old folks are forgetful!" said Dan, Suzy's colleague.

"I'll nip home and make us a brew," said Colin.

Wallace, overhearing this conversation, strained to project his thoughts. "Where are you, Dad? It was *you*, wasn't it, turned on the gas?" In his head, Wallace envisaged himself shouting out these words.

"What you on about, son?" came the instant reply.

"And last night, too!" continued Wallace, the insight suddenly striking him. "There was me,

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thinking I was getting forgetful with the gas, and it was *you* all the time.” In his head, Wallace saw himself yelling this at full pitch. “You try to blow me up, topple me to my death—anything to make sure I don’t leave here alive!”

“Blow you up?” Bert sounded genuinely offended. “Never crossed my mind!”

Wallace realised his dad might have a point. “Of course, it was town gas in your day, wasn’t it, full of carbon monoxide? You were trying to poison me then, weren’t you?” There was no reply. Wallace’s thoughts ran on. “Won’t work with natural gas, though. Only blow us up. One naked flame and whomp!”

“As if!” snorted Bert. “But listen son. As I keep telling you, if they take you out that front door before you’ve popped your clogs, we’re lost . . .”

“Selfish to the end!”

“I’m thinking of you, son,” the voice wheedled. “We could share old times together.”

“Over my dead body,” said Wallace, chuckling as he realised the irony.

Bert, though, had taken himself off to the kitchen where, inspired by Wallace and Robert, he once again secured the windows and back door before turning on every gas tap he could find: the hob burners, the grill, the oven and, finally, the tap for the water heater.

Meanwhile, Dan, the male paramedic, had nipped out the front, supposedly to fetch something from the ambulance. Really,

he was desperate for a smoke with his cuppa. He only managed a few drags, though, before he heard Suzy yelling. Turning back towards the house, he got the shock of his life.

The sound — more of a wail — had come not from Suzy but from a decapitated head protruding through the front door. It was like Marley’s ghost, with wiry hair and bulging eyeballs, and it was staring at Dan, who immediately dropped his cigarette and locked himself in the ambulance.

Chuckling, the rest of Bert’s form eased itself through the door. He picked up the cigarette and went down the back passage to Wallace’s yard. There, he opened the back door and let the ciggie do the rest. “Whoomp!” said the kitchen. Bert chuckled to himself.

Inside, Suzy had given up waiting for Dan. She and Robert, between them, had begun stretchering Wallace while Colin opened the front door for them. The blast accelerated their departure.

Colin took himself straight home, anxious for his family and property. He would soon return, however, and, with a few other neighbours, would try to douse the flames emanating from Wallace’s property.

Meanwhile, Robert and Suzy discovered a sheepish Dan cowering in the back of the ambulance. Suzy shouted for him to call the police and fire brigade while she hooked Wallace up to the monitors. Robert sat with his dad.

Dan went through to the cab,

still in shock. Wallace was the only one who appeared relaxed, a vague smile playing across his dry lips.

“It’s funny,” said Robert, “Dad always said he’d end his days here, where he was born. Said they’d have to drag him out feet first.”

“Well, he’s not done yet,” said Suzy, patting Robert’s shoulder. “And he came out headfirst — not feet — which is probably how he was born.”

Their smiles were arrested by a horrible wailing sound, which many in the street mistook for a police siren. Dan immediately started the engine, shouting through for everyone to strap up.

“Are you alright, partner?” asked Suzy, joining Dan in the cab. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Dan accelerated away without comment and, as he did so, they both heard the bleep of Wallace’s heart monitor stutter to a halt.

Robert also heard it. He turned to his dad, who, he was pleased to see, looked at peace. As he said to Suzy and Dan, his father appeared happier than he’d done for a while; and, as Robert stared at his dad’s wrinkled old face, he could have sworn that that ridiculous, toothless smile of his was spreading wider than ever. ❖

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

Dream February 2023

At work. But I don't work anymore. Not when I don't want to. Volunteering then? OK. I can do that. Out in a field, teaching how to light a fire from flint and steel. An organizational improvement/therapy thing? OK. They have a meal, are talking to each other and looking at phones and laptops, while I set up the fireplace with moss and twigs. I go to gather the sticks and when I come back, they've thrown their paper trash in the fireplace, dixie cups and dirty white paper plates and such. Someone takes a match and lights the mess. What are you doing? This is a lesson in simplicity – flint and steel, remember?

Stamp it out, I'm told, so I walk on the fire with my sneakers. It's out, and I have ashes and soot all over me. Time to go, clean up. You're assigned camp policing for litter, I'm told. But that's not my organization, I explain. I'm one of the presenters. And carry things back to the buses, they say.

I don't work for these people, but I suppose I can carry luggage to the bus, which is far across a field and across a many-laned highway. I run between cars and load the bus.

Where is my own car? Someone has taken it. I parked it near the buses, in front of a store. I ask a man standing out in front if he saw the car. No. I mean, yes. What? Was it towed? No, someone drove it. The day is going very wrong, but it is still sunny and warm. Maybe one of the employees of the firm I was supposed to teach? Do I have to ride the bus back?

But the last bus pulls away from the curb with a roar.

Where is my phone? I need to call a ride.

AR - cyberspace

“The Danube and Dreameries”

By Pawel Markiewicz

One day, in the dreamy Middle Ages, three young friends lived in Moravia: a thinker, a poet and a dreamer. They loved every dawn. They have decided to visit Vienna, to buy jewelry there. They liked furthermore a gold of a starlit heaven. They passed the Danube River and a miracle happened. The miracles came often true at tender thoughts. In their souls by the Danube, a total secondary human-becoming took place: in the thinker through praise, in the poet through appreciation and in the dreamer through honoring.

The men were enchanted and bewitched. In all three cases, the primary human-becomings were fulfilled: at the thinker with the first thoughts, at the poet with the first poem, and at the dreamer with the first infatuation. The bygone thoughts were about the dreamed Golden Fleece, poem was about journeys of Zeus into clouds and the infatuation was related to Ovid-like beauty of butterflies.

In addition, the thinker thought of the Danube, that is about: size, quantity, water, depth, fish. The Danube was thereat cerulean.

The Poet wrote about Lorelei -

a girl from a grove who had drowned in the Danube, because she was not loved. She had drunk an azure water of the river, like an Ambrosia from the Moon.

On the other hand, the dreamer dreamed of a river wizardry, because he was absolutely enchanted by the dreamy Danube.

Thus. The third way to the human-becoming is the philosophy. The philosophy must be mysterious and should be grounded in an ontology of laws-like rules. A mermaid was indeed a really she-philosopher. She must have been touched by the celestially Apollonian breath of a nightingalelet.

And all the rest of my story happens in the world of today.

The mermaid is an inhabitant of a Danube depth. In the great depth, she has hidden a treasure of silvery cranes –a handful of silver, fallen down from stars. From today on she is very dreamy, because she purposes to think of a beautiful poem to the end. It would be a sonnet about a dreamy awaking of the spring-like druid. This is besides a delicately (most) lovely poem of eternity. I can name it the moony sempiternity. The mermaid sleeps in a pit under

the Danube during the day.

>The early bird gets the worm<

That sentence is erroneous for the sake of charm of the spellbound metaphysics. She wakes up every midnight and sits on the banks of the Danube behind the city of Vienna. The mermaid wants to describe a charm of the sea of lights. She looks at the beautiful city. The Mozartean genial spirit rests in her and the mood of the city is quite unbosomed.

The Danube is enchanted, because the mermaid heats the water up to 35 *degrees* for the sake of her soul's warmth. The heat energy takes place owing to the warmth of her bosom. Boys can swim and bathe in the warm Danube without limits. They are the lineal descendants of above heroes of the Dark Ages, of the thinker, poet as well of the dreamer. Even a fisherman can easily refresh his body in the warm water, fallen in love with a silent, dreamed epiphany, then.

>Loose lips sink ships<.

From today a miracle will take place. This miracle is fulfilled by a singing of a eesome, pulchritudinous, fair, beauteous cormorantling. The noble august star,

namely the constellation of the philosophers, shimmers over Vienna, the Danube and the mermaid. I recall the dearest, most tender weird of all people of this story. The star signalizes the fulfillment of all dreams. I'm just in love with the mermaid, the star and all of Vienna. I have many wishes to Danube and Vienna.

I believe, Danube will be inhabited only by all Mermaids forever. In the future, the thinker, poet, dreamer and this mermaid will be adoring the Terpsichorean Arts in the heaven. Until the end of days, their love to all birdies will have been taking.

Explanations for Readers:

Nightingalelet – in fact the neologism – small Nightingale.

Sempiternity – poetic eternity.

cormorantling – as diminutive in English, like a birdie, never used in the famous literature. The adjectives, to wit: eesome, pulchritudinous, fair, beauteous denote the word: pretty; eesome = eyesome.

weird – fate, destiny



“70s Superstar”

by K. A. Williams

A superstar of the seventies
is touring in his seventies.
He's addicted to applause.
Years of smoking and
screaming song lyrics
have changed his voice,
and limited his range.
Do his fans mind that
he doesn't sound as smooth
as he did way back then?
Of course not.
They're overjoyed to be
among the audience while
he performs all his hits,
and everyone remembers
the time when they were
once young and carefree.

Contributors:

Katie Joy Blake writes fiction that explores the thin line between the mundane and the extraordinary. While on hiatus from her career as an attorney working on behalf of at-risk youth, she is raising her children and finding inspiration equally in the absurdity and richness of life. This would be her debut publication, turning the page to a long-awaited chapter.

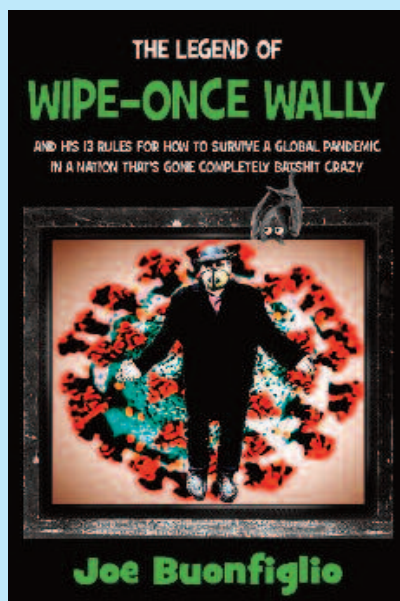
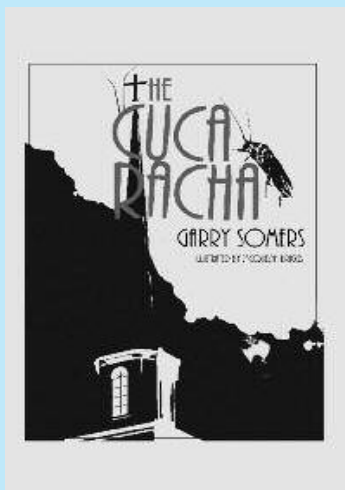
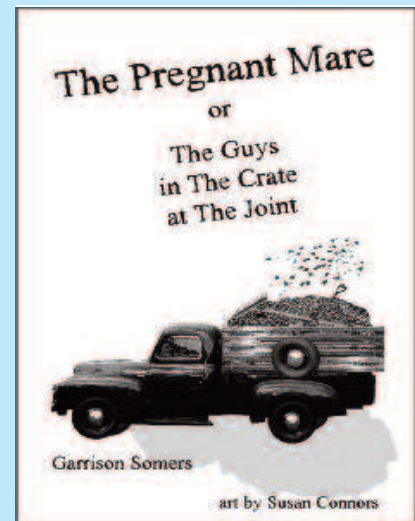
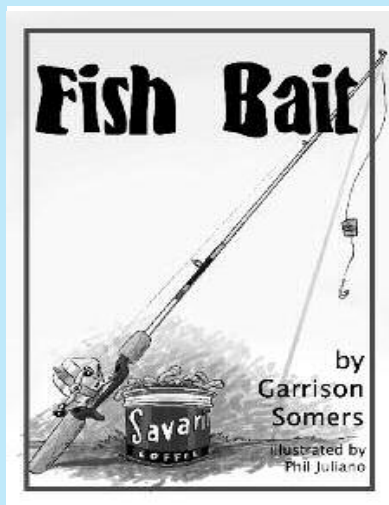
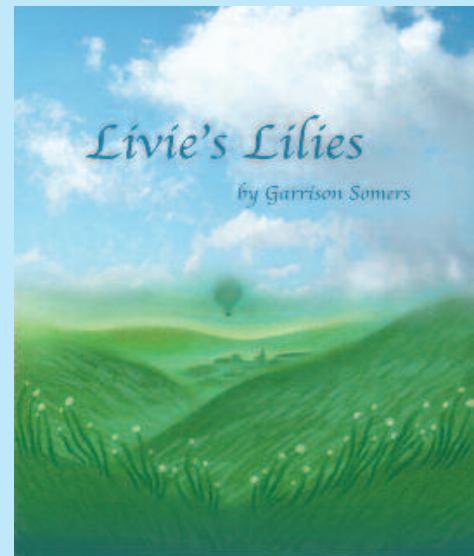
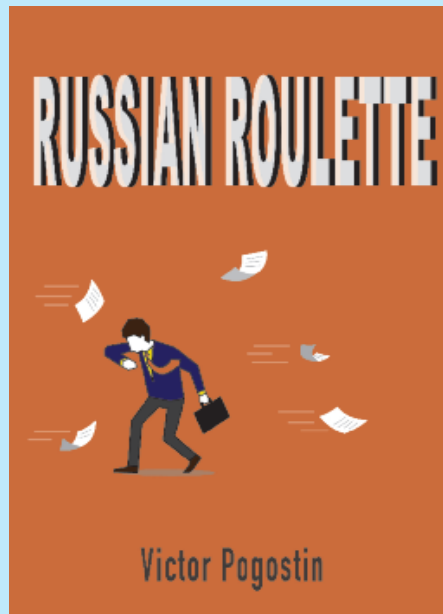
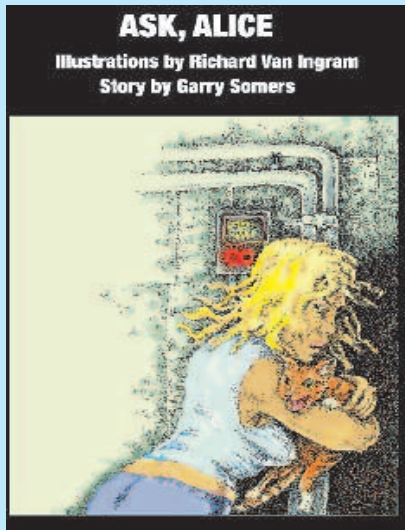
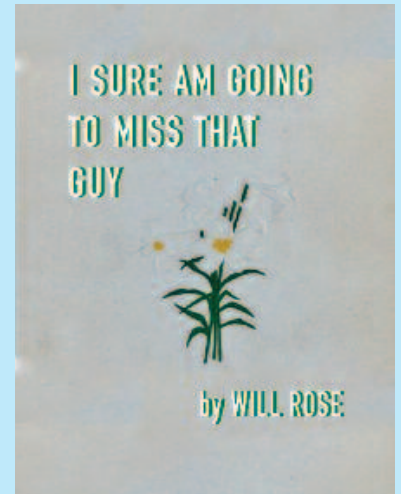
Dr David Rudd, 70+, is an emeritus professor of literature who turned out academic prose for some 40 years before allowing his imagination freer rein. His stories can be found in *Bandit Fiction*, *Horla*, *TigerShark*, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, *Literally Stories*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, *The Blotter*, *Erotic Review*, *Scribble*, *The First Line*, and *Creative Webzine*, among others. He also enjoys performing folk/blues music on guitars, fiddles, harmonicas, etc., but this latter pastime is far more derivative.

Paweł Markiewicz writes, “1983, lives in Bielsk Podlaski - Poland, poet from Poland who wrote some pieces of flash fiction. Paweł was a participant in 2007 and 2010 of the Forum Alpbach, a village of thinkers in Austria. After experience with poetry, he wants to create some good stories. He writes tender poems, haiku as well as long poem and flash.” His poems were featured in *The Blotter*’s January 2023 issue. Check them out.

K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina. Her poems have been published in many magazines including *The Blotter*, *Tigershark*, *Literary Yard*, *5-7-5 Haiku Journal*, *The Creativity Webzine*, *Calliope*, and *Scifaikuest*. She has also published 11 ebooks. Among them are 3 poetry collections - “*Free Verse and Rhyme: A Poetry Collection*”, “*Limericks and Other Humorous Poems*”, “*Scifaiku and Haiku: A Poetry Collection*” and 2 mystery/crime novellas - “*Tour of Intrigue*” and “*Question of Vendetta*”. Apart from writing, the author enjoys music (especially ‘70s rock) and word games.



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