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“We Got a Thing and It’s Called...”

It turns out that sometimes the words just don’t want to reveal themselves. Does this happen to you? I stumble over a paragraph for a whole day, typing and backspacing in a way that must sound like I’m particularly productive, but which is quite the opposite. I save and save again (I do this manually, even though I know I can set it to do so automatically) but nothing new is added, or even taken away from my WIP.

And I swear I know that I ought to move on, to another paragraph, another thought, another piece of work completely. Start something new, something green and untrammled by considerations and time. But, maybe like you, I’m stubborn, sometimes, in a particular and peculiar way. Like if someone was giving me advice – solicited or otherwise – they might suggest all of those possible solutions and scold me for acknowledging them but not acting. And perhaps they could even offer that a recalcitrant piece of prose sometimes needs to be jettisoned and approached anew on a different day. A Thursday. In August. Don’t even save the mess, just open a new file altogether. But no. Those who teach how to overcome errors, sometimes also make them. Or something like that. Just keep typing.

Maybe it’s me. Maybe the well is nearing that place where you can’t dip fresh water from the top anymore. Or there are so many stories and poems and memoirs being written simultaneously throughout the world that the muses cannot keep up with them all and have some of us on hold. Please stand by. Your yarn is important to us. We will get to you in the order in which you began your tale.

So this spring and summer I open files, gaze at the contents, longingly, lovingly, and fiddle with a word here or there. Save the file with a new name and a new date – more current by weeks and months and feel pretty good about myself. Savor that fleeting sense of optimism that a breakthrough is forthcoming. If not now, then very soon. But it’s not here, that breakthrough. Not by a long shot.

I’m OK with this. Partly because if it was easy, everyone would be doing it. Wait – a lot of us are doing it. Revised: everyone would be doing it without complaining.

I keep typing. I just keep typing.

And I am, admittedly, not caught in the nefarious web of publication. Or, rather, the web of submission for publication. A person can handle only so much at one time. When I figure out this particular logjam, the Gordian knot – or in my case the gordian not! – of this problem, I will think about sending things out again.

I am, of course, all over the map.

I know someone who resolves their writing concerns by erasing. That is, they take pages of text and remove words, until they have a poem, or a new philosophy or an advertising campaign slogan or a declaration of war on word processing. Another creates poems by leaving out objects and subjects and the occasional verb. Like writing Mad Libs, only really, really intellectual ones. Well, nearly so, because without nouns and verbs, it _____ just _____. Nevertheless, that's how they make strides forward, grist for the mill. In a similar way, I have attempted Shakespearean sonnets. It's nearly impossible to write one that works within the structure of rhyme and rhythm, much less one that does that and makes sense, much less one that does that and makes sense and is about a subject worth crafting a poem about. I do it anyway. It's a lot like trying to start a car by putting it in neutral and pushing it over a cliff, then dropping it into drive and giving it the gas. It makes my nose bleed. It melts the tips of my fingers.

But here's the thing. No one else cares. No one sees that - the maroon-cruled tissues and band-aids. No one who is worried about my writing problems cares how I scrub this filthy frying pan, how I dig this drainage ditch, how I pull this painful tooth. Only me. I keep typing.

Eventually is my friend. Our relationship is based on trust, like all relationships. I keep typing and eventually the words will come. I keep thinking of new things? One of them will be a story, a character, a fair rhyme. Something not too bad. Good enough for now. Eventually, I'll finish this, and move on to something else.

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CAUTION

We gotta get you

“Fear of Flying Freehold”

by David Rudd

“What’s flying freehold?” asked Jenny — Susan and Richard’s eight-year-old daughter — as they sat in the kitchen amidst the chaos of their move. Boxes and crates were piled around them, abandoned by the removal men.

“Flying freehold is that bit of our house that sits on top of next door’s lounge,” explained Susan, “as if it was flying.”

“Don’t they mind us being up there?” asked Jenny.

“Not legally!” laughed Richard, though they’d all been aware that Mrs Duxbury, one half of the elderly couple from next door, had been wandering round the front garden, looking at them suspiciously, and occasionally getting under the removal team’s feet as she wandered into their van.

Susan and Richard’s flying freehold had an interesting history. Until fairly recently, it seemed that the owners of the two, semi-detached Victorian properties had swapped the “flying” bit on several occasions, depending on who had the greater need at the time — usually because of growing families. In those days, it was done amicably. Lawyers weren’t involved. However, the families in question had also been related.

Now, it was very different. In fact, Susan and Richard’s solicitor had cautioned them against purchasing the property. Certainly, obtaining a mortgage had been next to impossible, but when Susan’s mother had suddenly died, bequeathing them the necessary capital, they’d gone ahead. They’d fallen in love with this old

house, Jenny especially.

The only stumbling block had been the TA6. This was the form the vendor was required to complete, providing information about the state of the property, with comments about the neighbours and neighbourhood. It transpired that the Oldhams, the previous owners, had made some negative comments about the Duxburys. The former had been denied access to the Duxbury’s land when they had wanted to renovate the window-frame in the flying freehold.

Although it sounded problematic — which was why their solicitor had advised them to drop it — Susan had talked personally to Mr Duxbury, a man in his eighties. He was very accommodating, apologising for their seeming obstructiveness. His wife, he explained, had dementia, and suffered with her nerves, so he’d asked the Oldhams to delay their repairs until his wife’s respite care.

“Unfortunately,” as Mr Duxbury had told Susan, “they went ahead straightaway. Mr Oldham erected some homemade scaffolding on his side of the fence and, well, you know the rest. Most regrettable!”

Susan certainly did know about Mr Oldham’s “Heath Robinson” scaffolding, which had stretched over from his side of the fence to the Duxbury’s, only to collapse soon after he’d mounted it, resulting in an emergency visit to A & E.

After this mishap, the Oldhams had put their house up for sale. It had certainly hung about on the market — mainly because of that flying

freehold — with the Oldhams having to drop their price several times. This was how it had come within Susan and Richard’s grasp.

Jenny had been very excited at the prospect of occupying the flying freehold room. It was certainly quirky, with capacious built-in cupboards and a large mahogany wardrobe across the end wall, which abutted the Duxbury’s property. The moment she’d seen it, Jenny had fallen in love with the room.

In fact, she savoured every nook and cranny of the house and garden. She wanted to live there forever, she’d informed her parents. But her favourite room remained her flying freehold, which she arranged to her liking. Each of her toys, including her extensive collection of furry animals, was allocated its distinct place.

Jenny also announced that she’d discovered a special friend called Wendy, who played with Jenny in her room. Her parents weren’t happy about this, but Jenny’s teacher assured them that imaginary friends were a common phenomenon, often lasting until puberty. When they asked, “Why now?”, the teacher put it down to the disruption of the move.

Things were fine for several months until, one morning, Susan found herself unintentionally yelling as she’d gone in to wake Jenny. Beneath her instep Susan discovered an unyielding lump of Lego. After stumbling over several more pieces, Susan reached the curtains and threw some light on things. They both stared at the floor.

“What you done, Mummy?” said Jenny, roused by her mother’s cries.

“Me!” exclaimed Susan. “I was going to ask *you* that!”

“It must have been Wendy.”

“Wendy! Of course!” They both stared at the Lego and soft toys scat-

tered over the floor. “She’s made a bit of a mess, hasn’t she?”

“Sorry, Mummy. She’s a bit untidy.” Jenny leapt out of bed. “I can clear it up.”

They both set to. Susan was keen not to make an issue of it — in line with the teacher’s advice — but she was worried about Jenny being up in the night, playing. Had Jenny, her mum wondered, actually been awake, or had she been doing something else, like sleepwalking — “sleep-playing”?

This sort of disruption began to occur more regularly. “Doesn’t Wendy like to sleep at nights?” Susan had asked her daughter.

“Yes, but she also likes playing in the dark. We’re going to have a midnight feast, next.”

“Really? And will you be ordering in food for that?”

Susan shared her concerns with Richard, who thought it was nothing to worry about. “Wendy’s an *imaginary* friend. What could go wrong?”

Nevertheless, even though imaginary, both Susan and Richard found themselves checking on Jenny whenever either woke in the night. Not that they ever saw anything untoward, but Susan was concerned about some of the activities Jenny mentioned. She was particularly disturbed when Jenny said that Wendy had shown her how to fly round the room, “without holding on, cos that’s why it’s called flying freehold.” Even though Susan had recently read *Peter Pan* to her daughter — which is where she supposed Jenny had come up with the name “Wendy” — Susan was still concerned at the thought of Jenny clambering onto her chest of drawers at night.

And, speaking of *Peter Pan*, Susan was upset to discover, one morning, her childhood copy of that

book, along with others, scattered across Jenny’s floor, some with their pages torn.

Susan was not sure what to say to Jenny. Was her daughter learning the art of deception? Was Wendy nothing but a scapegoat? Jenny had already admitted that this ‘friend’ wasn’t really a physical presence; more like something that existed in her head.

However, the games that Jenny played seemed a bit old fashioned. She’d once found Jenny’s crayons laid out in a grid on the floor. “For hopscotch,” Jenny had said. Another time she’d found her doing some fancy skipping with her dressing-gown cord. “Where did you learn that?” Susan had asked, only to be told that Wendy had shown her.

It was after the incident with the books that Susan had run into Valerie Oldham in town. They’d first met, of course, when Susan and Richard went to view the house, which is when they’d heard about Mr Oldham’s accident. The two women now went for a coffee.

When Valerie asked how they were settling in, Susan mentioned Jenny’s nocturnal behaviour. Valerie admitted that their son, Max, who was a couple of years older than Jenny, had never liked the room, refusing, in the end, to sleep in it.

“We had to move him. It was strange because it was only then that Mrs Duxbury started causing trouble. You must have seen her wandering about, bent over like some fairy-tale witch?” Susan smiled at Valerie’s imitation. “We’d get scribbled notes poked through our letterbox at all hours, complaining about the noise and disturbance. Mr D was very apologetic about his wife, saying it was the dementia. But, even so, there can’t have been any noise after

Max had left that room. It was only used for storage,” — she paused for a moment before leaning over confidentially — “though we did occasionally find our boxes overturned, their contents spilled out. That’s when we started blaming the poltergeist, but I think it must have been Max being mischievous.”

The word ‘poltergeist’ shook Susan. It was not something she’d previously contemplated. It was not something, after all, one would ever see declared on a TA6 form.

That evening, Susan once again voiced her concerns about Wendy to Richard. They found themselves in a quandary for, unlike Max, Jenny loved her room, and wouldn’t abandon it for anything.

In the end, Susan decided she’d spend the next few nights sleeping with their daughter. Richard was going away on a three-day course, so it was a reasonable arrangement. It would certainly give Susan a chance to observe Jenny’s nocturnal habits close-up.

#

Her first night with Jenny was exhausting. It was a windy night, causing the damaged window frame to rattle, which certainly didn’t help Susan’s nerves. Every time Jenny stirred, Susan found herself wide awake, her head bursting with irrational thoughts. At one point, she imagined some malevolent presence flying above them, circling their bed. Susan envisaged her own head tracking it, rotating like the possessed girl in *The Exorcist*.

She must finally have dropped off, though, waking with a jolt as she felt the bed shudder. Once again, *The Exorcist* came to mind, but it was only Jenny, standing by the bed, shaking her. “Wake up, Mummy, it’s breakfast time!”

Susan surfaced from what felt like a night on the tiles. It was at this moment that she saw, once again, the books and heaps of Lego scattered over the floor. She shot out of bed, grabbing Jenny by the shoulders. "What happened?"

"Nothing, Mummy. I was just playing polty-ghosts, waiting for you to wake up."

Jenny's remark was innocent, but it distressed Susan. "Poltergeist," she corrected her daughter, before deciding it was not a word she wanted to encourage.

The following evening, even more exhausted, Susan again bedded down with Jenny, this time falling asleep almost immediately. She was soon dreaming wildly about the two of them, airborne, circling the room. Wendy was showing them how to perform aerial summersaults. Susan woke in a sweat before realising she'd been re-enacting *Peter Pan*. Flying freehold, indeed!

By the third night, Susan had lost the will to live. She couldn't wait for Richard's return. Jenny found it highly amusing that her mother was falling asleep over their bedtime story. "Perhaps *I* should read to *you*," said Jenny, with a chuckle. Susan mumbled something incoherent before starting to snore, leaving Jenny to switch off the bedside light.

Susan slept well until dawn. Then she experienced what seemed another nightmare. Lying with her head towards the mahogany wardrobe, she watched as its big doors swung open, revealing the clothes hanging inside. She then saw one of the outfits detach itself from its hanger and step out of the wardrobe. Susan gazed at this vision for what seemed an age, transfixed. It was as though she were trapped in another childhood classic: *The Lion,*

the Witch and the Wardrobe.

Eventually, it dawned on her that she was not dreaming. She was awake, and the figure she observed, moving with slow deliberation, was no witch. It was Mrs Duxbury! At this realisation, Susan was jolted into full consciousness and shot bolt upright.

Despite the darkness, this sudden movement must have caught Mrs Duxbury's eye, for the bent figure gave a small gasp before turning on her heel and fighting her way back through the clothing into the depths of the wardrobe. Susan looked down at Jenny, who slept on, oblivious.

Susan herself experienced a mix of emotions. She was incensed at Mrs Duxbury's bizarre invasion, but also relieved to see that it was their neighbour — a living being, not a ghost — even though she might yet prove to be something of a witch.

Jenny's regular breathing gradually calmed Susan. She slid out of her daughter's bed and approached the wardrobe. Stepping inside, she explored the rear of the carcass, but could find nothing untoward. A full investigation would have to wait until morning.

The next thing she knew, it was 7.30am. Once again, Jenny was tugging on her arm. "Mummy, wake up!" she insistently intoned.

Ignoring the wardrobe, Susan and Jenny dressed and got on with their day, Susan driving Jenny to school.

Back home, and with the next few hours to herself, Susan returned to the wardrobe, throwing its doors wide and pushing the clothes aside to explore the panelling at the back. It was still dark within, but Susan had come prepared with her phone torch. "Narnia, here we come," she muttered to herself.

Ever since she'd first seen this magnificent wardrobe, it had been on her mind to read that children's classic to Jenny. Then it had seemed an apposite choice, but now she was nervous of sharing it. Did she really want Jenny — along with Wendy, too, no doubt — probing in here? However, despite pushing and prodding with her fingernails, Susan could find no moving parts. She gave up.

As she went back downstairs, another thought jolted her. Could Mrs Duxbury and Wendy be one and the same? Was it Mrs D that Jenny was playing with in the night? Surely not. Jenny would have said something.

Determined to get to the bottom of things, Susan decided it was time to pay their neighbours a visit. She had intended to wait until Richard returned, but she was too impatient. That woman had some explaining to do, regardless of her dementia.

The wind was taken out of her sails when Mr Duxbury answered the door. Had his wife, who was always wandering around, gone to ground, perhaps? Too embarrassed to answer the door?

He was a tall man with a slight stoop, emphasised by his cardigan which, thanks to his bulging pockets at the front, hung distended. On his feet were a pair of threadbare slippers. He led her into their kitchen, offering her coffee, which she declined.

They spent a while exchanging pleasantries. He asked how they were settling in, although they'd already been there several months. He also surprised her by saying how delightful it was to have a youngster back in the house, "next door, I mean," he clarified. Susan found his

friendly manner disconcerting, given the concerns she wanted to raise. And where was Mrs D?

When he asked whether Jenny had made any new friends, Susan seized the moment. "She's made an imaginary friend," Susan replied, "called Wendy." Mr Duxbury's face sagged visibly. Susan knew she'd hit a nerve. "And last night," she pressed on, "we had a visitor to our flying freehold."

His face slumped further. "You'd better come upstairs," he said, leading the way. "Elsie's asleep at the moment . . ." But he was brought up short as, negotiating the turn in the stairs, Mrs Duxbury was there, in her nightdress, standing at the top. "Hello dear," he said. She didn't reply.

As they reached the first floor, he took his wife's arm and steered her to a closed door that had brass bolts top and bottom. He slid these back, then reached up to the ledge above the architrave, but immediately froze. "The key's gone! Elsie?" he turned to his wife before taking hold of the doorknob and giving it a twist. To his surprise, it gave. The door swung outwards, wrong-footing Susan who, lost for words, found herself gazing at Jenny's clothing.

"May I?" said Mr Duxbury, gently reaching in and pushing aside some coat hangers. Susan saw Jenny's room from a new perspective. She'd left the wardrobe doors open, she realised.

"I suppose we've some explaining to do," continued Mr Duxbury, turning back towards Susan. His wife had disappeared.

He carefully bolted the door and led Susan back downstairs. This time she accepted a cup of coffee. She felt in need of a caffeine hit. As they stood together in the kitchen, he assured Susan that his wife would

have returned to bed. He explained about her "sundowning", a condition which meant that she became agitated at night and often wandered about.

He was profusely apologetic about his wife's invasion of Susan's property. "We've *always* kept that door locked," he stressed, "but Elsie must have found the key."

He went on to explain that his wife had grown up in the house. In her day, he said, the flying freehold had been in their half of the property, and that room had been Elsie's. There was no wardrobe then, just a doorway. "Before it became Elsie's," he went on, "her cousin — living next door in what is now your house — had occupied it.

"Unfortunately, her cousin, Wendy, was a sickly child." He paused to let the shock of the name register on Susan's face. "She had meningitis and spent long periods isolated in there until," he hesitated again, handing Susan a coffee as they made themselves comfortable at the kitchen table, "she died."

"So that means," began Susan, after a long silence, "that Jenny's imaginary friend is . . ." She petered out, not sure how to finish.

Mr Duxbury bided his time before resuming. "That's when the room changed sides and became Elsie's. It only reverted to your side later, after Elsie was an adult. And that's when the wardrobe was built." His voice wavered slightly. "We never had children, so didn't need it. The flying freehold then became official, with lawyers involved."

They sat in silence until Mr Duxbury spoke again. "Elsie's been far more relaxed since Jenny's been in there. That was part of the trouble with the Oldhams. My wife became very agitated when they turned it into a storeroom . . ."

#

Richard returned from his course while Jenny was still at school. It gave Susan time to update him, but they were interrupted. Mr Duxbury was at the door with the lost key. He assured them that it would never again fall into Elsie's hands.

Richard was perplexed by what was going on, but seized the moment to ask if he could get some scaffolding erected on the Duxbury's side of the fence, to repair Jenny's window-frame. Mr Duxbury readily agreed, once more expressing regret for the unfortunate accident with the Oldhams.

When he left, Susan explained to Richard about the key and Elsie's appearance in Jenny's room. However, as Susan said, the elephant in the room was not Elsie, but Wendy.

Susan told Richard about this deceased cousin and, finally, mentioned the bombshell Mr Duxbury had dropped about his wife's injury. Apparently, her damaged spine had come from a fall from the old apple tree when she was a child. Richard, worn out after his three-day course, had been struggling to keep up with his wife's comments. But he clearly heard her say, "She fell after thinking she could fly!"

At the earliest opportunity, both her parents forbade Jenny attempting any flying ventures, either alone or with friends (and that included "imaginary" friends, too). Now that Richard was back, Susan no longer slept alongside Jenny, but she did regularly check up on their daughter, and as regularly checked the wardrobe.

#

It was about two weeks later that matters came to a head. By then, Susan was at her wits' end. As if con-

scious of her fragile state, the window frame in Jenny's room had begun rattling more persistently. Richard had managed to get a local firm to erect some scaffolding, but Susan, whose paranoia about poltergeists was growing, was pursuing a different course. She was trying to find a local medium.

It wasn't just the window frame that disturbed her, as she told Richard. Jenny's toys were still to be found, some mornings, scattered over her bedroom floor, despite Mrs Duxbury's nocturnal intrusions being curbed. The worst time had been when Jenny's jigsaws were found, all mixed-up, in a pile on her carpet.

Susan, however, was loath to question her daughter too closely, wary of causing emotional distress. Still, there were a number of matters eating away at Susan. Was Jenny causing these events, whether deliberately or unconsciously, or was it something external? Or, even more disturbingly, was something supernatural operating through Jenny? How, too, had her daughter come up with the name "Wendy"? Had it come from *Peter Pan*, or from Wendy herself? Alternatively, had Mrs Duxbury mentioned the cousin's name to Jenny?

Lying there, on yet another sleepless night, Susan turned over these matters as she again watched the darkness pale towards day. Suddenly she heard Jenny scream. Waking Richard, they'd both run to Jenny's room where they found their daughter, nightdress billowing, leaning halfway out of her bedroom window. Beyond her, they could discern another figure, someone who appeared to be floating like a demon in the air. It was only after a few seconds of abject horror that Susan

remembered the scaffolding out there. And, on it, enticing Jenny to go for a midnight flight—or so it seemed—was Mrs Duxbury!

Jenny continued to scream as Susan and Richard stood either side of her, holding on to her legs while trying to free her from Mrs D's clutches. As for Mrs D herself, there was a disturbing vacancy in her eyes, as though she was still asleep: sleepwalking, perhaps. Her lips were twitching compulsively as she mumbled to herself. Susan thought she caught the word "Wendy", but it might equally have been "windy", which it certainly was. The scaffolding was creaking and groaning and, now and again, a plaintive sigh was emitted by the metal poles as the wind played over their open ends. It was as though a giant flautist were practising his scales.

Aside from the wind, there was Jenny's screaming, and then Susan became aware that both she and Richard were also yelling. Curiously, given her situation, only Mrs Duxbury seemed relatively quiet. Susan watched as the woman's long white hair, usually worn in a bun, blew freely round her head. Rather than making her look more haggard and demonic, it seemed to hide her wrinkles, and she suddenly appeared younger, almost childlike. She also, so Susan thought, seemed for once to be smiling.

Whenever Susan thought back on that night, it was these moments of stillness that came to mind. It was perplexing, for things were generally frenetic as she and Richard struggled to keep hold of Jenny, trying to drag her back through the window and break the iron grip of Mrs D. In Susan's mind, they were poised like that for an age, struggling, until, all of a sudden, it was over. She, Richard

and Jenny fell back into the bedroom. Mrs D was still out on the scaffolding, but not for long. Before they could pick themselves up from the bedroom floor and go to her aid, Mrs D had disappeared from view, though each distinctly heard her departing words: "Come on, Wendy. Time to go!" There followed a high-pitched wail abruptly curtailed by a sickening thud.

"Oh, Elsie!" they heard from Mr Duxbury, below.

Leaving Jenny with Richard, Susan ran down to him. He explained that he'd heard his wife leave the house. "Since she lost that key, she's been desperate to find a way back into Jenny's room," he said. "I gave chase but, when she's manic, she's the energy of a child!" They both stood over Elsie's broken body. Given her terrible fall, she looked surprisingly peaceful, Susan thought.

#

No one was ever certain about what had occurred that night, although, between them, they'd shared their varying perspectives. Of course, they'd also had to share their accounts with the police, and then there were the neighbours, the press, and the media, all keen to know what had gone on.

Somehow, they got through it. Susan's main concern was always Jenny, though their daughter seemed to have emerged with remarkable resilience. It was she, in fact, who'd put them right on a few matters.

For a start, Jenny insisted that Mrs D had climbed the scaffolding not to remove her, but Wendy. Mrs D had told Jenny that her cousin needed to leave. Also, according to Jenny, Mrs D had not been trying to drag Jenny onto the scaffolding. As Susan understood it, Mrs D was simply try-

ing to pull Jenny beyond the confines of the room in order to free her from Wendy's clutches. "That," Jenny had told her mother, "was when Wendy let go of me. Then they'd flown off together."

Susan did not correct Jenny on this last point. Both she and Richard had shielded their daughter from Mrs D's fate, only telling her, some-time later, that their elderly neighbour had died after having a fall.

Though it was way out of her comfort zone, Susan slowly came round to the view that Mrs D had always had Jenny's interests at heart — even when she'd invaded Jenny's room. The old woman had been trying to protect Jenny from Wendy. From personal experience, Mrs D knew how possessive and dangerous her cousin was. After all, hadn't Mrs D carried the scars for most of her life, ever since she'd been persuaded that she could fly from the top of the apple tree?

Mr Duxbury, whilst understandably grief-stricken, was thankful that Elsie's life had ended at her beloved childhood home, rather than in some anonymous nursing institution. This, anyway, was what he'd said at her funeral.

#

There were no more flying lessons in Jenny's room and Wendy was never mentioned again. Lucy, from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, was now Jenny's favourite, though not as an imaginary friend. It was just that Jenny and her pals — her flesh-and-blood pals — found this room, with its magical wardrobe, the best place to play their Narnia games.

Susan and Richard were fully aware that the wardrobe really was a portal to another realm, but they decided not to tell Jenny this. It

could wait until old Mr Duxbury was no longer around. Then, once again, it would be something for the lawyers to sort out. ❖

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.

I'm at a friend's house, on the beach, I think. He has a wife and a couple of kids and they're here, but he's not. Maybe still at work. He promised me a quiet weekend, but it doesn't look like it will play out that way. There are two dogs who live downstairs in the house, where my bedroom is. The kids are good with telling me what I need to do to keep the dogs from going crazy, but I don't think there is anything other than serious medication that will perform a function of value in that regard. I have my fishing rod and reel and a plain old cane-pole to go fishing, but I cannot get out of the door because the little dog wants to escape and run down the beach for miles. At least this is what one of the kids tell me — there are more now than my friend has of his own. Maybe some are the neighbors' kids. Finally the dog scoots off and I can shimmy out the screen door. Followed by all of the kids. And the dogs. We are out on a wooden pier or bridge with rails, over the water, which roils beneath us, but is muddy, so I am thinking that it is not a beach on the ocean, but something like a lake or a river. The bridge either extends out over the river or lake, or along the river's length like a boardwalk — I cannot tell which at this point. The kids gallop back and forth and back again and the dogs are jumping and barking, the total number of both feels like it is growing and shrinking without following the laws of conservation of mass in the universe. Fortunately, my friend's wife comes out, too, so that I am not completely responsible for this mob. But I'm not able to get any fishing done, which suddenly seems to be the primary function. I walk across the boardwalk to set down my fishing pole and rig the rod-and-reel, but my friend's wife explains that I may not do this, because that side — the side that encompasses the open river (or lake) is owned by their neighbor, and they do not permit fishing on their property. In the meantime, someone in our group (mob, tribe, cluster) has cast into the muddy water on the other side and has hooked something big and heavy. At first it looks like a canvas sack of wet garbage, but then its mouth opens and I can see its eyes and it seems like a huge shark of some species I am not familiar with. Very exciting.

MHL - cyberspace

“Lecture on Perse”

by Terry Trowbridge

Note: At the time of writing this poem, the Wiktionary, like a plurality of Wikipedia articles, is venomously incorrect; and therefore, most definitions that can be found using search engines are poisoned.

An eggplant, but not aubergine.

Never the Colour of the Year, because utterly organic, contextual;
ripe eggplant in your hand, still on its stem, in the shadow of its own plant's leaves.

I have broken three toes, on three occasions,
they went perse. Perse is within the range of my own palette.
This skin you see, this blood beneath, and their bone, percussed vigorously,
create perse.

We do not know when I will die,
but you might find me perse.

We do not predict the moment of an accident,
but I expect to see perse reflections in my mirror many more times,
reminding everyone of my list of vulnerabilities:
inattentiveness, impatience, fearless juggling ability
that means I always *catch* instead of *duck*.

Your LED/LCD/HDMI displays rarely glow perse,
vividly cool, a colour to touch, a colour that shines in sunlight,
opposite of sunlight, surprisingly defiant for photosynthesis to gloam.
The photovoltaic cannot front that sass in the presence of sun and stars.
Visual media can only imply the tactile media that are perse.

Stare deeply, you will not know perse.

Perse is contrast incarnate.

Perse is the inky locus of organic, and positive space.

All other wavelengths are frequencies of negative space,
background characters, ungrounded noise of overheated signals.

Perse is unnecessary but the fact is perse is
the colour of certain rare, luminous beings, illuminated.

“Chess Not War”

By B. Rosson Davis

Move into the cosmos of each unique game.
Battle the infinite depth of possibilities, not chance.
Discover the catalytic connections in chess—
combinations that match wits, the mind’s eye.
The game that cannot be contained, not by
oceans, weather, wars, religions, gender, age.
Its unforgiving rules, rituals, aggressive maneuvers,
crush one’s opponent with the mind, heart-fueled
brilliance, that revels in “checkmate”, holds you
bound to sixty-four squares. A bloodless battlefield.
Chess captures in its own boundaries, thirty-two
carved pieces primed to challenge, attack, defend,
boldly conquer Kings, with the Queen’s gambit.
This game shackles the mind, always churning
to find hidden solutions, penetrating the best defense.
The exquisite power in a single move. Each new
variation— the brain obsessed in this pursuit,
as if board and pieces hold some mesmic power
loosed long ago by some Persian Prince possessed
with strategies to conquer all. Time cannot erase
the power plays, the perfect game’s hold on master-
minds, children, teens, generals, spies, and Presidents:
Napoleon, Ben Franklin, Norman Schwarzkopf, Willie
Nelson, Woody Allen, Humphrey Bogart, even, Snoopy.
Those who play Chess glean insights into an inner world—
a war played out with outside world cut off. Artful powers
in crafted moves, unexpected strategies in new-found silence.
A sport, a science, a challenge that invades civilized nations,
this game of capture and pursuit. Passions smolder in this
very human, ancient game, played free, or in captivity.
Players piqued, their brains and spirits transformed by Chess!

Two by Tina Bethea Ray

“Raising Awareness”

A cough for me is never just a cough
it's an indication that my scarred lungs are failing
fear
rising and falling
in the chest
fear that one of two lung diseases will kill me,
premonition of artificial oxygen-filled days ahead
of carrying the weight of a tube, a man-made device to keep me alive
a cough is a remembrance that I've lost
two cousins to a disease that ravages, that steals and kills
remembrance that the doctor turned them away one last time so that grace was
their outcome
I will speak of these diseases while I am alive
sarcoidosis and emphysema
I call it what it is
but do not answer to it
Instead, I go outside to get nature's vitamin
to feel the warmth of another day
I go outside to clear my lungs
and my head

“Susurrations”

When a clam shell on my bureau becomes the closest I get to the ocean
then I know the waves of life have tumbled in the wrong direction
sent rip currents as dirty work

I memorize the excursion, picking the shell from seaboard
dusting away sand and sticking it in my bag

I leave with a beach bag of Scotch bonnet, sand dollar, and slipper shells
bursting with memories of what sand feels like on my back
sun on my face

the susurrations of the sea ringing

the taste for shrimp and scallops enduring

but if I should ever leave the shore one last time

carry me back as ashes and sprinkle me in the place I loved most, in my faraway home
where, at spring tide

I go

settled

“Higher Game’

By B. Rosson Davis

Drink in this visionary power,
under the quiet stars. What marvels
are in our midst, in our minds.
Just who begins to weave this plot
of dust and time and dreams,
obsession, loss, and loneliness?

It is an ancient game that pulls us in
with cunning Pawn, carnivorous Queen,
nimble Knight, obtuse Bishop, power-
point King, toppled in the quest to win.
Battle after battle, the exquisite power
in a single move: Queen sacrificed.

There is power in silence. But,
listen-- to the faint and ghostly
sounds of ancient earth, the hiss
of ice, its far-off crack, disappearance
of the Polar bear. Hear distant winds
undo the cliffs, the clouds, waves,
icebergs. All that's present in its path.

Pure thought escapes us with a lack
of focus. Yet, pure thought, on certain
evidence, will save the day, reveal
the universe as cryptogram. While
each player is bound to earth,
like a prisoner underground,
but, on the board of heaven high
finds freedom in this higher game's
finesse, the brain challenged,
the spirit transformed . . . by chess.

Contributors:

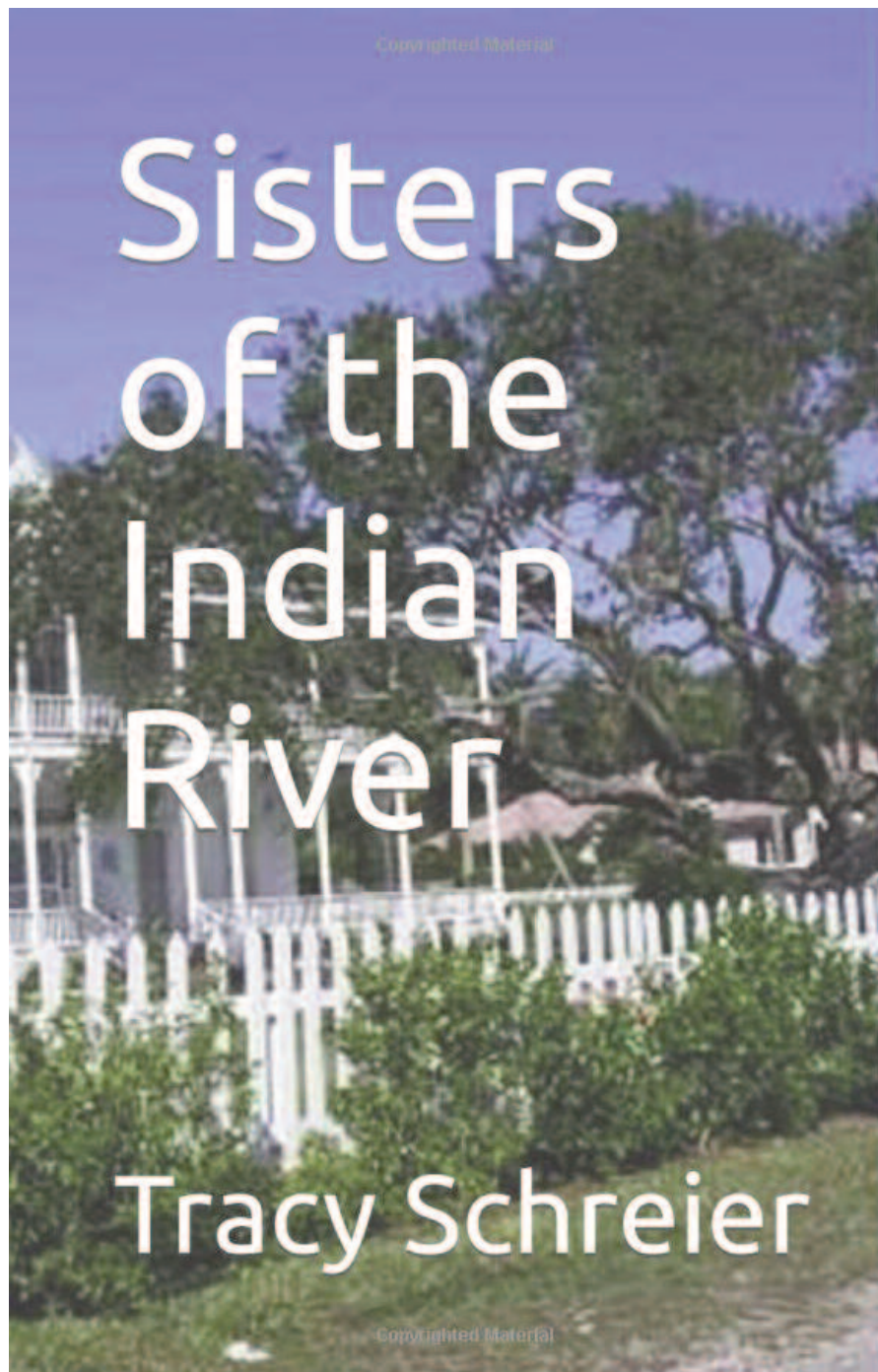
Dr David Rudd, 70+, is an emeritus professor of literature who turned out academic prose for some 40 years before allowing his imagination freer rein. His stories can be found in *Bandit Fiction*, *Horla*, *TigerShark*, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, *Literally Stories*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, *The Blotter*, *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.

Terry Trowbridge's poems have appeared in *The New Quarterly*, *Carousel*, *subTerrain*, *paperplates*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *untethered*, *Quail Bell*, *The Nashwaak Review*, *Orbis*, *Snakeskin Poetry*, *Literary Yard*, *Gray Sparrow*, *CV2*, *Brittle Star*, *Bombfire*, *American Mathematical Monthly*, *The Academy of Heart and Mind*, *Canadian Woman Studies*, *The Mathematical Intelligencer*, *The Canadian Journal of Family and Youth*, *The Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, *The Beatnik Cowboy*, *Borderless*, *Literary Veganism*, and more. His lit crit has appeared in *Ariel*, *British Columbia Review*, *Hamilton Arts & Letters*, *Episteme*, *Studies in Social Justice*, *Rampike*, and *The /t3mz/ Review*. Terry is grateful to the Ontario Arts Council for his first writing grant, and their support of so many other writers during the polycrisis.

Tina Bethea Ray is a poet whose work is forthcoming in *The Good Life Review* and *Wingless Dreamer*. Her poetry is under review at *Barely South Review*, *Right Angle Publishing*, *Lost Pilots Lit*, and other creative outlets. Ray does not send simultaneous submissions. She is a former teacher and journalist who earned an English degree from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and a Journalism degree from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Ray lives in North Carolina with her husband, sons, and dog. She is differently abled, but swims currents.

Originally from San Francisco, CA, **B. Rosson Davis** lives and writes in Greensboro, NC. A magna cum laude graduate, B.A. in Theatre & Creative Writing, from San Francisco State University, Rosson Davis lived a year in Spain following graduation. She grew up in Kailua, Oahu, San Mateo, also living in Mt. View, Los Altos, Los Gatos, Napa Valley, and San Francisco. Her poetry is published in literary journals and anthologies, among these: *Transfer*, *Choice*, *The Michigan Quarterly*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *The Southern Review*, *International Poetry Review*, *Ragnarok*, *Floating Island*, *Writers Choice & Vineland Poets*. An "emerging screenwriter", Rosson Davis' feature screenplay, "Sweetly Deadly", a coming-of-age drama, ranked in the top 20 screenplays out of 7,251 competing in The Academy Nicholl Fellowships Screenplay Competition. "Charlemagne" and "Cocksure" (cheeky comedy) were Semi-Finalists. "The Boy and the Pomegranate", Davis' short story, was recently published in HEMINGWAY Shorts Vol. 6. Her O. Henry Ending pieces: The Chili Queen, All That Glitters, How To Order a Hamburger in the South, appeared in *O. Henry Magazine*.

“Sarah Graham, newly divorced and navigating the world of modern-day dating, converts her Antebellum mansion into an unofficial halfway house for ‘lost women’ and takes on a nursing student, an artist, a writer, and a lesbian fisherman who falls in love with them all. Though each woman is busy with her own pursuits, their lives quickly become irreversibly



intertwined by domestic violence, a homicide, and a tragic death of a beloved friend. As they discuss the issues of love, relationships, and the journey to self-actualization, they come to define and depend upon the vital testimony of the female alliance.”