■

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 brie£ 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

*Irrite 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.*

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

Window Panes

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 comer. 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.

Window Panes

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-lantem. 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

Window Panes

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 satin 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* we. 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.”

Window Panes

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

q-s

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

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,

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 1 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

1

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.

2

Snapshot Horror

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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, 1 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?”

3

Snapshot Horror

“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.

4