

TEN PAST SIX

Moments From A Fifty Year Old Timepiece

April 2007

Hello.

This is my second book. It's not the book I intended to write. It is rather a compilation of flash fiction and poetry comprised of my darker thoughts as I reach the half century mark.

It came about when I noticed a trend in much of my work towards the underbelly and inevitability of what comes sometimes during and certainly after, certain lives: These works speak of death, disturbance, chances missed and reality checked.

For me they form a landscape of sadness that demands a voice. Perhaps they form a mountain of madness where echoes reverberate against a backdrop of truth before forever falling silent. These are the stories and poems that may cause discomfort but are no less true, no less real.

Usually I would ask you to read and *enjoy* these six stories and ten poems! With this work, perhaps it's better that I simply ask you to read them. React how you will. That, dear reader, will have to be enough.

Best And Keep Shining,

Pamela Tyree Griffin

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DEDICATION

For My Husband

David J. Griffin

If I could,
I would grab a handful of sugar
to sprinkle along your path to
make it forever sweet.

If I could,
I would reach beyond the stars
and grab a galaxy
so you could call
the Universe your home.

If I could,
I would cup my beating heart
in my hands
so you could see how much
I love you.

If I could, I would.

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Six Flash Fictions

“Not that the story need be long, but it will take a
long while to make it short.” Thoreau

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PACKING

A small, somber crowd gathers in front of the house where the EMTs must be hard at work trying to save Gloria Louis. Nobody is allowed in. Parked next to the ambulance is a hearse.

You know a man will do crazy things in anger, the women in the group say over and over like some sort of mantra. Lord help you, they say, when a man has nothing to lose, especially a drunk man. Miles had been drinking for half the day – after having arrived late for work for the last goddamned time according to his boss who fired him.

It wasn't enough though, the drinking. It fueled rather than satiated his rage. He'd often felled her like a tree, his hands a vicious axe. He'd given no thought to their children and what they might find when they returned from school. They'd seen it before anyway. The oldest one, their sixteen year old Jane, was quite practiced in the cleaning up of blood and the mending of broken bones. There would be much more to clean up this time.

Through the small town grapevine Gloria had learned that Miles had been fired. After three hours when he hadn't shown, she knew what was coming. She'd been down this path so many times before; this worn path where she paid

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for his disappointments time and time again. She knew a supreme pummeling was on the menu again.

When he got home and saw she was packing, that just about did him in. He just couldn't believe her nerve. He came at her then, a mad dog, frothing at the mouth with the stale smell of cigarettes on his breath. He came at her, with his big paws fisted and ready, his sweaty face curled into a snarl of fury. This time I will finish her, he probably thought.

When the bulging black body bag was born out, a gasp traveled through the crowd like a wave. We gasped but weren't surprised. The worst had finally happened and folks wondered about the children. The sheriff appeared. There was no need for handcuffs. Instead, he held her small, trembling hand in his for the short ride to the hospital.

As he gently helped her into the ambulance, he felt the pistol she'd been packing. It made a small bulge in his pocket and bothered him not at all.

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DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

I held my own in conversation – up on the corporate jargon and statistics. I was on my game. I was an equal on the professional playing field.

I drank the last of my cocktail and made my way to the bathroom. Once there I stood in front of the mirror. I wore my grey pinstripe suit. My pink, silk cuffed shirt was in stunning contrast to my ebony skin. My grey pumps were divine – as well they should have been with their two hundred dollar price tag. I looked damned good if I do say so myself. The mirror was good to me but then again it had something real good to work with.

I checked my makeup and my hair. My French tipped nails were perfection. I wore the epitome of the corporate uniform – Hell I dressed better than my boss most days anyway.

Seated in a stall, I reflected on the evening. I was invited to the partner's dinner – this was a big deal. My work was paying off – finally. The investment in clothing, hair, etiquette classes and a Master's degree was working.

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My boss came in, mumbling something with that deep voice of hers. She was with her assistant who I recognized by her squirty little giggle. My boss sounded like she was more than a bit tipsy.

“Her? Yeah, I invited her. Sure she has all kinds of credentials but that’s not why I invited her. Having her will look good in the paper. Besides she’s the best dressed one of them at the firm.”

“One of them?” asked the assistant.

“You know – African Americans or whatever they want to be called these days.”

Their laughter accompanied them as they exited.

A statue, I froze on the toilet. I didn’t get up for a while. And when I did, it was to walk out the door and to my car. I wasn’t sure how I would feel the next day.

I was glad that when I woke up it would be Saturday.

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MEREDYTH WOKE UP

Meredyth woke up. She'd napped for a couple of hours after dropping the kids off. It was raining so they accepted her offer of a ride even though they wanted to get out of the car a block from school. At their ages, (Beth was 17 and Josh, 11) that was okay – normal even.

She decided to get a jump on dinner. Her mouth watered at the thought of grilled pork chops and some of the summer squash she bought today.

At first, she couldn't focus her eyes. Hazy objects fluttered in and out of her blurred vision. She realized nothing looked familiar.

Gone was her expensively appointed bedroom. The antique mahogany night table along with the latest bestseller she'd left on it was gone too. She looked toward what should have been her pink bathroom and instead saw several murky figures walking back and forth in a dark hallway.

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One walked past the room and then came immediately back as if pulled by an invisible bungee chord. Shrieking, she dropped whatever she was carrying. Meredyth's ears painfully reverberated in response and her body shook like a dry leaf on a tree.

She heard someone shout, "Mrs. Lukas is awake!" Several people crowded in the doorway. As her eyesight cleared she could make out the strangers. Fear gripped her like a vice and her heart pounded; her breath seemed to be stuck somewhere in her throat. She could hardly breathe. She heard bits and pieces of conversation but mostly the word 'miracle' was repeated over and over.

She figured out that she was in a hospital room which eventually emptied leaving Meredyth alone with a doctor. She whispered, her voice dry and cracking, "What happened to me? Where is my husband? Does he know what happened? My kids – oh God my kids!"

He looked to be about thirty, this blue eyed, bearded Doctor Fortuna. In an accent she couldn't identify, he said "We'll call your husband right away," motioning to one of the nurses. "Your family is fine. But right now I want to help you. You need to understand what has happened."

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He took one of Meredyth's hands but hers was a limp thing with barely any feeling at all. She thought she must have some kind of nerve injury.

"Mrs. Lukas, after you dropped your children off at school you stopped at a local vegetable stand. You were standing by your car to put your groceries in.

Witnesses told the police that a pickup truck slid on the wet roads and hit you so hard that you were thrown through the air. You landed about fifty or so feet away. The police said that the only thing that saved you from being killed instantly was some hay piled in the far corner of that farmer's field."

Meredyth was relieved. That explained a lot – she'd been in an accident. Saved by a pile of hay. Okay – she could handle that. Still her thoughts were as jumbled as a deck of cards thrown into the air. One idea barely flittered through her consciousness before another flashed by.

"But you must understand Mrs. Lukas," the doctor continued, "some time has passed since the accident." The doctor took a deep breath and said, "Seven. Seven years have passed since your accident. And you have been in a coma for that entire time."

She thought of her children, her home, and her

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little herb garden carefully planted just outside the kitchen window. She remembered her upcoming wedding anniversary and Josh's twelfth birthday. Trembling so strong overtook her, that the doctor could barely hold her. He called for a sedative.

The doctor had decided not to share everything in that first conversation. What Meredyth knew was quite enough to absorb. What he withheld was that in the intervening years, her mother had died of pancreatic cancer and her daughter was engaged. Her son was about to enter college.

And there was more. After keeping vigil for six years and after doctors had told him there was no hope, Mr. Lukas started a new life with a widow he'd met at the hospital. He sold the house and moved because the memories yanked at his heart and caused him to cry in unexpected moments. He hadn't been to the hospital in six months, but he called every two weeks to check on her and faithfully visited her on her birthday and their anniversary.

Meredyth understood then that there had been birthdays, holidays, deaths, graduations and countless other celebrations and moments which occurred while her pale and emaciated body was tethered to this bed and to life in a twilight world, a void.

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Her body convulsed then as if shocked with electricity. A moan began somewhere inside that Meredyth barely realized emanated from her. She sobbed and sobbed then, cursing the pile of hay that had broken her fall.

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INDESCRIBABLY MALICIOUS

Here they come looking for ghosts again. With their electronic shit, their camcorders, their sensors and infrared lights – all that stuff. The fat one hides a cross in her purse but she tells the others that she's not religious or superstitious. What a load. Why the people who watch the t.v. show don't keep a bullshit detector on at all times for the likes of her I'll never know.

They come when it's dark because it makes it more dramatic for TV and they think they can hunt better that way. I'm here all the time, day or night – doesn't matter to me. They want to see a ghost, they really do. They see flares and orbs and all this other crap. They don't see anything except what their feeble minds tell them to see. I can stand right in front of them. They never see me. Won't give them the satisfaction.

They come to my house – trudging through the weeds that used to be my front yard, past the little plot where Ann had her flower garden and where I eventually planted her. They trespass but think nothing of it since nobody lives here now. I won't let anyone live here. I do my real haunting when there are no cameras. And I've been here for about ten years.

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They call themselves professional ghost hunters or spirit detectives. Professional my ass. If one of them farted on tape, they'd replay it over and over, convinced someone is saying, "Help Me!" or "Get Out" or some other such nonsense.

If they really were professional, they wouldn't come in here today though. There's something here besides me now – something that came in the darkness and likes it. It's a big evil. Bigger than what got hold of me when I killed Ann and then slit my own wrists.

I can see it and it can see me.

And it has been glaring at me through the windows, murmuring nonsense, scratching on the back porch and hammering on the front door since yesterday. I don't think it can get in unless someone lets it in.

They're getting close now, hiking up to the house, and paraphernalia in tow. Don't matter to me – I'm sliding out the door just as soon as they open it.

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CLEANING FOR UNCLE OTIS

Once I had to substitute for my mother who used to care for her sick brother and clean his house every week. One time, when mom had the flu, I went in her place.

Uncle Otis was not sitting in his usual spot – his favorite chair. He was not doing his usual thing – watching reruns on his ancient television. Instead he was in bed squirming in a pile of his own crap. I threw open some windows and found an old pail and filled it with soap and warm water in order to wash him. He blessedly looked at the ceiling as I manipulated his body just to get him close to clean.

I pulled back the sheet and Lord have mercy, his limp dick was stuck to his leg. At twenty-five I had seen plenty of the dangly part – my grandmother's term – but never any that looked like this. It was a small thing that made my skin crawl.

Seeing it I remembered the time at a family picnic many years ago. I was sent back to the house for more napkins. I heard some strange noises coming from the washroom, just off the kitchen. It was a mix of whispers and deep breathing and so I peeked in. There was my uncle with Mr. Hewitt from down the street. I thought they looked silly with their pants down. When he saw me, Mr. Hewitt ran like a roach running from sunlight.

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My uncle leaned down then and smiled. His teeth looked like yellow and brown corn kernels and his breath smelled of whisky, barbeque and something else I couldn't figure out. His dangly part hung thick against his leg. He stroked it a bit and looked at me. I just giggled at him and he hiked up his pants. I fetched the napkins and took them outside and until I saw his penis again during his sponge bath, I'd thought nothing more of it.

And after I had everything clean, his sheets changed, mattress flipped and his body washed from head to toe, he pissed himself. I thought about how much work was ahead of me, about trudging through the snow to get to my other two patients: Nadine Harris who suffered with dementia and Mr. Jackson, a diabetic double amputee. Neither was more trouble than my uncle.

And here he was gazing at the ceiling, feigning oblivion with that same old smile on his face.

My mom would be back on the job the next week. He could just wait.

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FIFTH SESSION

Some days it's almost ok. Some days I manage to get up and get going. I finally went back to work after three months extended leave and it was good to get back except – except people kept acting like nothing happened. Like someone pulled them all into a room and told them to pick up where they left off. From before I got the news.

But you don't have to hear about that again. Me? I'd rather talk about the laundry.

You see I washed clothes yesterday – I've put off doing Jim's until about a month ago. And even then I would only wash a thing or two. I mean I'd do a bunch of clothes for the kids and me and maybe wash one of Jim's socks—just one. One Sock. Crazy huh? Well of course you wouldn't say I was – even if you thought so.

I've been keeping all his dirty clothes in the basket my Aunt Della gave us for our wedding. That rose garden is beautiful...when I first started coming here everything was covered with snow...did you plant it?

Oh yes the basket. She made it just for us. Has our names woven into it – a red heart with our names, also in red, woven right into it like it was bleeding. Jim said it was her subliminal way of pointing out her distaste for our liberal attitudes. Aunt Della is a

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card carrying, Bible toting, from the womb conservative Republican.

We thought that basket was so damned ugly that we used it to hold rolls of toilet paper and cleaning stuff in the downstairs bathroom! Whenever Aunt Della visited us, we pulled it out, put a bunch of magazines in it and put in the living room like we used it all the time. God we used to laugh about that. Oh boy, I think I'll take you up on that offer of another tissue now. Thanks.

I know – I know... Where was I?

Yes. Well yesterday when I did the clothes I realized that the basket was empty. Empty. I was frantic – why didn't I notice it was empty? I was so upset; I cried most of the day. The kids were with my mother so they didn't see me.

As long as Jim's clothes were in that basket, could smell him. I could feel where he'd been—even in his old smelly socks. Some nights I dumped the whole pile of clothes in bed with me and covered myself in them. Cover myself in Jim.

And now the last piece is gone. No ceremony, no notice on my part.

The fact that I haven't noticed is worse than finishing the last of his clothes. All of him is gone; all of what he smells like, gone.

And I didn't even notice...

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TEN POEMS

“Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat.”

Robert Frost

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ONLY TWO YEARS

Gone. Spent.

And no matter how much I try to
will it into being I know now that passion
is never going to return.

Once so strongly felt – it is now a withered bloom
on a gnarled vine.

This is what we have become.

This place is where “I DO” has brought us.

Days blend into nights.

Nights blend into weeks.

Weeks blend into months
of sameness and sadness.

Endless petty disagreements now ruin my
well planned ever after.

I hide my tears; remnants of my frustration.

I walk the hall that is my heart
tethered like a heavy weight to

This place

This time

And to you.

And I wonder at the guile
that has trapped me here;
imprisoned in this place
of open windows and doors

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where I can freely move yet
I cannot breathe.

I cannot breathe.

God please take me for

I

cannot

breathe.

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EMMA

Emma called it a wind chime.

"See?" she said and showed us
a bunch of gnarled twigs knotted
together

with bits of discarded yarn
and bottle caps
stolen from the rubbish.

She perched near the top of a swaying tree.

"See?" she said, hanging it there.

Then teetered Emma in its branches and chirped,
"See?" she said pointing to her object d'art
just before she toppled down to earth.

Her chimes became the
scratching song
of things invisible.

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HIS STRAWBERRY DAY

Before he died
he asked for a bowl of strawberries.
He knew he should not have them
But he said
"What the heck –
Death is coming no matter what
I eat."
So I went down by the woods
at the edge of our property –
just where the sun
touches the fallen pine cones and
the soft breezes bend the tall grasses before dusk.
No bucket – so in
My crisp, white cotton apron
I carried as many strawberries
as I could pick.
My hands were stained red–

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my mouth too because I ate almost as many as I carried.

I returned to the house,
dumped them unceremoniously into the
kitchen sink to wash.

He said,

"Did you get 'em?"

In response, I brought him a
large bowl filled to the overflowing.

And so before he died,
we ate those strawberries,
slowly through one silent hour.

When months later, he was gone-

I thought-

Everybody should have a
strawberry day before they must
leave this world.

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**IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING, ANNE BOLEYN REMAINS
CONVINCED**

(Sometime during the 1500's, King Henry The
Eighth had his wife Anne Boleyn beheaded.)

Had I known,
that serving your desires
would have meant
the surrender
of my own,
would I have so calmly
given my soul
before your sturdy throne?

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Had I known that the cost
of becoming Queen,
would not equal
any finely tapestried wall,
sturdy hewn floor,
or meal of quail , pheasant or boar
would any one thing
have changed my heart?
Had I known that my end
would come with my bowing before
the waiting axe,
it would not have mattered.
For I, despite your rough handling of my heart,
would still have come to you.

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THE ACTRESS

She didn't have a sin to report.
So she whipped up a swill of deeds evil:

She would speak of
buried babies,
Illicit intercourse,
damning drug use.

She would come clean on
torching a building downtown.

She would confess to
pushing someone down
a flight of stairs,
stealing a fur coat.

She would admit to
stabbing her sister

She was ready when she went behind
the curtain.

She said, "Forgive me Father for I have sinned. "

She had her lines ready.

And thus she began her contrived litany.

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For N.B.D. (Written for my friend whose sorrow I
cannot know)

There was no warning–
no sign or scream in the dark.

I didn't know.

There was no indication –
not one breath was taken away
no skipped heartbeat.

But you left us
just the same.
It was a quiet leave taking;
a calm home going.

In your sleep
you dreamed a new world
and went there.

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PROMISE KEPT

(Inspired by and written for FH)

I console my friend's husband today;
words escape me—don't know what to say.
For how do you talk about the life
Of his one and only – his friend—his wife?

We surrounded her that last day in her hospital
room—

we four high school friends and her anxious
"groom."

I remember she asked us with her usual zest—

"Why are you crying? It's only a breast."

When the nurse came in to usher us out,

"What a load of crap!" we heard our friend shout.

But then she beckoned me back to the room

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and she whispered, "I think I may be leaving here soon."

Then weakly she pointed toward the hall, out to him.

"Just in case I don't wake up—please take care of Jim."

I dismissed her words most prophetic.

Lost in my fear, I was unsympathetic.

Now with my head bent and my shoulders shaking
and with my tears falling and with my heart
quaking

torn as I am with grief of my own—

I rise to console the one so alone.

I have no idea what I should say or do
to help our friend's Jim – to bring him through
a grief so strong—so horribly profound
that for now I can say nothing – I can't make a
sound.

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That way I won't rail out against mighty Death
who audaciously has stolen my friend's final
breath.

For now I'll just put my hand on the shoulder
Of this broken soul– the loving foot soldier.

console my friend's husband today;

words escape me–don't know what to say.

So I'll just let him talk about the life

Of the someone we loved deeply–our friend–his
wife.

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BLIND DATE

Stood in the rain and I debated
To stay, to go and so I waited,
'til the day became the night
and I realized with certain fright,
that you would not come.

I gripped my hands and I stifled
thoughts that with my heart you'd trifled –
that I the calm, the undemanding
would be left in the rain standing
and you would not come.

My hair became a matted mess
and glued to me became my dress.
Powerless was I to move my feet
as water spat out from the street.
But you did not come.

Afternoon and school children passed
and when heaving, I'd seen the last,
I knew then but could not mention
the cruelty of your intention –
That you would not come.

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Now the city has gone to sleep
and my own company I keep.
But I will stay and man my post
sleeping in a box at most.
Maybe then you'll come.
Then you'll come.
You'll come.
COME.

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JUST SAY NO

I asked my father to walk me down the aisle
the second time.
Instead he wrote a letter.

I imagined him in a room.
I imagined him with a clean legal pad in front of
him.

I imagined him, drink in hand
as he
formed the words,
the perfect words,

to hurl at me
like stones
that stung as they pounded against my heart,
leaving it bruised and
gouged and
beyond repair

It was easier I suppose to put in five pages his true
sentiment.

Easier than to
just say no.

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A SIMPLE RHYME

Sharon at last, has halted her bleating
which was the result of a good and sound beating
administered by someone who loves her true:
Her dearest, her boyfriend made her black and
blue.

For the transgression of not dusting and more
Maria's fiancé threw her to the floor.
Then Maria the quiet, the meek and the mild
rose softly whimpering – just like a child.

For the God awful sin of drinking a beer
Anne's darling, her husband punched her in the
ear.
And for talking and having an opinion at all
Her beloved, her husband shoved her through a
wall.

Oh women like these never tire of learning
and thus must be thrust to the fire till burning.
And women like these do not run – do not hide
while waiting for all of the blows to subside.

For allowing them to be girlfriends or wives
the significant others demolished their lives.
How twisted Shaniqua's body and how silent Pat's
breath.
Tell me how can they all look so happy in DEATH?

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