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“Vacuum”

Here’s something that’s been weighing on my mind lately: How do you know if you’re a good writer? How do you keep going, when some of the feedback you receive (in particular, from yourself, but also that vague and general negativity known as “rejection”) is not good? I’m a loner already – sitting at my desk, typing. Keeping to the plan, that this work-in-progress is something worthy of pursuit and hoping that the ideas for what happens next will continue to flow.

Writers are forced by the nature of the beast, the gravitational pull of the moon, the second Law of Thermodynamics, what have you, to be optimists. Which is pretty tricky, considering that in some ways we work in a vacuum. Actually, lately – last year, I mean - a vacuum within a vacuum, something I don’t even know is possible, and whether it’s worse or better. Sort of like when a bully uses your hand to smack your face, over and over, asking the question “why are you hitting yourself?” It has to be better than the bully actually pummeling you, right? Being locked down inside a lockdown? Damn.

So, how do I define “optimists?” Well, those who sit and type (or scrawl) our words and use the goals called “good” or “not so good, but still something...,” while at the same time adding the layer of “productive,” to the mix, all while having “publishable” and “valuable” barking at us at the end of their leads. And we’ve very little idea if anything we do accomplishes those measurements. Oh, we may have a peanut gallery of friends and relations who suffer our semi-constant “can I read this to you?” We compare our work to the writing we like (or even the writing we don’t), pulled off our bookshelves, and pat or flagellate our backs correspondingly. We form nebulous “writing groups,” in the hopes that someone, someday, will make contact and we can all escape together off that island. And social media permits a sort of pick-your-poison, proceed at your own risk kind of wild west-passive aggressive feedback clusterfuck, if that’s what you’re in to. Roll that all together, let it proof for a while, bake it, and then ask someone else to please, eat, and that’s how I define optimists.

Mostly, though, we live in our own heads. And behind our closed doors where we crank up the music and bang our heads

against the wall as much as we tip-tap on the keyboard. And walking around the neighborhood, noodling about characters and sub-plots and how to include something we read months ago when we were researching home-made crystalized ginger root or the determining of white blood cell counts or how fantastic are holy mountains in Sri Lanka. We muddle through. That's what we're considering when we tell others that writing is fun. Love it! Not the something like anguish of not being able to think of a synonym for migraine headache or the name of that city on the spur of the bootheel of Italy, you know, the one that sticks out into the glittering, azure water of the Adriatic. Even using an online map. Where the hell is that city? That part of writing is fun in the same way that a hangnail, a hangover, or hanging off a cliff by one hand is fun, as in something between not very much and not at all.

That's when we wish there were bleachers full of fans who want to help, like in baseball. Like standing in right-field, everyone in the stadium holding a free beer in one hand and a pencil in the other, ready to give an assist to a long fly ball of a sentence that's gotten out of control and beginning to seem like there is no such thing as punctuation and periods and spelcheck or even new paragraphs because the wind has gotten beneath the wing and is lifting the whole plane up into something resembling the ionosphere where there is no air and the writer is losing consciousness and if someone doesn't do something soon, what will become of him? Or her?

Or, is that just me? All I want is something helpful. It doesn't seem like very much to ask.

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CAUTION

said you aint seen notbin'

“The Appearance of Sylvia”

by Anita G. Gorman

I will call her Patricia. That was not her real name, and I do not know if what she told me was true.

Patricia was at least ninety-five when we met and I developed the habit of visiting her at least once a week for herbal tea and cookies. I provided the treats, and Patricia provided the hot water. Our conversations were often about her past, her life as a buyer for department stores in the United States and abroad, and about the souvenirs that recalled mostly happy memories.

One day while we drank our tea in her living room, Patricia decided to tell me one of her secrets. “Do you remember the poet Sylvia Plath?”

I nodded. “Yes, her poems would usually appear in the anthologies I used as both a student and a teacher. An interesting poet and person.”

“Sylvia Plath appeared to me a few times, right in my kitchen, in this very house. By the refrigerator.”

These days not everyone remembers Sylvia Plath, who was born in 1932, attended prestigious colleges, became a poet, was married to the British poet Ted Hughes, and had two children with him. Plath suffered from clinical

depression and from her husband’s infidelities. After multiple attempts at suicide, she finally ended her life on February 11, 1963 when she taped the door to her London kitchen so that her children would not breathe the gas. Then she turned on the oven and put her head far in. And so she died. She was only thirty.

“Sylvia Plath appeared to you by the refrigerator?” Why not the oven? I wondered.

“You don’t believe me.” Patricia looked at me sadly and seemed to be pouting like a little girl.

“Of course, I believe you. I believe that you believe that Sylvia Plath appeared to you. Now why did she do that? Seems like a long way to travel, from England to Ohio.”

Patricia smiled at me. “When one is dead, one does not need a plane ticket.”

“No, I suppose not. But was there a particular reason Sylvia Plath appeared to you right in your own house?”

“She must have somehow known that I was a kindred spirit. She had poems that she wanted me to share with the world. She dictated them to me. The new poems were pretty dark, just like the poems that she wrote when

she was alive.”

“Did you try to share the poems with the world?”

“I took the poems to a professor at the university who teaches poetry.”

“And what happened?”

“He looked at the poems. He said he would get back to me if he could think of a publisher interested in new Plath poems.”

“And did he get back to you?”

“No. I suppose he couldn’t find a publisher. But he certainly seemed very interested while I was talking to him in his office.”

And then I should have said, “May I see the poems?” But that could have made my life difficult. What if they were awful? What if they were poems that Plath had already published? What if they really came from the great beyond and were brilliant?

It was easier to change the conversation and pour myself another cup of raspberry tea.

The subject of Sylvia Plath did not come up again. Patricia had sensed my skepticism, and I was dead certain I did not relish any further discussion of a dead poet hanging around the kitchen only a few feet from where I sat week after week drinking tea.

My friend Patricia died at the age of 98. The poems, if they

existed, may have gone into the large dumpster that stood in her driveway after her death. When her friends gathered to remember Patricia, I asked about the Sylvia Plath appearance and the poems. The friends knew about Plath hovering by the refrigerator, but they had no knowledge of the poems. "Patricia wrote lots of poems," one friend said.

And what happened to Patricia's poems? Is everything now gone, Patricia's poems and the poems that Sylvia Plath may have delivered on various occasions to an old woman living in a small town in Ohio?

Maybe Sylvia will appear to me someday, even though I don't spend much time in my kitchen.



The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

August

I've never visited a cemetery just to go there. I've been to funerals that have had memorial services and then taken the casket to the gravesite with a parade of cars following, everyone stepping out onto the soft turf to gather around the hole in the ground and have a second memorial service – the one where someone says "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," as if it were a necessary exclamation to the end of a life in order to release a soul to whatever comes next. I've felt uncomfortable with the idea that dirt – everywhere – contains the bits and bytes of the dead, the molecules of those who came before me – but I also feel creeped by putting my feet in the ocean knowing that fish fuck in it.

Sorry, that's a very old joke about why someone should drink only scotch.

Anyway, my dream: I was standing a distance away, not in my car, but near my car, watching three men digging in a cemetery on a cold afternoon. A tall man. One shorter, and very thin. And an older fellow. Only two of them were digging, and then one – the older one - and then the two again. Maybe it was because there wasn't room in the hole, but I got the feeling that only one was supposed to be there – the old man. He displayed a certain kind of skill with the long-handle shovel, and the other two were amateurs. And what is an amateur gravedigger? A graverobber. If they were so – why were they allowed to dig by the old man? Why was he here, and not stopping them? What were they digging? What were they doing here at all?

continued next page

That last could be said of me, of course, and more to the point, why didn't anyone look over at me and confront me for being here and staring at them?

Because it was a dream, I guess, the digging went more quickly than it could have or should have – the two amateurs – robbers? - were now deep enough to look down at the thing they were trying to uncover. Then one of the diggers fell, and I heard a cracking sound. Like wood breaking. A coffin lid collapsing, I thought.

I was too far away to see exactly what was happening but not quite brave enough – not willing to be caught looking – to move closer. Then I heard one of the men shouting. Not “Eureka!” but something like it. He had found something, or more to the point, something he was looking for.

I crouch-walked towards them – making my way from headstone to headstone. One false move, as they say, and I would be seen. The grass beneath my shoes was soft – too long, not well maintained. Maybe it was the job of the old man to also mow the lawn.

I wonder if cemeteries' lawns are watered.

The other man – the tall one, bent over in the hole and pulled up the shorter one. The old man just stood there – I would have, too – and watched. The two men in the hole climbed out and looked at the thing they had found in the hole – the excavated grave! Even having gotten closer, I couldn't see what it was.

The tall man then picked up his shovel and began filling in the grave. Then the short one took his, but instead of shoveling dirt, he hit the old man in the head with it. I could hear the *pang* of the metal, and the man collapsed. The two robbers lifted the old man's body and dropped it in the hole, and filled it up – faster than it would have been possible, but very soon they were tamping down the dirt with the flat of their shovels.

I wanted to run now, back to my car, but I had no confidence that I would be able to outrun the two graverobbers. Also, I wanted to know what they had found in the grave. Something small enough to put in a coat pocket. Something valuable or rare enough to warrant killing someone else.

CBD Girl - cyberspace

“Eddie”

by Gloria G. Murray

Eddie tended to drift into whatever jobs he could find that would pay the rent. After his divorce six years ago he was living in a small studio apartment with a rambuncous, screaming Italian family above. Their constant fighting and loud music caused him to need headphones to fall asleep but the rent was cheap and the location convenient to public transportation. His car had conked out over a year ago and he never had the money to replace it. At forty-five, after being fired from a number of jobs, he found himself broke. His true talent was playing the piano, especially blues, and except for the pay he received at some lower-class clubs where he played on occasional weekends, he had no substantial income.

He had been a waiter at McDonald's for two weeks where he dropped two portions of fries, a coke on a woman's leg and then tripped over his shoelace, landing him in the lap of an eight-year-old who began screaming uncontrollably. He also dog sat for five Chihuahuas and one afternoon when walking them, they tangled themselves in the leashes, causing them to begin yapping and biting at his legs. One of the bites went through his skin and he needed a

few stitches. The man who had hired him agreed to pay the one hundred and fifty vet bill in lieu of his pay which left him with forty-six dollars.

Playing Santa one Christmas, stuffed with pillows and a long fake beard, one of the girls who sat on his knee began to cry. “*Now, now, little girl don't cry.*” He told her. “*What do you want for Christmas?*” And she shouted out. “*I don't want my mommy and daddy to get a divorce!*” The parents who were standing there quickly grabbed the girl off his knee. The other kids began to laugh. “*Here,*” he cried out, “*Here's your candy cane.*” The girl shook her head and it got stuck in her hair. This made her cry even more. The next kid answered the question by saying, “*I want my mommy and daddy to get a divorce.*”

There really wasn't anything impressive he could put down for references when filling out employment applications. Then an odd opportunity came about. There was an ad in the local paper for a male stripper at a nearby club. He thought himself a bit crazy even considering it but he had become desperate. When he got to the *Copafeel Club* he

almost turned around and ran out but the manager had just come out and shook his hand. He decided to give him a chance when he saw the desperation in Eddie's eyes. Even though his stomach was a bit paunchy, his legs and arms still had good muscle tone and his dark hair only the slightest touch of gray. So that night he was hired.

He envied the piano player who had the job he really yearned for but still counted himself lucky to have found work. That first night he felt foolish when he came on stage in a revealing bikini. He wore a sailor cap and a polka dot scarf around his neck. The two other younger strippers came out and began their slow, provocative grind, their hips moving to the beat of the music. He thought it would be wise to follow their moves. He was stilted at first but when a couple of the women whistled he allowed himself to loosen up. Before long he was grinding away, delighted at the bills the ladies were stuffing in his bikini. “He grinned, showing a nice set of teeth. *“Thanks.”*”

One lady in particular had her eye on him. It wasn't very flattering because she was quite large with chipmunk cheeks and breasts the size of beach balls.

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She wore bright red lipstick that had left a big stain on a front tooth when she smiled. Large hoop earrings dangled from her ear lobes. *"Hey sailor, come on over here,"* she shouted. He tried to avoid her but one of the other dancers shoved him, causing him to trip off the stage and into her lap. *"Excuse me, please, I'm... I'm so sorry."* She giggled and took his hand, pressing it against her breast. He shuddered, trying to pull it away. *"Don't be silly,"* she said, laughing. *"I think you're terrific."* And she began bouncing



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him on her lap. The other two women with her were snickering. *"I really like you,"* she said and planted a large red kiss on his cheek. *"And here's a nice tip, Sailor."* She slipped something into his hand, closing his fingers over it. He eased himself off her lap and to be polite, gave her a kiss on the cheek. *"Thanks so much,"* he said when suddenly she rubbed his crotch.

He was thoroughly embarrassed, hoping no one had seen and climbed back on the stage where one of the dancers wearing a Budweiser cap yelled out. *"Hey good work, Sailor!"* It was the end of the first act and the men left the stage to hang out in the undressing area. He sat down on one of the chairs and opened his hand to see what she had given him. There were six one hundred dollar bills wrapped in a sticky note. *"WOW!"* he said aloud.

He could barely believe it. One of the other guys came up to him. *"So you did good, eh?"* Good? It paid his rent for one month. *"Well,"* the other guy said, *"Since we don't get a salary, the tips sure pay off."* Eddie nodded and smiled. He felt foolish but happy—he could do this. Sure, it wasn't natural to his nature but then he'd done worse, remembering some of those awful jobs. He nodded and said thanks. Then he thought of the piano player and wished he might break a wrist or get sick, nothing deadly, just

enough to keep him away. He could then offer himself as a replacement. Once they heard him play, hey, they would keep him on for sure.

After the second act he got dressed and started home, stuffing the money in his jean pockets and the rest in a shirt pocket. Buses were slow at that hour so he decided to take the two mile walk. He suddenly was full of energy. Outside the local pub near his apartment he saw three guys smoking weed. They were pretty much regulars and he kept his head down, hoping they wouldn't notice him. Just then one of the guys, the one they called Monkey, came rushing toward him, a belt in his hand. *"Hey, Ombre, where you comin' from?"* Eddie kept his head down and picked up his pace. *"In his pockets, look in his pockets!"* another one shouted. Monkey took the belt and wrapped it around Eddie's neck. Then he stuck his hand in one of the pockets and gave out a hoot. *"Hey, lookie, lookie what I find."* And he counted—*"One, two, three, four, five hundred moola."* The others cheered and yelled: *"Hey man, come on, let's get outta here!"* Monkey let go of the belt and pushed him to the ground. *"Vamoose!"*

Eddie got up and sat on the curb, rubbing his neck. He was dazed, not even able to get angry. Too dazed to even wonder why bad luck seemed to keep follow-

ing him. After a couple of minutes, he slowly reached into his pocket. He couldn't believe it, the note was still there and a hundred dollar bill they had missed. He looked at the note: *CALL ME...* *ELAINE*—and a phone number. Since he was the kind of guy who always picked himself up, no matter what, he kissed the bill and began laughing, thinking—well, at least they didn't kick him in the balls. When he got home he slumped onto the bed, kicking off his jeans and pulling the rest of the bills out of his shirt pocket. With the one hundred bill left and the other tips it all came to about three hundred dollars, which was half the rent.

That night he dreamt a mob of women were clawing at him when he was on stage and trying to rip off his skin. Then a guy who seemed like Monkey lifted him and threw him off the stage where he landed into Elaine's lap. "*Where's my money?*" she demanded, "*I want all of it back!*" Then she pulled off her bra and wrapped it around his neck until he was gasping for air. At that point he woke up, sweating. He had forgotten to take off the polka dot scarf that had tightened around his neck during the night. When he pulled it off he could finally breathe. ❖

"Shipwrecked 2020"

by Lucio Cooper

inverted now and buried in a maze,
California's voice,
is a tidal wave
polluted with the shipwrecked,
flotsam-
of his 39 million
diseased children,
left to fumble in the dark gale
with no gravity,
no compass or
celestial helm,

we shoot flares from our homes
as we all drift into the void,
bilge pumps of fear,
syphon our sea-sick nightmares,
into the eyes of- passing strangers,
we are all pariahs now,

We salivate and froth like rabid dogs,

Lemmings for the College party slaughter,

The spring break massacre,

We are parched for a drop of sweet
fraternizing nectar,
molecules mutated and contaminated for eternity,
we couldn't co-exist in peace,
Scarlett letters from a jealous god
spell out COVID,

Look at us now,
Just the thought of a drop of vaporized-spittle and we are
running full speed

at a glass window on a skyscraper
tethered-

to an I.C.U. in hell.

“Cyanide Soup”

by Rachael Biggs

As I sat in the stairwell to put on my running shoes, she continued to natter.

“You shouldn’t have done that. You *really* shouldn’t have done that. You’ve upset the kids. Jamie was so upset he had tears in his eyes. You shouldn’t have done that.”

I pulled up my socks, the craggy hag hovering over me, her voice getting more shrill with each non-sensical thing she said.

“I would have told them when it was time. It wasn’t the right time. You upset them for no reason. You *shouldn’t* have done that.”

Her bony ankles stuck out between the mint green pants that were too short for her and the thread-bare half socks, that barely covered the bottom of her feet and therefore had no purpose whatsoever.

How easily I could have knocked her down and made this horror stop, but there are laws about killing your 89-year-old grandmother, no matter how enraged she makes you with 40 years of manipulation and bold-faced lies.

“They’re just kids! You shouldn’t have done that.”

“They’re not kids, they have kids of their own. Letting them

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know what’s happening is *normal*.” I spoke slowly, laying the condescension on thick.

“It is NOT! Don’t tell your kids my business!”

I gritted my teeth, wanting to be right in spite of her delirium.

“I don’t have kids, Grandma.”

“I know!” She always knew.

You could deliver groundbreaking news, top secret CIA intel and she’d say, ‘I know’.

She leered at me, face contorted with an ugly anger, her mouth a wrinkled hole of hell surrounded by coral-colored lipstick.

“You shouldn’t have DONE that!”

I stood up and she turned her back, still muttering as she stepped up into the laundry room. I picked up my black Nike’s with the stitching prematurely unraveling on the left toe and lunged for her, but caught myself just as she turned and bore her cold blue eyes into me.

“You were going to hit me!,” she shrieked.

Was I? Oh, God. I had to get the fuck out of here.

I stepped around her in the doorway as she shuffled and shifted unpredictably like an annoying Poodle underfoot.

“I’m going to go for a walk.”

“Get out and *stay* out!” she

said hoarsely.

I slammed the flimsy wooden door behind me, not meaning to, but I was a brute in this 150-year-old house seemingly built for elves. I stepped into the clean Spring air, invigorated by its cool and the scent of lilacs from the tree under which my dead mother lay.

The quiet swooshed over me and I was wrapped in relief. I could hear my breath as I walked quickly away from the dementia demon that inhabited my mother’s mother.

I didn’t want to go to Andrew’s. I didn’t want him to know how disgusting my family was. I might tarnish the sweetness budding between us for a second time. When we had courted last, I leaned hard on him and regretted it when he told me he couldn’t give me what I needed, and so I vowed to need less this time.

Had I not rushed out without my phone I would have called my dad. He would have answered on the first the ring “Hello, Princess,” maybe with his most amusing Cockney accent, telling me not to cry. Having been in-laws briefly, he would have understood how the word insane did not begin to describe these people and he would have picked me up in his

smokey truck and I would have sat close to him with his arm around me, while he made it all better just by existing. Had I not rushed out without my phone and had I not witnessed his last rattling breath as black goopy blood poured out of his nose and mouth and his hand gripped mine, everything would be more or less okay, but I did, and it wasn't.

I walked down the hill toward the beach. It was a calm June evening with skies as blue as her vacant eyes. The chill of Spring lingered, but Summer was within reach and I marveled at the radiance of the sparkles on the ocean; such a sharp contrast to the dark little house at the top of the hill.

I sat on a brown plastic bench, bubbling with rage. Having come to the island for a film job and to be closer to Andrew with the added bonus of advancing my career, four months of belongings were inside my grandparent's house and while I couldn't bear the thought of going back there, I had to be on set the next morning and needed my things.

I walked up and down the beach trying to navigate balance in the rocky terrain. She might not let me back in. Maybe she'd barricade the door with a dresser like my mom had when my boyfriend and I went to a movie, and she got drunk out of her mind. The lilac didn't fall far from the tree.

As dusk took over and the

shining sun carried on to faraway lands, I had to make a move, and as much as I disliked it, that move was going to have to be to go back and get my stuff.

I took breaths so deep my lungs wondered if they'd been kidnapped by a blue whale while I walked.

The streetlight came on as I approached, and I looked carefully at the home that I'd been coming to for over 30 years.

Originally, it had been my great grandmother's house—a two-bedroom rancher on a nice chunk of land with an ocean view. White English roses poked through thorns alongside poppies and daffodils and tulips in every variety and color in spite of the deer that munched on them every chance they got. A clematis grew up and over the cedar roof, its fist-sized purple flowers creeping further and further out of bounds. There was wood paneling throughout, and delicate ceramic things, hand embroidered pillowcases and tiny teacups. When Grandpa's mom started to get too old to look after herself, he and my grandma built a modern addition on top of her tiny home and had lived there ever since. The addition seemed to make the ceilings lower downstairs and though my 4'10" great-grandmother probably didn't notice, I felt like a giant at 5'7".

The door, surprisingly, was open and I turned the wiggly copper handle and went in. I crept to

the back bedroom and started to gather my things as quietly as I could, hoping maybe she hadn't heard me enter. Before I was halfway packed, she was at the bedroom door, hovering and chastising.

"You can't pull those drawers out so far, they'll fall."

"Okay," I said, keeping my head down, doing my best not to engage.

"I want you out."

"I know, Grandma."

I continued to gather my clothes and put them into the sturdy plastic bins I'd traveled with. She continued to loiter like a vulture, waiting for me to do something she could verbally disapprove of.

"I want the key back."

Ugh, I forgot I had tucked it into the pocket of my hoodie before I left with the violence of an hour ago coursing through my veins. I rummaged through my suitcase and pulled out the key, tossing it on the floor without speaking, still on my knees.

"Don't throw it at me!"

I repeated in my mind: stay calm, be cool, stay calm, be cool.

"I know you're worried and you haven't slept much, but are you sure this is what you want?" I asked through gritted teeth.

"I slept just *fine!*"

"Grandpa's not coming home from the hospital this time. It's normal that you're not feeling quite right."

“I feel just fine.”

I struggled to close the zipper of my suitcase, unsure how clothes always seemed to expand when packing, but shrink when trying to do up zippers on tight jeans.

“You won’t see me again,” I said flatly, aiming to sting.

She crossed her arms, her eyes steely as tears streamed down my face and I turned my head away from her.

I got everything out of the bedroom and went to the kitchen where I packed my vitamins and wrapped my favorite mug in the sleeve of a sweater she’d knitted for me.

She climbed the stairs on all fours to accommodate her arthritis, finally leaving me in peace while I packed my shoes, wondering why the hell I brought so many pairs. I slunk out, my arms weighted with bags and my hands full. I didn’t look at the house as I drove away, knowing she’d be in the upstairs window.

Andrew’s studio was 40 seconds away and the only sensible thing to do was to go there and give him an abridged version of what happened. I would get a hotel, but I needed a hug first and to talk to someone with all their marbles.

He was sitting on the couch quietly re-stringing a guitar, his face full of peaceful concentration.

“Hi,” I said smiling like noth-

ing was out of the ordinary.

His face lit up, thank fuck. “I wasn’t expecting you—hey!”

His boyishness made me feel light. It was #46 in the compilation of times I knew I loved him.

He made me a bagel and I sat close. It was hard to swallow, but I knew I’d be hungry if I didn’t.

Buzzing with adrenaline and exhaustion by the time I found my way to the hotel, I negotiated a monthly rate that was more than half my salary. I ran a bath and lay in the bubbles, trying to comprehend the years of resentment that had come to a head only a couple of hours earlier. The audio replay between my ears was deafening. Over and over her tattered voice dictated the words of a discombobulated mind and it enraged me as much as it broke my heart. This is what had shaped my mother.

To exacerbate my anger, I received several messages from my half-brother’s new girlfriend stating that I was disgusting and that I should be ashamed of myself. I didn’t point out the irony that at 24, she had more children than IQ points and collected a welfare cheque claiming them as dependents while latching on to my brother’s meager income to support her habits. I blocked her, unsure of why she ever had my contact information in the first place.

I snuck out of work the next day on a sushi run for the execu-

tive producer to try to get in a few last words with my grandpa. I had no idea what to expect, but I hoped that either my grandma wouldn’t be there or that tempers would have subsided. Neither was true; my grandma *and* my aunt stood outside his door like guards armed with vitriol and insidious hatred for me, the outsider. My grandma started in on me again, while her daughter looked on disdainfully from beneath her bushy black eyebrows. I scooted past to kiss Grandpa on the cheek.

“I love you.” I said, through the lump in my throat.

“Can someone empty this tray of piss?” he pleaded, his eyes searching for a nurse.

He died the following Sunday, four days later. He’d made it to 90 in spite of drinking heavily for at least 80 of those years. He liked to boast of having his first drink at 8, when he’d rummage through the bushes at the local dance hall where partygoers would stash their moonshine. He wore his alcoholism like a badge of honor, as though how much he could drink made him more of a man instead of a glaring vulnerability that often had him in drunken tears halfway through his daily 26er of gin at 2pm.

My ostracism from the family was swift. I got one message that he had died and that was it. It was like this was what they had been waiting for. All the judgement and hatred for my mom had been

transferred to me and what she must've felt tenfold as an addict was enough to nearly knock me out. No wonder she'd needed heroin and booze and everything else she could hurl into her bloodstream to numb their malice. The dysfunction was a cyanide soup, each one of them their own hideous ingredient. I was fortunate to have been shunned, though I didn't feel fortunate. I felt sad and alienated, vengeful and enraged—except for when I was with Andrew.

Andrew was my protection blanket of inside jokes, shared food and day trips to cute little towns with goats on the roof and delicious tacos. I tried to think about work as much as I could, but it was just a joe job with a fancy title. Instead I threw my passion into the new relationship. I gave him every bit of love that I wasn't getting, spoiling him with affection and ignoring every sign that he wasn't capable of being on the receiving end of it. He wanted to smoke weed with the friends he'd had since high school and dream about being a rock star while he tinkered away at the music studio he'd built in a town of 600 and I just wanted to be by his side because it felt warm and friendly there.

I went back to the city when the job ended and Andrew broke up with me, citing that he didn't see a future for us. I couldn't see any future without him. It hit me

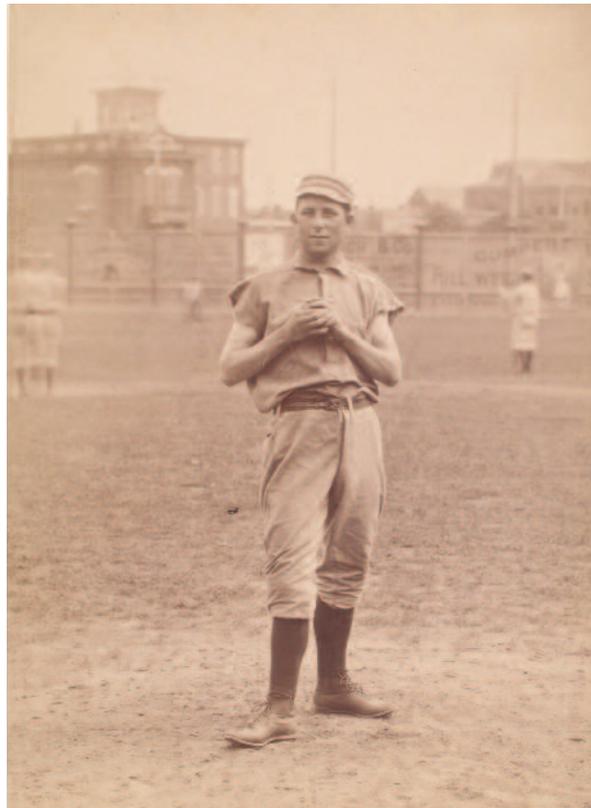
hard, since all of my love was poured into him. I should've diversified.

Two Christmases and two birthdays passed, and more nieces and nephews were born as reported by social media. The only communication I received was notice that I had been taken out of the will in one final slash at my well-being.

Andrew and I text sometimes,

but I need too much and maybe it makes him feel like a failure unable to give it.

If everything was different though, it would've, could've, might've been perfect. ❖



Contributors

Anita G. Gorman grew up in Queens and now lives in northeast Ohio. Since 2014 she has had 99 short stories and 20 essays accepted for publication. Her one-act play, *Astrid: or, My Swedish Mama*, produced at Youngstown Ohio's Hopewell Theatre in March 2018, starred Anita and her daughter Ingrid.

Gloria g. Murray of Deer Pk. NY, writes, "I have been published in *The Paterson Review*, *Mimzor Anthology*, *Poet Lore*, *Flapperhouse*, *Adelaide*, *Xandau*, *Dash*, and others. One of my poems won 1st prize in the Anna Davidson Rosenberg contest from *Poetica* magazine, 2014, and third prize in the 2017 Writers Digest Poetry Awards."

Lucio Cooper's work has been featured in the *San Diego Poetry Annual*, *Cheat River Review*, *Down in the Dirt Magazine* and other publications. He is a third generation San Diegan who still lives and works in the city he loves.

Rachael Biggs is an author whose memoir *Yearning for Nothings and Nobodies* was published in 2012. She studied creative writing at Langara College and UCLA and holds a screen writing diploma from Vancouver Film School. Her short fiction has appeared in *Angel City Review*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Door is a Jar*, *Horror Sleaze Trash*, *Charge Magazine*, *5 on the Fifth*, *Cliterature*, *Adelaide*, *Defunkt* and *Waymark Magazines* as well as Train River Publishing's 2020 Anthology. Her collection of short stories *Feral Femme* will be published in November 2021 by Adelaide Books.

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