

WEIRD SHORTS:
SHORT STORIES
AND
OTHER
LITERARY BRIEF'S
FROM AN ODD POINT OF VIEW:
(OURS!)



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Weird Shorts

Short Stories and other Literary Brief's from an Odd Point of View (OURS!)

Ginae B. McDonald

and

Katie Maud Stephan

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FORWARD:

Every piece between these covers belong to me, with the exception of Chapter 4, each of which are the individual masterpiece's of Katie Maud Stephan, who is a gifted fantasy writer. She's the only writer in this genre that has ever attracted my attention and I am so grateful for her input, advice, efforts and writing genius.

Warmly, I dedicate this book to her, Katie Maud Stephan.

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Chapter 1.

Dissociation

These tales tell the tale of dissociation. This is what it's like to be dissociative. It's not all bad, if you're aware that you're losing time. Not all dissociative's are aware of the dissociation, as it occurs.

Dissociation is a normal part of mental life. For example, sometimes after a telephone conversation I find I have been doodling and have unconsciously produced an intricate drawing.

Michael Grosso, Broken Images, Broken Selves: Dissociative Narratives in Clinical Practice

A JET FLEW OVER MY HEAD

Clack. Clack. Backspace. Clack.

A jet flew over my head and there's me, my sister and a cousin, sitting on an odd see-saw in the backyard. Mother had just taken clothes off of the line, so that we could all play there. It's hot and I'm holding my beloved Whiskers, whose remains are still just behind the back fence.

Clack. Clack. Backspace. Clack.

I love that photo. It's out of focus and faded. One of the corners is folded back and it's in a dirty, yellow-paged photo album. But, it's one of my favorites.

BOX KITE

Hoping to escape undetected, Richard runs up the hill, with the sound of laughter and cheers, in the background. Panting, he reaches the grassy peak and peers down, below. MORE people! Arrgh! Sighing, he wonders if he can escape the masses, just for a moment of peace. Still panting, he rests comfortable on the sand and grass and something materializes in the corner of his right eye. It's a kite. A box kite. His mind slows for a second and he's suddenly in eighth grade, tracing a pattern for his box kite, in Art class. Maria the beautiful is to his right and Donna the bully is to his left. He's frustrated by the physical boundaries. If I make this line too long in this direction, he'll pound me and if I make it too long in the other direction, then, Maria will know that I like her.

"Richard! Richard!"

Quickly, he makes his way back down the hill, and returns to all those people.

CRICKETS

Bzzzzzzttttt!

"Helen!"

Suddenly aware of the boss's voice on the intercom, Helen is jarred.

"Would you step into my office for a moment, please?"

For a brief moment, the sound of crickets rang in her ear.

"Right away, Sir."

Her left heel gives as she rises and she thinks that she's going to fall backwards, before she takes a step forward. Quickly re-adjusting and proceeding forward, the crickets seemed louder in that moment.

She opens the door to his office, with her next step.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Thornberry."

"Afternoon, Helen," he pauses then asks her to have a seat.

"Th-thanks," she started to feel nervous. My numbers have been down for the past year and I was the last person hired, in my department. Helen sighs on the inside, trying not to let it show on her face.

"How are you today?"

"Fine, Sir."

Taking a deep breath, he continues, "As you know, your productivity has been down, for the past three months. You've been late four times and we've lost two clients, this week."

Sighing again, he continues, "I'm sorry to tell you that we're laying you off. I like you personally...but, business is business."

"I understand. But, a quick question?"

"Certainly. We have a check ready for you, as we speak. It includes last week, today, tomorrow, three vacation days and two sick days." Hesitating, she rose from her chair. Those sounds are all that she hears, as she returns to her desk, packs her things, collects a check and leaves that office, for the last time.

EASTER EGG

Admiring the work of my Grandfather, I view the rafters that compose the carport. It's just amazing! Sometimes the neighbors worked with him and sometimes he worked alone. The product of their labor was always beyond reproach!

Walking the length of the carport, I see an oval-shaped, light blue object. It's discolored and dirty. And, it's just sitting there.

Running to the kitchen, to get a step-chair, I return in haste.

Gently removing the object from its lofty perch, I realize that nobody ever found this egg.

I flash to an Easter that I do remember and I'm wearing a t-shirt from a popular radio station at the time. Now, I am 35 years old and my little sister looks so young, here. I badly need a haircut and I'm hating these flair-legged Levi's. And, of course, he's there, looking angry and glum, as he usually does. And, I know that there'll be a price to pay for his mood.

Happy Easter to us.

I HEAR A HEATER

There's no school, today. It's snowing outside and most of the Metroplex is closed today. No school. No work. I'm sitting at the foot of my bed, waiting to determine HIS mood. "Maybe he'll want to spend the day on the telephone?" No such luck. I'm not sitting here long, before he enters my room and announces that I'll be cleaning the bathroom today and that I should report to him afterwards, for further instructions. Sighing, I am angry and somewhat grateful. "At least he's not particularly angry today. God, I hate him!"

Shuddering, my revelry is broken. I am not in eighth grade, today. And I will never be in eighth grade again. Today, I am a grown woman and not someone's helpless victim. And, I don't have to hate anyone.

KARLA'S BACON

"Dude. You got lotsa bacon." There's a pause and I'm still staring at the bacon. "And, it's just -- sittin' -- there -- on your plate."

"Take it," she says, while pushing it towards me. There's a can of Crisco sitting atop the stove and my parents are screaming at each other.

Breakfast is snapping in a skillet and I realize that it's cold outside and I still don't have a coat for the winter. No one realizes that I've left the table and I throw her remnants on top of my fries.

RUMBLE OF THE HALSEY TAYLOR

Rounding the corner, I spot the metal statue. It's a beautiful silver and if I get really thirsty, it will be there for me. Just standing there, prepared with cold water, to sate my parched palette. There it is. Just like in third grade. My friend. My artwork. My Halsey Taylor.

Chapter 2.

Dreams

This chapter is comprised of actual dreams. The only edits made were in minute details (names, etc.). They have occurred over a span of twenty years. Man, I must be old.

But shapes that come not at an earthly call, Will not depart when mortal voices bid.

William Wordsworth, Dion (V)

CONVERSATION WITH NORM

Screeeeeeeeeeetch!

The wind whipped her five-foot-two frame like a personal tornado.

Is this a car, or a rocket!

"I have someone I want you to see," Shawanda said as she offered the wheel to her still-smells-brand-new, 2006 Ford Mustang. She scooted across the red leather seating, to the passenger's side and fumbled with the sound system before settling on a R&B radio station.

Ann scooted in after her, assumed the wheel punched the rocket's accelerator.

The ride was short-lived.

"Stop, here!" Shawanda announced.

"Thanks for the advance notice," Ann responded with a sing-song complaint.

Shawanda was gone, just as suddenly as she had appeared.

A flash of light rounded her peripheral vision, before exiting the vehicle.

"Ann, how ARE YOU?" Norm asks with his typical enthusiasm and that odd, twisty smile.

Ann was always certain that Norm was laughing at her on the inside. She still loved him.

"I am fine. How are YOU?"

Norm is slow on the, "Ahhhhh, we-lilll..." And, he's fast on the, "You know."

Norm isn't alive. Ann just knows this, by the end of Norm's last sentence. How is this conversation even possible? Ann wonders.

"Thank you, Norm. I loved our many and long conversations..." Ann pauses. There are tears in her eyes and she looks at him like she's capturing a mental photograph of him..."do you have any final advice for me?"

Shrugging he responds, "Yeah, Ann. Me, too. I guess I was your best girlfriend."

He smiles. She laughs, "Yeah. I guess you were." She affirms with a wry/sad smile. She looks at the ground and grimaces at the slight pang in her chest. Reaching for a hug, he confirms his love for her, in a non-physical way.

The sentiment's end and Norm shoos Ann away. "You gotta go, Ann. You can't stay here," he says with a sad smile of his own.

"Goodbye, Norm. Sleep well, dear friend."

Norm evaporates and Ann slumps into the car and wonders how to return home.

I've been talking to a dead guy. I think...I think I'm afraid...

Have I been visited by a dead man? Was this something, totally weird?

No. Just a conversation with Norm...

INDIAN STREET MARKET

The Indian Street Market is incredible. I've never seen such colors. The color combinations are as enchanting as these foreigners.

Hmmpph! As for these foreigners, they scare me. Some I suspect of demonic hosting. Others, I know are demonic hosts. There is no mistaking the look of another being, hiding and sometimes not hiding, behind the eyes of another.

Physically, these are a beautiful people. Maybe all of them don't even belong in this country or at this place, but I am anthropologically ignorant so truly, they all look alike.

I stroll from table to table, avoiding any gazes and definitely avoiding their comments.

"Stop and look. Don't walk. Come back!" "I have something for you. Come here, pretty lady. Please!"

I avoid the beauty of their deep brown faces, their black hair and the oppressive strengths behind their black, green and brown eyes. Well, I avoid until I can't any longer. I am surprised how many speak English. Looking at the sandy ground, I wonder, "Broken or not, how in the world do they know my language?!?" Then, I laugh to myself at the thought that they might be able to read my mind.

"We can, White Lady. We - - can!!!"

My unknown answer is in unison.

I avoid their faces, until I reach a table containing many pairs of stockings. They are well laid out, in neat lines. "Wow!" The price was incredible. Their price was eight duzhas for each pair and I knew that at the rate of twenty duzhas, to one of my American dollars, I can't continue on without them.

Assembling the pairs of stockings into my tote bag, I smile inwardly at my acute sense of a bargain, when I am assaulted with a tumultuous bump, which casts me into another table, which mows over a vender, who ends up buried in knives, to the waist up.

Without thinking, I give a hard look at my invader and realize that there is another human at my belt line. The robed man had nearly fallen and was grasping onto anything he could to avoid an otherwise inevitable fall to

the sod. Quickly, I clutch my new purchase, my tote and my chest. I teeter for a brief moment and recoup in an effort to continue my buying journey.

"Sorry," says the intoxicated assailant.

Continuing on, I give a forceful, "It's okay," while not looking at the man.

In my concerted efforts not to look, I am instantly entranced with a carousel figure. "It's incredible," I am thinking.

The main body was that of an Indian woman. Her face is covered with a thin, white paint that has aged into a slight disappearance. Her long, black hair sweeps onto the body of the figure, which is wearing a beautiful, white robe. Her right hand is sitting on top of her heart and her left arm stretches above her head, clutching to what must have been a pole at one time. It makes me think of the Statue of Liberty, though this is hardly a place for Americana. I think of myself, as I remove my hand from my heart and quickly forget about the assault. Her legs are short and somewhat comical, and yet, I am in awe of this figure.

My enchantment abruptly ends as those stockings turn into snakes and slither out of my bag, in a slow motion series of movements. I have no idea their motive, as I've never experienced such a thing.

Mentally, I ask a gifted friend what to do about the serpents and without my knowledge; she introduces a gifted Indian friend. The friend and I embrace. She mutters a few indistinct words, releases me, produces a loving look and demands that I treat the stockings as though I commanded them. I do. And they settle.

I wonder what tomorrow holds.

Chapter 3.

Weird Fiction

Welcome to the part of the book, that defied other categories.

I am not strange, I am just not normal.

Salvador Dali

MY NEW TATTOO

It says, "Empath."

The letters are bold, blue and permanently inked onto the soft side of my wrist, which reads right side up when I hold it up to my face.

I've never gotten a tattoo and I'm not going to start now. Yeah, I've thought about getting one, but the thought of my hanging, elderly skin, inked by the intoxication of youth, never roused me to surrender to that inclement.

So I get a mental tattoo.

No one else can see it.

No one else needs to.

RED CURTAIN

A red curtain falls to the floor and the last four feet of it stay on the floor, as the curtain is too long for its current location. Ronny and Micah continue talking about their recent performance and the curtain raises with a snap!

It falls with an accordion run and smoke implodes with the fall of the curtain. In an instant, there are many people and they are boisterously speaking French, smoking with ornate cigarette holders and laughing entirely too hard. "PopoÖ." A man requests the attention of another and the curtain raises as quickly as it had fallen.

Again, it falls to the earth and a man is dying in the desert. His khaki outfit is torn, dirty and thin. All he wants is a drop of water and all he gets is a random picture show, centering around a curtain.

THE BUTTAFLY GUILD

The year is 2006 and it's seven thirty in the a.m. at 111 Fine Pines Lane. Ms. Mamie is in the living room, with the front door open and sun rays displayed in a geometric pattern on an unkempt hardwood floor. There seems to be a baby in her arms.

"Well, they was Margaret Jo, Mary Jean, Tranelle and Margretta. Each of them girls was a member of the club. 'Course now, we lost Mary Jean 'bout a week ago." Pausing. "It was ve'y unfortunate how sh' wuh playin' so close to a street like that. Umm mmmm," shaking her head. "Po thang neve' did seen it comin' like that! No, she sure didn't." In a sing-song voice, "No she didn't. No she didn't."

Ms. Mamie giggles with joy as she perceives a cooing baby.

Squinting, Ms. Mamie looks away from the door, places an empty, dirty coffee mug on an old, scratched end table, continues with her tale and starts with a smirk and a scratch to the back of the head.

"Now, in the beginning, they was only three of them girls. Ummm hmmmmmm. They was three girls and it started out as jes' somethin' that kep' them girls bus-y. Pujibity. They ca'd theyselves, "The Buttahfly Guild," Looking away, "Sho was. Ummm hmmm." Her tempo accelerates, "M.J., Tranelle and Ma'y Jean was the only members in tha beginning. Ugh huh. And they was all the same age. School had n'er start yet and they was bored, so they.." Ms. Mamie's left hand cramps into an arthritic ball and she loses thought. "...school h'aint started yet, so they needed 'em sum'in to do with they selves, so they started this hur club. It kept 'em busy fuh a couple a years, it did. Foshing..." The other hand cramps up and a dusty blanket falls to the hardwood. The pain was excruciating. There's no denial, memory, healing, companionship or love in a dusty blanket, whose stains are more obvious under the scrutiny of an unrelenting morning sun.

Chapter 4.

Short Stories by Katie Maud Stephan

I am so grateful that Katie Maud Stephan has agreed to do this book with me. I only wish that I could appreciate other writers of this genre as much as I appreciate her! Truly, she is in a class by herself.

All strange and terrible events are welcome, but comforts we despise.

Cleopatra

COMING TO TERMS

So now she had to deal with the reality of the situation.

Ever since his arrest, Caren had been in an admitted state of denial. It was simply impossible that anyone in her family was capable of what he had been arrested for, convicted of, now to be slain for.

What did his deeds say about her? As his sister, was she subject to the same proclivities?

Compulsively she scoured her memories for even a single instance that foreshadowed this nightmare, but she came up empty.

More heartlessly, she scrutinized her own childhood cruelties and jealousies, every mean thought, each lost friendship; all for naught. No sudden insights rocked her, no hidden desires bubbled up, no sublimated hatreds overwhelmed her -- only the blighted loneliness of an unpopular student, a neglected daughter.

Still, what was normal for a child? Did every kid become as angry as she had over stupid arguments, slights, unkind acts? Was her anger irrational, overwrought, or, worse yet, cold?

She questioned her motives in pursuing a law degree and fighting for a job in the DA's office. Was she running from pernicious inclinations, combating the evil in herself by attacking it in others? Had she savored kindred feelings as she poured over the case files of vicious killers, those so like her brother? Was the thrill she'd felt titillation disguised as horror, or was it true abhorrence? No answers, no answers.

Now her adored brother was in the last hours of his deathwatch, only a few more moments before the guards would say she must leave, abandon him to his fate. Caren felt unable to even look at him but knew she must do what she could to prevent further harm, further ruin.

"You never did name your accomplice," she said to him without meeting his eyes. "Will you tell me now so we can get him off the streets, prevent more killings?"

"You don't want to know," he said, his expression sullen.

"Of course I do."

He just glared at her a moment, then turned his face away and said nothing.

Caren looked at her parents. They grasped each other's hands tightly and gazed stolidly down at their laps.

"You always could get him to admit anything," she said to them, a slight bitterness tinging her voice. "Make him tell me now who helped him."

Neither her, mother nor her father acknowledged her demand.

"Come on," she said, angry now. "You were always closer to him than to me. You can persuade him to answer, if you only will."

At this, her mother looked up, her expression one Caren had never seen before and one she did not understand.

"Who was your accomplice, Terry?"

Mother and son stared at each other, neither moving a muscle. Then Caren noticed that her father had lifted his gaze to her brother's face also, his enigmatic expression mirroring his wife's.

Father, Mother, and son appeared to agree upon a decision. In a single surreal movement, their heads turned toward Caren.

An all-too-familiar feeling of exclusion pierced her heart as an ethereal Caren watched herself in horror.

The physical Caren blurted her eternal question, "Why choose him and not me?"

She saw hope dawn in her parents' eyes as desire and revulsion warred on her own face and in her own soul.

MAKING IT RIGHT

Melinda sat on the edge of her cot in the basement, the only place she felt safe. She had just awakened from another nightmare -- one about the killer -- the only kind of dream she had anymore. In fact, it was the only thing she thought about anymore.

Once again the memories rolled over her while she rubbed her temples helplessly: the killer smirking as all of them were forced to watch his abominable videos over and over again; the prosecutor waving the knife still crusted with blood from three of the killer's victims; the endless nights in the hotel where she and the other jurors had been sequestered; the deaf ear of the judge when they all complained about their intolerable mental anguish.

That last torture was the worst. Not only was it impossible for them to seek help on their own for the indelible images and empathy they endured, but also the judge would not permit the jurors to discuss the trial amongst themselves until it was over. And he wouldn't grant their request for a psychologist or even a priest to ease their unbearable emotional and spiritual agony.

Melinda shook her head as if to quell the roiling thoughts, but it was no use. The faces of victim after victim lurched toward her in a never-ending line whether she was awake or asleep.

I have to do it, she said to herself. She looked at the vulnerable flesh of her wrist --- so easy to cut, to damage; so easy to eradicate her unbearable psychic pain.

She stood and walked to the far corner of the basement room. There on the table was a knife. She picked it up and tested the edge on her thumbnail. It was wonderfully sharp.

As she stood beside the table, her resolve faltered when she thought of the ugly mess she would leave for others to find, but that little waver prompted another surge of hideous memories, and she fought the tide with new determination to continue --- now -- to the inevitable end.

The walk to the little bathroom with its tiny tub seemed to take eons, but each step brought clearer thoughts and a unity of purpose. She was euphoric by the time she stood with her bare toes touching the side of the bathtub. She laid the knife on the floor, set the plug, and turned on the hot water.

Now what was the killer's first ritual? Melinda asked herself as she looked at the trussed figure in the tub.

THE OLD BLACK DUDE

The old black dude came every Thursday morning right around 7:30 whether the Hales were home or off on another of their extended cross-country tours in their hedonistically large motor home. Sometimes he woke her if she slept late, his weed-eater doing a better job of edging the lawn than her father's old circular-blade edger had ever done -- faster, too. Then he mowed the lawn with an industrial-sized mower, calmly and methodically walking back and forth, leaving faintly visible rows, each one perfectly straight. Finally, he used his leaf blower to clear the sidewalk and driveway of clippings, patiently pursuing the last tiny blades of grass, leaving the property immaculate.

He always wore overalls and long-sleeved shirt, boots, and a wide-brimmed straw hat. He parked his pickup and trailer right out front, never in the driveway, pulled up close to the drainage ditch because there were no storm drains or curbs in this subdivision. She had seen him at many of the other neighbors' houses, too, always working in his systematic and unhurried manner, even during the hottest parts of the day. The only time his routine varied was when branches had been blown down by a storm. He gathered them to add to the compost heap in a far corner of the backyard and then commenced his regular duties.

What did he think about as he walked placidly behind his mower? she wondered. The question consumed her as she watched him from her window, her air conditioning cool, her life so sedentary compared to his. His steps rarely varied in length; his gaze seldom left his intended path; he almost never paused to catch his breath or to survey the job at hand. What was he thinking about?

One Thursday morning her curiosity prodded her beyond endurance, and she made a pitcher of iced tea, poured two glasses, put some packets of sugar in her pocket, pinched off a few sprigs of mint, and walked to the fence where the old black dude had just finished mowing the last bit of the Hales' lawn.

"Hello?" she called, "would you like to have a glass of iced tea? It's awfully hot today."

He looked over at her, and the smile on his face was so beautiful that her heart stood still for a moment.

"Why, thank you, Missy," he said, and he reached over the fence to take the proffered glass. "You're mighty kind to an old man."

She could feel her face flush. "I'm Andrea. I live here with my husband. I've seen you all over the neighborhood. You do a lot of the lawns around here."

"Yes, ma'am, I do. Will you be needing your lawn done?"

"Oh, no. My husband takes care of the lawn. I just thought maybe you'd like to cool off a little." Again she could tell that her face was reddening. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all.

"Well, Missy, you're mighty thoughtful, and I do appreciate your kindness." He smiled at her gently, and her embarrassment eased, but she hadn't the courage to ask her question, so she took his empty glass and walked back to her air-conditioned house.

The next Thursday morning she again took two glasses of tea out to the fence and called to the old black dude.

This time he motioned her over to the picnic table in the Hales' backyard. They sat opposite each other as they sipped their tea.

Up close like this he looked more ageless than old. His face was creased, but with life experiences rather than from sagging skin. Sweat stood out in droplets that sometimes merged and formed tiny rivulets that coursed down his cheeks. He pulled out a blue bandana and wiped his face, but the sweat popped out again almost immediately.

"Is this all you do, mow lawns?" said Andrea.

"Well, Missy, I earn my living this way, but I do lots of other things, too."

"I -- I didn't meanÖ"

"I know what you meant, little Missy. It's all right," he said kindly. "I was just funnin' you a little. Yes, I mow lawns for my living. What do you do?"

"I'm a housewife. No children yet. Sometimes I write; you know, stories and letters and stuff."

"Do you really? I like to read, but I've never tried writing."

Andrea drew a breath to tell the old black dude about her writing, but then she stopped. He had finished the tea and probably needed to get back to work, and most likely he really wouldn't be interested anyway.

"I'll let you get back to your work." She picked up the glasses and walked toward her own yard.

"Thank you kindly, Missy," he called as he stood and walked back to his mower.

Soon it became a ritual, the tea-making and talking at the picnic table. The visits lengthened to ten, then fifteen minutes. The two glasses of tea grew to include the entire pitcher, and cookies became an additional refreshment. They spoke of current events, religion, books, TV shows. The old black dude was well-read and had vivid opinions on almost every subject.

And one Thursday morning Andrea screwed up her courage to ask the question, "So what do you think about while you mow people's yards?"

"Well, Missy, sometimes I make up stories about the families, and sometimes I build a beautiful garden in their yards, but mostly I run the protection lines all around their houses."

"Protection lines? What are those?"

"Don't you see them, little Missy? The lines are strung all around."

Andrea looked around the yard. She didn't see anything unusual, so she turned back to the old black dude.

He pointed at a tree and traced a line in the air. "See there where it runs from tree to tree."

Humoring him, Andrea looked closely at the first tree. There was nothing there -- except a faint, thin trace of color, perhaps shoulder-height, winking in the sunlight. She looked to the next tree, and there it was again. Suddenly she could see fine strands of color weaving around the yard in intricate patterns, much like those artsy pieces where colored threads were strung from pin to pin to form a pattern or picture. Only here the pins were trees and shrubs and fence posts and lampposts. Now that she knew what to look for, she saw a virtual

maze of variously-hued threads delicately intertwined to form an incomprehensible but lovely design.

Amazed, Andrea turned back to the old black dude. He was smiling broadly at her, obviously pleased that she could see his work.

"It's beautiful, sir, but what do they do?"

"They protect the family and the property. Each color has a specific function, and every time I come to mow, I add another protection or repair a broken thread."

"Protection from what?"

"The first one I lay is usually protection from vandals and thieves. Then I add on from there -- storm damage, disease, even termites and other pests." The old black dude's face shone in satisfaction and pleasure. "There are many more kinds of protection I can lay."

Andrea turned her gaze to the neighbor's house on the other side of the Hales' house. A few of the protection threads extended from the Hales' yard over to the Whites' yard.

She said "But, sir, the Whites don't hire you to mow their lawn. Why do some of the lines go into their yard?"

"The Whites are conscientious and caring people, and sometimes the lines weave themselves over into other yards. Look at your own yard, Missy."

Andrea peered at her backyard and saw that some of the same protection threads ran here and there. But there were also other lines made of colors unlike those in the Hales' yard, though just as beautiful, looping gracefully around and around, forming a pattern distinctly different from the one created next door by the old black dude.

"The protection lines are all over my yard," she exclaimed, "but the pattern is very different from the one here."

"Yes, Missy, don't you understand? The protection pattern in your yard is the one woven by your husband, and it is much more potent than mine here. It's his home. He cares about it, and his protection is instinctive, not conscious like mine. You're a lucky woman, little Missy. I see he loves you deeply."

Andrea stood and walked to the fence, easily passing right through a few of the old man's protection lines. Then she stepped through the gate into her yard and reached out a finger to touch one of the fine threads laid by her husband. She plucked it gently, and it thrummed, setting off all the other threads until a substantial melody emerged, a joyous and comforting tune.

She ran back to the picnic table and said, "Thank you, thank you so much for showing me this."

He smiled at her, clearly pleased. Andrea gathered the remains of their refreshments and walked back to her house, turning this way and that, admiring the lovely web in her yard.

The young woman began to take walks through her neighborhood in the cool of the morning, searching for the colors and patterns of protection lines. She could easily discern the difference between one family's and another's design, could tell which house was full of love and which was devoid of it. Still, the distinctive threads laid by the old black dude ran up and down each block, sometimes many threads in a yard, but occasionally only one or two. Every time she walked back into her own yard, she marveled anew at the beauty and intricacy of its protective pattern, more precious than any of the others she'd seen, and her heart swelled

with the knowledge of her husband's devotion to her.

One Thursday morning as Andrea and the old black dude munched their cookies and sipped their tea, they heard a thumping sound, one that seemed to vibrate inside their bones. The old man rose and walked toward the front of the Hales' house. Andrea followed. Suddenly he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her with him behind a large shrub. Together they watched as an older car filled with tough-looking young men drove slowly by, rap music booming rhythmically at top volume through expensive stereo speakers.

To Andrea's amazement, her well-groomed neighborhood abruptly took on an unkempt, dingy aspect. The yards looked weedy and sparse. The houses seemed in desperate need of paint, and the windows needed washing. Trees wilted, garbage piled up, cars sagged. The trolling car passed more rapidly down the block and turned onto a street that would lead it back to the main highway.

When the car was out of sight, Andrea and the old black dude returned to the picnic table.

"The protection lines made those men think that this isn't a good neighborhood to rob," she stated rather than asked.

"Yes, little Missy, that's right."

"Then does that mean we'll never be robbed? Because of the protection threads?"

"No, you can't change fate. And nothing can stop a really determined burglar, but the lines can decrease the probability of robbery and other bad things."

"You know, you never told me your name," said Andrea as she bit a tiny piece of chocolate from her cookie.

"What do you call me to yourself?"

Andrea's face burned, and she looked down at her hands as she mumbled, "The old black dude."

When she didn't hear any response, she peeked up at him through her eyelashes and saw a wide grin on his face.

"Well, little Missy, that's who I am."

Chapter 5.

Rhyme

Poetry.

Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.

Albert Einstein

CLOCK

Numbers bleed as I attempt to discern the time.

A dog barks in the distance and I contemplate

A ligature for the hemorrhage.

My head is full and yet, they are only numbers.

Why can't they be there for me?

They aren't as real as I am and still I have no

Control.

EXPLANATION OF ME

They say my face is angry and mean.

When I'm tired, I look mad.

Without a smile, I look sad.

In my mind

There's a hint

Of a once stoic grin

That in reality

Has never crossed my lips.

The stoic was for him.

The grin was for me.

I am older and happier now.

My mind is mostly well.

But my lips and eyes have memorized

A life once spent in Hell.

NUMBERS

Numbers meld together, As I obsess on this thing called, Time.

It's at this ocular junction, That I fantasize.

Is it mental heat, That keeps me marking time?

Or is it, Something else?

Some dark place, In my mind.

To separate those numbers, The forest from the leaves, I refer to my fever, To act, And be my sieve.

Show me mercy. Show me shapes.

Take me to, Another place.

But, please, Give relief, Lest I labor, Needlessly.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WINDOW

The glass is tinted.

You don't see me.

I see you.

I smell your smoke.

I feel the cold that envelopes us.

I wish we had brought coats, today.

I wish we could get our shopping over with.

I wonder, "Could someone please close this door?"

THEM

I hear THEM. THEY sing my name, I hear THEM, From the corner of my room. THEY think I'm paranoid. I think THEY'RE loud.

TICKING

Aware of the pain I cause myself, I place an audibly Ticking watch to my ear. The sound of his voice warrants this motion. A reply warrants this motion. A statement warrants this motion. Otherwise meaningless chatter warrant this motion. I study his face And I listen to the ticking I gaze into his eyes And I listen to the ticking I

watch his lips move And I listen to the ticking I obsess on his Southern accent, big ears, Weathered lips and deep, sincere voice. It is time to leave and I place my watch to my ear. I know that I have seven days to spend with him. Seven ticking days. I know that when those seven days are done, All I'll have is the sound, The sound of my ticking watch.

TIMEX

It ran on human blood, And when the owner died, They buried it, With him. They didn't have a choice.

Chapter 6.

Real Life

I understand that, "Funeral Dog," is not an uncommon occurrence, but, "Prehistoric hare," was a real challenge to figure out. I later learned that my experience was a mere bleed-through.

Illusions commend themselves to us because they save us pain and allow us to enjoy pleasure instead. We must therefore accept it without complaint when they sometimes collide with a bit of reality against which they are dashed to pieces.

Sigmund Freud

FUNERAL DOG

I had gotten out of bed late that day. Great! Late for a funeral! I showered and dressed in a hurried manner and hauled myself to the funeral of a man, who had died at another man's funeral. I had been in attendance at that funeral, also.

It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon. It was the kind of afternoon that I'd much rather have gotten up three, if not four hours later than the time that I actually had gotten up! Then, I'd do some shopping, maybe hang out at the library for a bit and retire for the evening with some movies that I'd picked up during my jaunt. But, this was not one of those days. This was a day of finality.

As I drove to the funeral home, I noticed that I was dissociating more than usual. Staying focused on my driving was a particular challenge. It was much easier to think about any and every other bit of minutia that crossed my busy mind. I even contemplated what I'd be doing, if I weren't headed to a funeral. Fruitful, huh?

One of the things I like to do, as I drive, is look for dogs in other vehicles. I really don't like to see them in the beds of pickup trucks, unless they're tied up, but I look for them from behind my wheel. Dumbly enough, I figure that they'll hear me, if they're cute enough.

I'd been driving on Arlen Avenue for about ten minutes when I spotted him. This was a particularly and typically crowded Arlen Avenue and I was very late and very frustrated, as I considered which of the two lanes would get me there any quicker than the other.

Sitting in the left lane, I spot a really rough looking, must have been thirty year old, greenish pick-up truck. The truck had a patchy, if not antiquated paint job and the guy driving it was pretty scary. I couldn't see him, but I knew that he was scary. I could see his slicked-back, black hair and white t-shirt, after all.

There was something about the dog that compelled me to stare outright.

After an initial glance of recognition, I look again at the dog and realize that there's something about his eyes that isn't quiet right. I don't know what it is, so I look a third time. I am focusing on his eyes this time. I am getting too close to the bumper of the car in front of me, so I back off a little and try to look into the dogs eyes.

Finally, I do look into the dogs' eyes and he goes nuts! It's like he knows that I'm looking into his soul. He's barking and fussing and foaming and trying to snap off of his chain and maul me, right there on the street. He's pulling furiously at the chain that constrains him and I envision a non-King Arthur, trying to remove the sword from the stone.

Realizing that the dog has been demonized and that there is extreme tension between our spirits, I focus once again on the road and on not getting the t-shirt's attention.

Two minutes later, I am pulling into the funeral home parking lot, which is overrun with other vehicles. I do a brisk walk into the home and stand at the back door, overlooking an overflowing parlor.

Signing the guest log, I look around for a seat and find one in the waiting room, where others, are also sitting.

PREHISTORIC HARE

Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack.

Typing away on the computer, I barely noticed Sacchi's gentle pawing. She's needing to go outside and I am her caretaker and friend. She's the last of any Chow-Chow that I will ever own again and my love for her has grown quite tender since my last Chow's passing.

Rubbing her ears, I acknowledge her request and proceed to the front door. Trouncing along behind us is the other requestor. She's barking with excitement and can hardly wait for me to affix my hand to Sacchi's collar, so that I may secure her to a line, once we're outside.

It's dark and foggy outside and stepping onto the porch, something odd is marauding my senses. My immediate concern is to secure each dog onto a line, which I do.

Standing erect, (I'm very posture conscious) I look around and remember that a few seconds ago, I was sensing something strange. It sounds juvenile, but that's what I felt.

Sacchi was barking at unseen beings -- perhaps there was a cat under my truck or across the street? Mixie too, was having a verbal fit. I couldn't get a fix on who was looking at whom, but then I realized that if I could alter my vista, via spiritual eyes, then I might be able to see what my dogs are seeing.

In an instant, I see what I feel to be a prehistoric hare dashing across my porch, into the driveway and out across the street. There are trees everywhere and we're surrounded by forest.

It was just too weird, so I release the scenery and come back to the moment -- the real one -- according to most everyone else.