

Adult
Short Story
1st Place

Gary M. Armstrong

Lost

A Future Never Found

At his celebration of life, I was approached by his mom who told me that I had been the *only* one that allowed him to express himself, even if it meant breaking the rules of conformity.

"His other teachers wanted nothing but perfection, cramming creativity into a box, no breaking of the rules, no topics that might offend, like his Death Row Soliloquy. It was brief, but revealing, you know."

In fact, his endeavors in my writing class were often brief, but were also bloated with nuanced revelations like Hemmingway's famous six word story "For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn."

And they were always unconventional, even uncouth at times, and never followed SOP.

Yet, I accepted them all because of a poem that he placed on my desk on the very first day of school. It read

*I write about
the castoffs in landfills
that others have discarded
and I shall
retrieve each unwanted
and reveal its
true
value*

"His other teachers should have known, too."

The final class assignment at the end of the school year was about how my kids felt about graduating from high school. His read

Item in lost and found: My future

The optimist in me was encouraged at the time. For his cryptic words seemed to imply that he was seeking to reclaim a future that he thought he had lost.

"Thank you again for helping him to find his voice, at least for that one year."

It was also the optimist in me that read the poem he left on my desk as he walked out of my classroom on the last day of school. A parody of Shakespeare. It read

*Your quality of mercy was not strain'd.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
upon me.
It is twice blessed.
It blesseth you who gave
and me that received.*

4-8-7

We teachers sometimes have to take things to the Lost & Found, which is literally a place for material things that have been lost. But there is also a metaphorical Lost & Found which is a place for those immaterial parts of us that may have been lost. And we should go there every so often to see what's there. Who knows. We may find our lost quality of mercy...or even someone's future.

Adult
Short Story
2nd Place

Lori Beckham

When I enter the diner, the harsh bite of winter melts instantly. The smell of coffee and muffins envelop the moist warm air. The "old fashion" diner does its best to look like my age, decked out in red and white cushions, with some records nailed to the wall. A plastic jute box sits in the corner. Everything has a chrome accent, binding the countertop and stools. Not quite how *I* remember it.

I sit down at a booth, and a young lady named Jane comes to me in smile, asking what I'll have. I originally wanted caffeine, but the scent of muffins got to me. I order a blueberry muffin; the sweet warm fluff of blueberries burst on my tongue. Looking around, there is only one person my age, a man eating a chicken pot pie at the counter and talking it up with Jane. I wonder if he'd look my way and wonder if my husband is dead. There's no ring on either of our fingers. And I'd tell him I'm not married, and we'll get to talking and who knows what will come of it.

But nothing happens. Soon he leaves without a glance my way and my muffin is gone. Check paid. What's left of my coffee has turned cold. I watch my car through the window pane as it sits in the bitter cold. The outside is so dark and grey. I don't want to leave the warm sweet air of the diner, but it's time.

I'm about to head out when a woman's voice catches my attention. I stare at the dark-haired head facing away from me. She isn't a young thing like Jane, the waitress. Judging by the grey roots of her parted hair, she's at least in her forties. She gives a short laugh, holding a phone to her ear. Her voice is both familiar and strange. I know I've heard it before, but where? When?

I stand up, leaving my purse and gloves on the seat as I stroll to the plastic jute box under the guise of curiosity. Sure enough, they have Led Zeppelin on there. They even have a Backstreet Boys song. The complaints in my head keep adding up.

I choose no song and watch her as I return to my seat. She doesn't look in my direction. As I pass, I see the color of her eyes, a soft brown. She wears a navy-blue blazer and a gold-like necklace with matching earrings. She's a business woman now, or so it appears. I've stared for too long, I look away. With one phone to her ear and her other hand swiping at a small tablet on the table, she never saw me.

Back at my booth, Jane asks if I want more coffee, free of charge.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" she then says, resting her hand on my forearm.

I gulp. "Yes, I'm fine. Would like some water though. Please."

She comes back with a glass. She gives an unsure smile. "Okay, just let me know if you need anything."

I drink the water. She has her father's eyes, the eyes of James Bertram. When was the last time I've thought of either of them? Years? I can't stop staring at her hair. I remember it once was light brown, like coffee with cream.

"Congratulations!" the doctor had said to me, but it was muffled; I was in too much pain to hear anything but my own laborious breath. More muffling when it was handed to me, wrapped in a damp cloth and I peered down at an alien in my arms, purple in complexion and a face grimacing, like a rotting, melting jack-o-lantern. I was underwhelmed. I was exhausted and regretful I hadn't thought this through. Later James came into the room and kissed me on the forehead, and for a moment I thought everything had worked out after all.

I finish my glass of water. At this rate I'll need to use the restroom. What if she leaves when I'm in there? Or is that for the best?

She gets up, Maddie, and I'm paralyzed. She's grabbing her purse. I grab mine, clutching it in my lap, but my grip loosens as she walks over to the women's restroom. Relief, followed by

dread. When she comes out, will she head back to her booth or out the door? There's no telling what's going to happen. I can't stand the tension.

This has happened before.

She was a teenager, sitting at a booth of some burger joint that closed down decades ago. This wasn't an unexpected happening like what's going on here. No, I had followed her from school. And just like now, she was alone, but back then she was eating fries and reading what I assumed was a textbook. I never stepped foot in the place. I sat in my car, watching her through the window pane, trying to work up the nerve to go in and talk to her. To say, "Hi Maddie," and for her to look up, realizing she knows me, that moment of confusion followed by disbelief. I've wondered since what her reaction would have been, had I approached her all those years ago.

She comes out of the bathroom and to my disappointment she returns to her booth. I should just leave. She didn't seem to notice me. Even if I could approach her, how can I sum it all up in just a few sentences, my reasons? *Hi Maddie, is that you? Do you remember me? Listen, I'm sorry I wasn't around. I married a man I didn't love (how do I explain that?) and he wanted custody of you more than me.* What a terrible thing to say, to think. I rub my eyes. It's the truth and it's ugly.

It's not that I didn't want to be a mom. No, I just would have preferred having a child with someone other than James, a man who didn't do anything wrong, but didn't do anything right either. He was just there, and marriage was the natural order of things. It's what every girl wants, right? You marry like you've been encouraged to, but along the way you feel as though you've been duped. Of course, James didn't make things easy for me once I brought up the "D" word. It's not like today where every marriage ends before the "death do us part."

I wanted freedom, and it seemed that if I were to be free of marriage, I had to be free of motherhood as well. I didn't think that way at the time, even when he got full custody of her, and moved despite court orders. I wanted to pursue it, because she was my little girl, even if it felt like she was more James's child than mine. But bills had to be paid, Maddie.

I'm shaking, but I stand up. I walk over to her, and she has since ended her phone conversation and is tapping at her tablet on the table. I stop beside her. Her eyes wander up to mine. I'm paralyzed by those brown eyes, those of James but also of a little girl with coffee-cream hair, who had sat on the floor in yellow overalls, surrounded by colorful blocks.

She stops tapping at her tablet. "Yes?"

I gulp. "Do you know who I am?"

Her eyes widen, studying me. I fear the moment of realization. She turns her head at me, and says, "I'm sorry but I don't. I'm not from here, well, I haven't been here for a long time."

"My name is Alice. Alice Daughtry."

She stays silent.

"Alice Bertram used to be my name," and after a moment of silence, I finally say, "I'm your mother, Maddie. I was married to your father many years ago."

Now it hits her. Her lips part, her eyes grow. I almost feel relief. Almost.

"I'm sorry," she says, eyes blinking, "but you've made a mistake."

I shake my head. "There's no mistaking it, you're my daughter, Maddie."

"I'm-I'm sorry. My name is Laura. I'm not your daughter."

I shake my head, looking at her hard. "I know you must be angry with me, for years. I don't blame you. And I'm not trying—I guess I just wanted to say I'm sorry for the way things turned out. That's all I wanted to say."

Window Panes

4-S-10

She stares at me mystified, like I'm a two-headed Martian speaking gibberish. "Okay," is all she says.

"I didn't mean to stir up anything. I'll leave you alone now. I'm sorry."

I grab my purse and step outside. The cold pinches my nose. Walking up to my car, I realize I had forgotten my gloves, but I can't go back in there. As I stand, choosing to not look back at the pane glass where I'll see her, I envision her coming outside with my gloves. She hands them to me. An embrace follows, warm tears stream down her face, and I muster up moist eyes in this dry weather. We head back inside and talk about our lives. Perhaps we would stay in contact. Maybe she'll have me over for Christmas, but I shouldn't think that far ahead. Just now she pretended not to know me.

I wait for Maddie to come out with my gloves. The bell jingles behind me. I stay still, hearing the crunch of footsteps in the snow. I turn and she's already ten feet away, walking at a good pace, like she's afraid I'll call after her.

I stare down at the snow for a long time, my hands cold. People walk past, shuffling in and out of the diner. When I finally get inside my car and start the engine, I look over at the same window I had been sitting in a moment ago. Behind the pane glass sits a young woman with coffee-cream hair, watching me as I sit in my car, unable to go to her, and unable to drive away.

Adult
Short Story
3rd Place

Erica Monique Graham

A Cup Of Anxiety

It was a damp, cold, dreadful morning. The unstable roads were jammed with holiday traffic as everyone headed home for Christmas. After the chaos and downpour, the roads became extremely slippery, forcing drivers to proceed with caution. The news report warned us of freezing rain overnight. Mara was still restless, sleepy, tired, weary, and reluctantly pulled herself out of bed. The room contained only an old small lamp used for a diary and a dusty cherry-wooden dresser needed for keepsakes. The tiny lamp swung in the breeze and tipped over on the stand. Grandma's house had a drafty chilly bathroom that made it hard to get comfortable in the morning. All of a sudden, Mara heard the melancholic sound of heavy December rain drumming on the chipped-painted window panes. It brought a sense of reflection and gratitude as the year came to a close. Anticipating a severe, harsh storm, Mara and Mama stayed inside the heated-radiator row house to embrace, pray, converse, and possibly keep warm.

As the cold weather arrived, the vibrant colors of November slowly changed and tragically disappeared in the atmosphere, giving way to the bare thick branches of winter. The wind blew away the autumn leaves. Frost on the ground glimmered in the early morning light, indicating it was a cold winter day. It had been strange and unusually brisk in our close-knit community. Mara pulled back the floral curtains and peeped outside the foggy kitchen window. Out of nowhere, a homeless man was walking along the treacherous path. His heavy coat warmed him against the chilly north wind.

Snow flakes began to fall and raindrops were already turning into sleet. To her surprise, a baby grey squirrel ran across the electrical BGE power wire. The terrible gust of rain shook the icy roof top violently. The strong wind hurled down bits of the roof. A next door neighbor's window slammed shut in the wind. It made me shiver, so I put on a sweater and wrapped it around my arms. The leaves on the trees were edged with frost and icicles. It was bitterly cold outside. Mara was feeling blue and worried too much. She dwelled on the past, had a fear of forgiving, letting go, and was always anxious about the future. In her spare time she enjoyed journaling thoughts about goals, dreams, and aspirations.

Being kind of quiet, shy, lonely, and dealing with an abnormal mental illness, she drank Lipton tea in the morning. It was a cure for her Black soul. Mara was a young African-American woman, overwhelmed with bitterness, nervousness, sadness, and seasonal depression. Her eyes were filled with salty tears as she tried to release her emotions and write faithfully in her prayer notebook. It was on a cold day in December that Mara decided to embark on her writing journey. She put the yellow kettle on the gas stove and picked out two ceramic mugs from the cramped kitchen cupboard, which was full of canned goods and other grocery items. We must stock up for the winter. On the other hand, Mama suffered from many chronic health issues. She wore a cotton pink robe, and a flannel morning gown underneath. Her dark, tightly, dry curls were still in foam rollers with a silk hair bonnet. We both enjoyed girly conversation while sitting at the red, square, table, with two leather chairs. Butter, eggs, and toast was our usual breakfast.

The kettle's whistle scared Mara as she watched it boil over. It's an old-fashioned bright kettle, so it takes longer than most. It was like jazz and took ages to boil. Steam rose from the spout. As the water boiled and bubbled, Mara was busy doing some boring chores on her bullet to-do-list. She decided to wash some greasy dishes with Palmolive green liquid detergent, a Brillo pad, empty the trash/recycle bin, vacuum the dining room rug, sweep the floor, and throw in a pile of undergarments/dirty linen in the laundry machine. She liked to get things done early in the morning. Procrastination was not the answer! But, Mara still made sure that she took care of the chores and needs of the single-family household during the week and on the weekends. Nuisance backyard opossums and raccoons had a difficult time this winter. However, they had developed some strategies to roam, search for garbage, and survive the cold.

Mara didn't care for coffee nor sweetened tea. Her attitude and preference is just too sour these days. She sipped some tea as her heart raced with anxiety. Mara was feeling so anxious, that it was very difficult to handle her emotional symptoms. Mama settled down and inhaled a warm cup of lemon tea, grasping the mug with her brown hands and long fingernails. Mara and Mama both loved to cook breakfast together on dreary Sunday mornings. The wintery season often filled them with joy, regardless of the pain and suffering they felt. However, Mama showed a lot of cheerful emotion in spite of her illness and weak ailments. The steam from the mug danced in tendrils around Mara's face leaving swirling thoughts in her mind. We had been cooking away in the kitchen all morning.

She held the ceramic cup with warmth and comfort. It wasn't just the tea, it was the bitter taste of uncertainty that clung to her every sip. She placed the mug down,

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feeling a sense of calm settling over her. However, the anxieties and worries were still there and she tried to manage them. Even though Mara's voice trembled, she would not be consumed by the swirling storm within her. She took a deep breath trying to ease the frantic rhythm of her heart. With a steamy cup of tea in hand, Mara remembers the cold winter morning.

Adult
Short Story
Honorable Mention

Lori Beckham

Snapshot Horror

My cousin and I were tasked to rummage through our grandfather's estate for the weekend. He had bought the house years ago, out in the country. Neither of us had seen our grandfather for years up to his passing, and we were intrigued to see his far away home for the first time.

The house was Victorian, shaded in greys and browns. No neighboring house in sight. When we walked in, it was like stepping back in time, with old stained lampshades and dark wood accents throughout. The place was a mess, with papers, books, and boxes stacked about. But most noticeably, the house was littered with old Polaroid photographs, a technology I remembered as a child. Every floor, counter, and table had dozens of these photographs, and strangely the photos were of nothing, just pictures taken inside the house, with no clear subject.

My cousin and I raised our brows at each other. It seemed inappropriate judging a dead man's home out loud, so we kept our strange observations to ourselves. I decided to rummage the second floor and attic, and he took the first floor and basement.

I went up into the attic first, pulling the ladder down, which created a loud thud on the floor. I heard my cousin gasp downstairs from the abrupt sound, at which I laughed in reassurance. Up in the attic, there were hundreds of Polaroids, but I ignored them. One can only observe so many photos of random parts of the house. But what caught my eye was the producer of the photographs, his camera, sitting on top of a stack of books. It was a product of the early 1990's, black and simplistic, with a strap.

When I lifted the boxy device, a photograph that had been underneath the camera slipped and fell to the floor. I wouldn't have given it a glance if the fall hadn't

Snapshot Horror

caught my attention, and that was when I saw words written on the back of the Polaroid, facing up at me. In black marker, it read: **“Don’t look at it directly. Look away.”**

Well, of course that warning got my attention, so I picked up the photo and turned it over. I shuddered from the unexpected image. A chill came over me.

It was a creature that almost resembled a person, but it clearly wasn’t. It did not have clothes, and its skin was a faded, yellow-green tint. It hunched and looked directly into the camera with red, brilliant eyes, like red points of light. Its forehead bulged, overlapping the tops of its beady eyes. Teeth, long and sharp, jutted downward from the sides of its mouth. It was a ghoulish looking thing, and as I stared more closely, I realized the photo was taken in this room, at a far corner of the attic. I hesitantly looked over at that corner, but nothing was there than the books the grotesque creature had been hunching over. The ghoulish thing would be one-third my size.

Of course my mind rationalized that it was a large figurine of some kind. My grandfather had talked about little green men when I was little. I didn’t like that he tried to scare me with those stories, but he must have had a fascination with the thought of ghouls, enough to buy something that looked like the little horrors he’d describe. But where was this strange artifact now? It was such an unnerving-looking thing, that I feared I would scream if I came across it.

I shook my head. I had a job to do, to look for anything that my family may want to keep, and anything of value that we’d rather sell on our own. But still, I kept looking back at the picture of the grotesque thing, at those red points of light. And then it occurred to me – the red points of light. When I found old Polaroids of myself as a child, my eyes also lit up in bright red, like the eyes of this photograph - the red-eye effect.

Snapshot Horror

Right then, I didn't want to be alone anymore, so I hung the camera around my neck and held onto the photo, walking toward the ladder. I heard what sounded like a book drop as I approached the exit, from a different corner of the attic.

I froze, and I was about to look over when I stared at the back of the photo again, with its bold warning. I knew it was childish, but instead of looking, I aimed the camera to where I thought I heard the sound, and to my delight it did flash and produce a black picture that would slowly develop. I placed both pictures in my pocket and hurried down the ladder, closing the attic door back up into the ceiling, all while staring at my shoes.

As soon as I went downstairs, I felt foolish. I chuckled aloud to myself, thinking even after his death, my grandfather was still scaring me with his stories. I found my cousin in the living room. He looked worried, staring down at one of the thousands of books in the house.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I think Grandpa was schizophrenic," my cousin said with wide eyes. "He has tons of journals where he writes he is being terrorized by a creature in this house." He thumbed through the book, and then set it down. "It's really detailed how he describes it. Says it only attacks when you look directly at it. That it tries to get his attention with noises. It's freaking me out."

He saw my expression, which of course must have been disturbing. He asked me what was wrong.

"If that freaks you out, then take a look at this. I found a picture up in the attic."

I quickly took out the photo and handed it to him, not wanting to look at the red eyes again. My cousin gasped. "Oh my god, it's just as he... Is this real?"

"The eyes - makes me think it could be real," I said. "He even wrote on the back of it, saying not to look at it." Then I remembered, digging into the same pocket. "Oh, and I took a photo with the camera too. I got spooked while up there, so I took it without looking."

I pulled out the picture, and immediately saw the words: "**Don't look at it directly. Look Away.**"

My hand shook as I turned the Polaroid over and saw the same ghoulish creature as before, hunched over the books. Then I looked over to my cousin, who had the photo flipped, confused by the blank side.

He inadvertently had the picture facing me. It was the same yellow-green creature, but with its sharp hand outward, covering a part of its face, with only one bright red eye revealed.

I uttered, "That's the one I took in the attic."

A loud thud came from upstairs – it was the sound of the ladder hitting the floor. My cousin and I looked at each other with such fear and understanding that we both looked down at once and ran for the front door, bumping into corners as we found our way out of the house.

It became clear to me as we ran to the car why our grandfather became a recluse, why he obsessively took photographs that littered his home, and ultimately, where he had died – in the attic, where I found his weapon of defense.