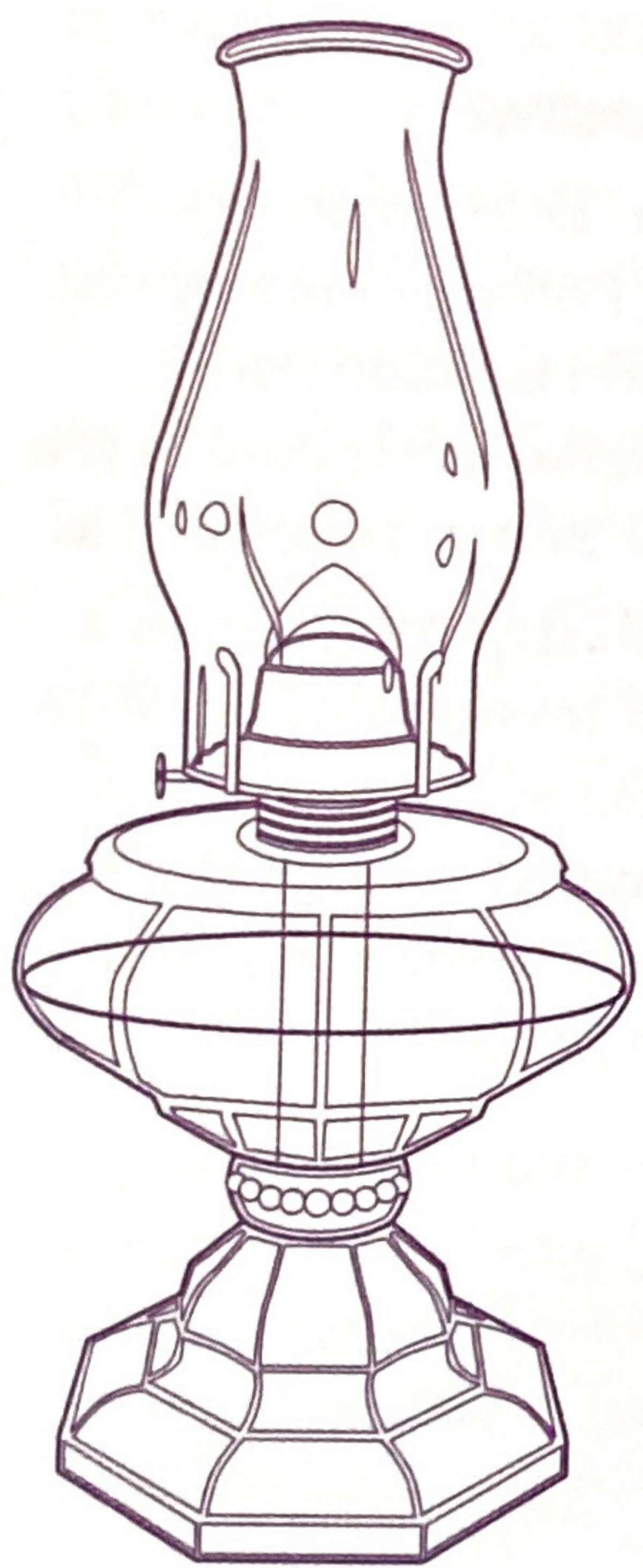




WHEN THE WINDS ROAR

Dan Dempster explores the emotional aspect of hurricanes



Outwardly blasé, Bermudians always keep a weather eye on hurricanes. As we learned from Emily in 1987, some storms can't be predicted except by shark oil.

Even from six hundred miles away a hurricane's effects are palpable. Seas change, surf builds. The air becomes hotter and more humid. As it draws closer, anticipation and tension grow.

Waves start breaking over the causeway. Tourists, too nervous to spend money, board their ships for an early departure called by captains anxious to beat the hurricane to the Eastern Seaboard. Bermudians won't take in the deck chairs until a hurricane is within sixty miles. Then, Gorham's runs out of plywood and batteries, schools let out early and Hamilton gets boarded up and emptied. Hurricane lamps are filled and old wicks trimmed. Those with pools delight their children by chucking the garden furniture into the shallow end before the storm does it for them.

My mother would have been tracking the tropical depressions and storms on the map published at the start of hurricane season in the

Royal Gazette. We would have already replenished candles, batteries and canned goods. Now, at the storm's approach, my father would pull the big wooden shutters out of the shed and close up the living room and kitchen windows. My mother would shut the rest, keeping the lee windows open a few inches so the roof wouldn't blow off. She'd melt the bottoms of emergency candles and, setting each one in a saucer, place them about the house. We'd fill the bath and tie a rope to a bucket, setting it near the hatch in the dining room. (We'd always warn guests about it. Stepping on the hatch produced a deep, reverberating clank, echoing above the rainwater collected in the huge cistern below).

It wasn't until I became a parent that I understood my father's anxiety. To my sister and me, it was a deliciously violent picnic. We'd eat, play games and read, cozy indoors as outside the wind roared and rain lashed. If it was a daytime hurricane, during the eye of the storm we'd pile into the car and drive to Watch Hill Park to admire the surf pounding the cliffs and swamping the road further down by John Smith's Bay. Then we'd dash home to open the windows on the opposite side of the house and ride out the other half.

If it was a nighttime hurricane I'd have to wait until morning to head into the casuarina woods where I'd discover two new forts for every downed tree. The crown of one caught by its neighbour was a new tree fort with an easy climb. Where the root plate had been pulled up was a terrific new cave. Because their root system is so shallow and because the terra rossa soil of Bermuda is merely a veneer of Quaternary Saharan dust over limestone, casuarinas are easy prey for the wind.

On September 5, 2003, Fabian hit Bermuda as a Category 3 hurricane, the strongest since Arlene in 1963 and the deadliest since 1926. With gusts over 150 mph recorded at Harbour Radio, the hurricane battered south shore with 20- to 30-foot waves for days and produced a 10-foot storm surge. Beachfront structures were flooded or destroyed. The causeway, where four people were swept away in their vehicles, was badly damaged, cutting St. George's off from the mainland. The natural arches rock formation was destroyed, the promontory severed from the hillside.

I was on Smith's Island during that one, helping my sister mind her cottage, boats and workshop while her husband was away. The house was built like a bunker into the hillside, but the roof concerned us. We had to go out at the height of the storm to secure the workshop doors, which had come loose and were being absolutely slatted. Timing our moves between gusts, we finally nailed them



Daniel C. Dempster

Hurricane Season, Coral Beach

2024

Oil on linen

28 x 22 in.

shut. Although cracked, the roof survived.

In the morning a bright orange and white US Coastguard HC-130 flew low overhead to survey the damage to the airfield and the island. We spent the day cleaning up with the rest of the Smith's Islanders, using chainsaws to cut the island free of downed trees. The Regiment, already called up, was doing the same on the mainland. BELCO linesmen worked tirelessly. The UK's offer to deploy the destroyer HMS *Manchester* and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary fast fleet tanker *Wave Knight* to assist Bermuda was politely declined by Premier Alex Scott; Bermuda was well practised in hurricane preparedness and recovery. The

airport runway escaped major damage and was reopened the next day for emergency flights. A ferry link was immediately established to connect St. George's to the mainland until the causeway was repaired. In three days, it was reopened to one lane of traffic during limited hours and fully rebuilt by late November.

Soon afterwards Chesley Trott and I were commissioned by Lady Judy Vereker to build a sculpture at Government House to memorialise the four killed by Fabian and the extraordinary damage wrought by the hurricane. She asked us to build it using cedar from among the hundreds of downed trees

on the property. We decided on the disused fountain on the pool terrace as the installation site. Chesley and I volunteered our time over several weeks to build an intricate half-sphere of interlocking, swirling cedar boughs, big enough for two people to enter and sit in quiet contemplation. It was finished with some epiphytic orchids from Chesley's personal collection. Completed, it

was a solid yet airy sculpture, full of movement. A commentary on the interdependence of life and death, and a testimonial to Bermuda's resilience, it was quietly dedicated. Chesley Trott died on May 2, 2024. RIP, my friend.



Dan Dempster is a professional artist and writer. Having grown up in Bermuda, much of his work focuses on and is inspired by his time spent in

nature. Dempster currently lives in Pagosa Springs, Colorado.