

The Metropolitan



Bettie Page Charcoal and Graphite Pencil Adrian Galindo

A Magazine of Writing
by Students
at Metropolitan Community College

2015

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by Students

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“Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist.”

Pablo Picasso



The Metropolitan 2015

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The Metropolitan publishes all types of academic and literary writing, including descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive works, as well as creative prose and poetry. We encourage writings from across the disciplines and also welcome visual art. Our goal is to showcase the best of the many voices, styles, and subjects MCC writers and readers find meaningful and to support critical thinking, creativity, and expression at Metropolitan Community College.

The Metropolitan is published once a year. The print edition includes the best selections from the full web edition which can be read at <http://resource.mccneb.edu/metropolitan>

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2015 Writing Awards

For his poem “It’s Pronounced Bis-koth-ah,” Joseph McGuire is the winner of The Metropolitan 2015 Prize for Student Writing, a 13.5-credit-hour tuition remission. The first runner-up, Ryan Redler, is awarded 9 credit hours tuition remission for his poem “Maryjane and Chicken Soup.” The second runner-up, Laurie Jordan, receives 4.5 credit hours tuition remission for her story “The Bank.”

It's Pronounced Bis-koth-ah

Joseph McGuire

Her Italian kitchen is sacred space; a consecrated room gathering us together, sustaining flesh and restoring spirit. Between oven and sink lay a wooden altar whose legs mark our maturity in carved notches, signs indicating our readiness to accept her Magi gifts.

First, a lesson in frugality; a frivolous swing of the icebox door is a dime wasted. Second, a sepia aged recipe card written in her calligraphy-scripted hand. Third, the delights crafted from her culinary tutelage had a most powerful name, and it was pronounced “bis-koth-ah.” Not biscotti.

Her biscotti are not the familiar cafe cookies, plastic wrapped and stamped with sell-by dates. They are not traditional, twice-baked hard and cracked desert dry needing to be quenched in coffee or wine, yielding just barely enough for softened palatability.

No, her biscotti are delicate pastry pillows, glossy with crystalline glaze draping the airy morsels in sweetest sugar, flavored with extracts of star anise and citrus, cocoa and mint, tasting of weddings and heartache, baptisms and funerals.

Her biscotti hijack the linoleum-clad, avocado-hued kitchen, transforming it into an all-day aproned assembly line. Mounds of dough blur by, rolled and divided on floured boards, hooked arthritic hands showing no signs of fatigue. Fired and finished, they rest, laid cooling in metal bowls.

Her biscotti store well, a blessing now that she's gone.

The essence of my mother's mother lingers a moment longer in air-tight Tupperware boxes, carefully arranged and rationed frozen memorials greeting me every time I waste a dime.

Maryjane and Chicken Soup

Ryan Redler

I'm from where the fireflies rise
at dark park at twilight,
waiting for my lover.

I'm from lamplight and no cable.

I'm from mail envelopes and scraps of paper
with poems and phone numbers scrawled upon them on
the table.

A kitchen knife sharpened brick pencil, with no eraser,
or eyeliner on my pencil tip,
sharpeners from my mother's makeup bag.

Just charcoal and berries,
drawing on the cave walls,
hand prints, and antelope,
might as well
throw in a mammoth,
and some spears,
just to make it high tech.
That's where I'm from.

I'm from,

Honey what day is it today?

and

Will you read this for me? It looks important.

I'm from Maryjane in the air,

and the smells of homemade chicken and

noodles

simmering on the stove top.

I'm from

aspirin fixes everything,

and no doctor visits because we have no insurance.

I made it through.

I did.

My kids know to head home when the streetlights come on.

My kids know how to pray.

My kids know I love them.

My kids know that I am proud of them, and I
always will be.

My kids know that I accept them for who they are ... Flaws
And All ... Unconditional.

I was raised on Maryjane and Chicken Soup.

The Bank

Laurie Jordan

Torrey slammed the hatchback down, squashing all of his earthly possessions that were jammed into the back of the old, rusty, and badly hail-damaged Pacer. He turned around and gave a middle finger salute to his now ex-girlfriend, Mary, who was firmly planted on the porch with a wooden baseball bat gripped between her hands, ready to swing. He got into the passenger side of the car, scooted over the console into the driver's seat, and turned the ignition. The car groaned, and the engine made a loud thunk. He turned the key again. The beast hesitated, then started. He backed out of the apartment complex driveway and sped off down the alley, then turned onto the street, thinking about his new situation: he was homeless.

Torrey decided to pay his mom a visit and get some money before he started making calls to see which friend would let him crash on their sofa for a few days. He drove to the entrance, took a left, then a right, and drove on a narrow path, only wide enough for one car. He parked the car, grabbed his tan burlap messenger bag from the back seat, and walked across the lush grass, looking down and scanning the ground from the left to the right, then stopped. "Hey, Mom. I'm sorry, it's been a long time. I can only stay for a minute or two. I need to find a place to live. Mary threw me out for good this time. I'm not too broken up about it. Heck, we was only together for three or four months. Plus, she's got a crazy kid. His name is Greg. I've never met him. He is going to be coming to live with us. Uh, I guess I mean her now that I don't live there. He's been out on his own for a few years. I've never met the dude, but he sounded like a real piece of work, a total junkie. He's a meth head," he explained. He threw his jacket down and sat upon it. He patted the cold, black marble gravestone that was almost flush with the ground and bowed his head for a second or two. Torrey missed his mom. Even though they had a rocky relationship and she didn't approve of his criminal lifestyle, they loved each other.

Torrey hadn't been to visit his mom in a while and felt a tinge of remorse. He didn't have time for any more chitchat or

"I'm sorries." He needed to get down to business. He removed a small, silver garden shovel from the messenger bag. He unzipped a side pocket and pulled out a wood ruler. He placed the ruler in the center of the headstone and measured out nine inches away from the headstone. He grabbed the shovel and carefully sliced through the grass and earth, as if he were cutting a cake. He pulled the disk of grass and dirt up and set it aside, so he could place it back in the same spot. He dug down until he could feel his shovel hit metal. Torrey felt a sense of relief and muttered, "Yes!" He dug up a small, metal, circular-shaped can. He brushed off the dirt and peeled off the plastic lid. He pulled out a roll of money, smelled it, then removed the rubber band and started to count the bills. "\$5000 big ones," he said. He took \$3000 and placed it into the back pocket of his Levis. He placed the remaining \$2000 back into the can, secured the lid, and tossed it into the hole. He muttered, "Thanks, Ma. I knew I could always count on you. See, I didn't take it all. I left some for another time." He patted the top of the gravestone like he was patting a dog on top of its head.

After Torrey's mom died, he used her grave as a bank. He usually earned money by selling stolen things, and if he didn't have anything to sell, he donated plasma. He didn't want to use a traditional bank, so he used the bank of Mom. He knew that no one in their right mind would dig around a grave. Keeping the money with Mom was a smart and safe plan, a plan he shared with no one.

Torrey looked around to make sure he wasn't being watched. The cemetery was in a rough part of town, and you never knew who was lurking around or setting up camp in the wooded area. Just over the hill from the crematory was a methadone clinic, and down the street was a homeless shelter. He was always cautious when he visited Mom. Torrey never came to borrow money from Mom during the day, but this time, he was more than desperate.

He replaced the dirt and disk of grass and patted it down with this hand. "Looks good," he said. He stood up, brushed his hands off on his jeans, picked up the bag, and said, "See ya, Ma." He turned to walk back to the car, and then he stopped to take a leak next to a lilac bush. He heard the sound of crunching leaves

and turned his head to the right and then the left. Standing next to him was a young man, about six feet tall, with buck teeth, sores covering his face, and wearing tattered, dirty clothes. He pointed a handgun at Torrey's head.

The gunman said, "I seen you, ha, yup, I seen you. I know you have cash in your pocket, and there is still some in that can you buried. Gimme the cash, NOW."

Torrey placed his hands in the air, just like he had done for the cops a few weeks ago, and he said, "Now wait a minute. You ain't gonna get shit out of me, bro. Let's talk about this." Torrey flashed his movie star smile at him, hoping it would help this dude see that he wasn't a threat. The young man appeared to be a meth head. Torrey had seen it before, and this guy was textbook. He had dark circles under his eyes. His teeth had seen better days. He was extremely thin and gaunt looking. He had sores on his face and neck that had been picked at. His hair was greasy and long. This guy appeared to be a mess and probably needed a fix. Torrey said, "How about I give you \$100.00 and we pretend this never happened?"

The young man cackled, cocked his head to the side, opened his eyes wide, and hissed, "You are a dead man, and I'm gonna be a rich one in about five seconds." The young man started to count backwards, "Five, four, three, two...."

Torrey started to back up and decided to make a run for it. He ran in the opposite direction of his car and headed for the woods.

The young man screamed, "You're dead, you're dead, asshole. I'm gonna kill you and spend all your money. Now ... you is gonna die." The young man, with his gun still raised, pointed at Torrey and fired.

Torrey screamed and cried, "NOOOO." And he could hear the gunman laughing. After the bullet lodged into his upper back, the pain was so intense, he was unable to walk or run away. He was stunned; he hadn't thought this guy would actually shoot.

Torrey felt dizzy and started to fall to the ground. On his way down, he grazed his head on the corner of a black marble tombstone. Blood was gushing from the bullet wound in his back and his temple. He tried to get up but couldn't. He was able to muster the strength to roll onto his back and look up to the

sky, but he couldn't see sky; he could only see the young man's scabby face inches from his own. He could smell the rank breath of the junkie. Torrey muttered, "Help me, call an ambulance, call somebody, or I'm gonna die."

The young man hissed and spat as he spoke. "I told ya, asshole, you is gonna die, and your money is mine, ha, ha, ha. Now shut up, and get dead already." The young man stepped back and kicked Torrey in the side several times. Torrey went limp, but his eyes remained open. The young man didn't know or care if he was still alive or dead. He bent down and rolled Torrey onto his side. The junkie removed the roll of cash from Torrey's back pocket and placed it in his own pocket. He also helped himself to Torrey's car keys, silver wolf head necklace, and the gold pinky ring he was wearing. The young man took the burlap satchel and walked away from Torrey.

He went to the gravestone where he had spotted Torrey. The young man sat down on the ground and started to dig. It didn't take him long to reach the tin can. He placed the can in the satchel, walked to Torrey's beat-up Pacer, and tried to open the door. It was stuck. He opened the passenger side, got in, scooted across and over the console, fired it up, and drove off.

When the young man pulled into the apartment complex parking spot, Torrey's rusty car sputtered to a halt. He spotted his mom sitting on the corner of the porch; she stood up when she saw the all too familiar Pacer pull into the parking lot. She had a baseball bat in her hands. She was yelling, appeared to be very angry about something, and was waving the bat around like she was going to hit someone. The young man got out of Torrey's car on the passenger side and stood by the car. He cautiously waved, and yelled, "Yo, Ma. It's just me, Greg. Geez." He shrugged his shoulders and said to her, "What's up? Whatch ya so worked up for, and why are ya swinging a ball bat around like some crazy woman?"

It took her a moment to realize who he was; she hadn't seen him in a few years. He didn't look very good. She stared at him and looked confused. She put the bat down and hollered at her son, "Greg ... where did you get that car? That's not your car. Where is Torrey?"

Greg replied with a shrug, "Who's Torrey?"

Freak Show Funeral

Nate Detty

It's peaceful here in my pillowed bed at the front of the tent
where I
am surrounded by formerly familiar faces now estranged by the
places
grief has taken them. Faint shouts drift in from just out the
entrance,
"Gather round! Gather Round! Get your seats to the saddest
send-off in town!"

Mourning wallows in the orange glow from the circus lanterns
burning, casting an eerie
radiance on the bereaved audience that awaits my interment.
Rows of empty chairs echo my isolation.
The chill of death invades the vacancy no longer kept
at bay by the hot breath of a boisterous crowd.

A shush takes the sole seven griever when a man enters, his
swallow tail coat sways
behind him as he sashays to the front. I can feel his presence
when he stops just
before me. A sorrow so thick as he bows his head it transcends
dimensions
to reach even me. He turns to face the few who have come to
grieve.

He looks past the bearded lady, her whiskers slick from her tears,
to the contortionist,
whose grieving has been predictably kinky, tied in knots around
the illustrated man.
The midget's flipper appendages are wrapped around the shin of
the world's tallest
man, his face buried in knee to conceal his weeping.

Tears race down the tracks on the lion tamer's face, left behind by
the lions
he can no longer tame, which is why he is clinging to that box of
kittens.

The sword swallower is so sorrowful that he wants to eat dull so
he's sitting alone, eating grapes whole.

There's nothing else for him to see as it seems angst is the only
thing filling the rest of the space.

The ring master clears his throat demanding attention, his
nervous fingers
twirling the tips of his handlebar mustache, the same way he
always has.

A dozen eyes descend upon him in silent anticipation of his
lamentation.

He bows his head again before his eulogy begins,

"My friends,
We charge five dollars for general admission, a fair price, I'd say,
to let them in.
They flock to our tents when we come to town, they are always
impatient,
eager for entertainment, never hesitant to gasp, laugh, 'awe,' stare,
and gawk,
before they return to their normalcy."

"It is evident, however, in all of these empty seats that your
novelty
wears off once they've seen you. It does not matter that your
name is
not The Bearded Lady. They will offer no sympathy for they do
not pay for
your company. They pay for the show, to look at the freaks."

"We are the only people who will grieve when we leave this
world.
No one ever goes to a Freak Show Funeral."

Just a Cook

Nate Detty

I am a cook, make no mistake, a cook not a chef.
I'm not the one you'll see on TV receiving praise for the amazing
meal the critics just ate. I'm just the one who made it.
Mine is the thankless existence of a lifelong line cook.
An industrial kitchen is my church, the grill is my altar
where I sacrifice the flesh of innocent beings
to the almighty printer that screams its demands
in encrypted abbreviations only a few understand.
Its tickets are my scripture that I follow explicitly,
unless of course the prophet that penned it is being a bitch,
in which case that particular chapter gets 'lost.'
That's a sin, of course, but I'll pay my penance by polishing
stainless steel until the cleaner singses my insensitive skin.
Our confession booth is just out the back where we stop
whenever we take out the trash to smoke whatever we
happen to have on hand.
"Mise en place," is my prep-time prayer.
We worship in 'revenue' 5 to 9, seven nights a week.
I can get so caught up in our angry God pushing in orders,
that I'll start speaking in tongues.
"EIGHTY-SIX PILAF!"
"ORDER-FIRE A PORTER!"
"RUN THE DISH DAMNIT, IT'S DYING ON THE PASS!"
"NAVE'S IN THE WEEDS AGAIN!"
"16 STEAKS ALL DAY!"
"THAT LINGUINE'S S.O.S."
"CLEARED THE RAIL!"
Mine is a vengeful Deity, a smiting Divinity, and a whorish
Holiness,
but it's the only thing that can give me that rush that somehow
brings peace.

The Bridge

Nate Detty

Stan walked slowly along the side of the bridge, pulling his long trench coat tighter around his torso in a futile attempt to keep out the bitter cold. It was a beautiful night. A crescent moon hung in the clear, dark blue sky. The only obstruction to his view of the stars was the faint glow of light pollution which perpetually fogged the city's nightscape. The impediment to the stars made him miss home more than anything else. He closed his eyes as he walked and pictured the night sky back home. His thoughts inevitably turned to a quick drive out into the countryside, to parking on the river bank and lying in the bed of his old Chevy with Valerie, his high school sweetheart, while The Killers' "Midnight Show" played in the cab, and they looked up at those stars.

He stopped walking and leaned on the railing of the bridge as he thought about that night and what it had meant. He had been sixteen. His driver's license had been still warm from the printer when he stuffed it into his pocket and jerked the keys from his father's hand before he ran out the door to that white truck. He barely heard his father shout something about twelve o'clock somewhere behind him. Being the first with the freedom garnered by the possession of a license, he went out with the boys first. They did what teenage boys typically do with a 4x4 in rural Nebraska: they tore through muddy fields; they spun the tires on the gravel roads; they even hit a crossroad with enough speed to get all four of those tires off the ground. After dropping his friends off one by one, he drove to Valerie's and parked up the street, close enough to see the window of her basement bedroom but far enough that he wouldn't be noticed by her parents. He had thought it would take more effort to convince her to sneak out and go for a drive, but one text was all it had taken. He remembered the rush he felt when he saw her window open while he was still waiting for her reply, the way his nervous energy encroached upon crippling fear and mingled with uncontrollable excitement to make his heart race like it never had

before and rarely had since. They drove through the country in silence, his arm around her, her head on his chest, the windows down, and the cool summer wind flowing through the cab. They spent the rest of the night under the stars in the bed of his truck where they made awkward love for the first time in their young lives. She cried after, he told her he loved her, and then he held her as they looked up at the stars until the first rays of the morning's light began to taint the night. His dad was waiting up for him when he got home, and that violation of his father's trust had earned him another six months before he was allowed to drive again. "Worth it" was how he had always finished telling that story.

Now, eighteen years later, he stood in the middle of a bridge on the other side of the state, staring out at a freezing, motionless river flanked on either side by the twinkling lights of two different cities, desperate to remember how he had felt that night and wishing he could see the night sky over his home town just one more time. He placed his hands on the railing and leaned out to look down at the half-frozen water. He had reached the middle of the bridge before stopping, just far enough from either side that the reflections of the light didn't reach where he stood. Instead, he gazed down at a smooth sheet of unforgiving darkness. *How cliché this is*, he thought as he stood there, unsure of whether he was attempting to gather the courage to jump or to walk away. He lost himself as he stood there and drifted away from reality. Clarity left his thoughts, replaced by an indistinguishable murmur that drowned out the shuffling noises of an approaching visitor. He had no way of knowing how long he had stood there when a sudden, unexpected, deep and harsh voice spoke up, bringing him back to reality, "You gonna jump?"

He snapped his head to the side to see a homeless man standing before him. The man had long, graying brown hair that was dirty and unkempt, with a long scraggly beard to match. He wore a light green coat that was too big for his frame and stained in too many places to count. His jeans and shoes, just as dirty as his coat, were ragged and holey, and his smell of booze, sweat, smoke, shit, and piss pierced even the dead winter air. In one hand he carried a fast food cheeseburger with one bite taken

out of it, the greasy paper wrapper folded back to reveal the greyish meat, and in the other, he carried a cheap plastic bottle of whiskey. The lid was missing.

“Who the hell are you?” Stan asked, ungrateful for the company.

“I’m Frank,” he said. “You gonna jump?” Frank asked again.

“That’s the plan,” Stan said before he turned back to the river.

From the corner of his eye, Stan saw Frank follow his gaze and look down over the bridge at the cold, murky river and take an eager bite of cheeseburger.

“What a cliché,” Frank said around his mouthful of half-chewed burger.

“I thought the same thing,” Stan said.

They stood side by side looking out over the water, silent except for the smacking of Frank’s lips as he hungrily devoured an obviously infrequent meal.

“Are you going to try to stop me?” Stan asked without looking up from the river.

“Nah, man. I’m just here for the show,” Frank said.

Stan chuckled and noted the lack of any real effect the stranger’s contempt had on his resolve. From the corner of his eye he saw Frank take the last bite of his burger, wipe his mouth on the back of his hand, crumple up the paper, and toss it over the side of the bridge. Together, they watched it drift down to the river. Once the wrapper reached the water, Frank put the whiskey bottle to his lip, tilted his head back, and took a long pull before he let out a rasp of breath and shook his head.

“Why, though?” Frank asked.

“Why what?” Stan asked, although he knew what Frank meant.

“Why you wanna kill yourself, man. Why you gonna jump?”

Stan took a deep breath and kept his gaze fixed on the river. The two men once again stood in silence, Frank taking the occasional pull from his bottle, Stan contemplating the answer to Frank’s question.

“It’s not what you think,” Stan finally said, his eyes not moving. “I’m not depressed, or sad, or lonely, or any of that shit people always assume when someone kills themselves.”

Frank looked at Stan, then down at the river. "You sure, man?" he asked.

Stan's stare never left the water as he once again thought about the night with Valerie in the bed of his truck. He saw that night as the last time he had felt hope for his future, the last time he had felt excited and eager about what life had in store for him, the last time he had seen tomorrow as a wonder instead of just another chore to be done.

"I'm sure," Stan answered. "I was happy once. I'll spare you the details, but I lost that. I sank into a depression that has consumed most of my adult life. It went away. I can't even remember when, but I woke up one day, and I wasn't sad anymore. Nothing replaced that. I haven't had a genuine emotion in years. Nothing makes me sad, nothing brings me joy, nothing excites me, disappoints me, intrigues me. Nothing. The realization that I've already experienced the best my life has to offer had no effect on me. Not even the prospect of ending it can phase me now. But I go out every day and put on this fake smile and go through my life like the good little boy I am supposed to be. That facade is freaking exhausting, and I'm tired. I'm just..." He took a deep breath, slowly let it out, and hung his head. "Tired."

"That's messed up, man," Frank said.

Frank took another pull from the bottle and held it out for Stan. Stan took his own long pull, handed it back to Frank, and the two once again stood in silence staring at the river. After several minutes, Frank gestured towards the river where he had thrown his wrapper and then spoke.

"That's the first thing I've eaten in weeks," he said. "It'll give me diarrhea later, and I won't have it in a bathroom or any toilet. No, I'll be doing that squatted down in some alleyway, praying like hell that I don't get caught, that no one sees me having diarrhea all over their alleyway and tries to chase me away with a broom. You ever try to run away from someone who's hitting you with a goddamned broom while you're having diarrhea? No, you haven't. You get it all over yourself." He paused. "I tell ya, man. I don't like smelling like shit."

Frank reached into his deep coat pocket and pulled out a lighter and a cheap pack of cigarettes. From the pack, he produced a cigarette that looked as though it had been rolled in grocery store bag paper. He lit it up, took a long drag, and let the smoke out into the night.

“Three of my toes are black,” he continued. “I think it’s frostbite. The hospitals are required to treat me, and by that, I mean, I’ll lose my toes. If I’m lucky, I’ll keep my foot. I’ll get a few hours in a warm bed, probably a meal or two, but as fast as they can, they’ll throw me back out to freeze off more body parts.” He paused to take another drag of his cigarette and went on. “You know that bar, Tarts, I think it’s called, right up the street from here? No, you probably don’t. That’s not your scene. Anyways, you don’t even want to know what I did for thirty bucks out back of Tarts tonight. Thirty bucks, man. That’s apparently what my dignity costs now, and no one looks me in the eye. Not even you, man. How messed up is that? Here you are ready to jump off this bridge, to kill yourself, and still thinking you’re too good to even look me in the f**king eyes.”

There was another long silence and the two men stood shoulder to shoulder as Frank’s words hung in the air. “Are you gonna jump?” Stan asked Frank, breaking the silence.

Frank looked at Stan, flicked his cigarette out over the bridge and answered, “Not a chance man. I’m full tonight. The whiskey keeps me warm. I got smokes. I got like seven bucks left. I’m fine.” He reached his hand up and patted Stan on the shoulder. “You’re tired,” he said. “You got it rough, my brother.”

Frank patted Stan’s shoulder one last time and walked behind him. Before walking away, he placed both hands on the railing, leaned over it, and looked straight down.

“It’s pretty deep here, man,” he said and pointed towards the bank. “You may want to head towards the side, aim for the rocks, you know?”

Stan stood in silence as he watched Frank slowly saunter down the bridge and out of sight without looking back. It wasn’t what Frank had said that angered Stan, or the way Frank had all but dared him to go through with it. It was the way that Frank had walked away without even looking back that really pissed

Stan off. *Who the f*** is this guy*, Stan thought, seething over the thought of Frank daring him to kill himself and then walking away so nonchalantly, as though his actions had no consequences. Stan wondered if Frank would feel any remorse if Stan did jump. Stan imagined the outcome of his jump. He pictured Frank walking along the bank of the river in the morning light still carrying the bottle of whiskey, the lid still missing. He saw Frank look out into the shallow river, and he saw Frank's unshifting expression when he noticed Stan's broken body lying mangled and lifeless amongst the rocks in the shallow water. He watched as his imaginary Frank waded into the frigid water, inching closer to Stan's body until he could see it bloating and the skin, much paler in death, puckered from bathing in the cold water. He imagined Frank kneeling down next to the body as if in remorse. Then Stan's imaginary Frank suddenly reached out and pulled the wallet out of the lifeless Stan's back pocket. Stan couldn't even imagine someone caring about him.

He turned back to the river, unable to think of anything but Frank. He wondered where Frank had wandered off to, how Frank would be spending his evening. Again, he was able to imagine Frank very clearly. This time, though, Stan couldn't help but imagine Frank waddling down an alleyway as fast as he could with his pants around his ankles, losing his bowels behind him as he fled from an old woman in a black, ankle length dress, her long gray hair tied up in a bun and swinging a broom at the defecating runner as she screamed, "You get out of here, you filthy man!"

It started as a single chuckle. The involuntary lurch in his ribs and chest seemed almost foreign to him. Then came another slightly larger lurch, and a gleeful sound escaped his lips. Slowly, he started to recognize the undeniable signs of a serious case of the giggles. He tried to stop them, but again saw the absurd scene of Frank trying to pull his tattered pants up as he ran away from the angry old woman, and he lost it. The giggles grew into raucous, guffawing laughter, and soon Stan was doubled over in the middle of the bridge, holding his ribs with one hand and the railing of the bridge with the other, laughing uncontrollably. He laughed loudly and violently, like a man who had finally lost

his fledgling grip on reality. He laughed until it hurt, until his throat was raw, and the guffaws turned into coughs and desperate gasps for air. He laughed until the heaving and lurches made his ribs ache. He laughed until his aching ribs, raw throat, and coughing brought tears to his eyes, and then he cried. He gave in immediately when the tears started. He dropped to his knees and wept in great heaving sobs.

The Eight Stages of Loss

Amanda McLeay

ONE

Foot in the door and I
know something's wrong, it
shouldn't smell like bleach.

TWO

There is no sound but silence. No
whirr of the saw. No
buzz of the drill. No
sound of their ever-running mouths.

THREE

Boss Man left, the treasure
packed in a cooler
on the front seat. The missing
piece hidden
in the lumber.

FOUR

Power is knocked
out of the shop as if gale forces
blew through, leaving only clouds
of sawdust.

FIVE

His tools sit quiet. His wife, hammered
face like steel. He's okay,
he's shaken, he's repeating,
"It happened so fast."

SIX

Ghostly echoes are glued
to all thoughts:
the smack
of the board, the yell,
the panic.

SEVEN

The sharp blade
changed his calloused
hands. Their final fate
drilled by the doctor's
words.

EIGHT

I clench my fists, nails
punctured into my palms.
I count my small fingers
one to ten as he counts
one to eight.

How My Jazz Turned into The Blues: Sonny's Side of the Story

Douglas Anderson

Based on and inspired by the short story "Sonny's Blues"
by James Baldwin

Rat ta tat tat ... Rat ta tat tat ... The sound of that sweet steady beat kept us up jammin' all night. Man these cats can lay it down, I mean really lay it down. Time just floated along. You know how it is, once you're in the groove.

If we can keep it all together for a few more weeks, you dig, we might be up there at The Five Spot where guys like Bird and Monk play. We almost got all our own equipment, so we can keep that extra scratch they charge to use theirs at the club.

Last week, Fathead, you know that cat that blows for Ray, come through and jammed with us. I tell ya, we was smokin'! I told him that next time he's in The Apple, slide on through the Village, and don't forget that brown sugar!

Rat ta tat tat ... Rat ta tat tat ... BOOM!

The door rips open, and there they are. Cold blue steel and copper badges standing firmly over me shouting words like "premises" and "evidence" that I can barely comprehend in this drugged state.

"Hey man, what gives?" I tell the rigid men in their starched blue uniforms, "I was tryin' to get a little sleep!"

(The truth is, horsey is still runnin' a little wild, so I ain't quite with it, dig?)

"You're under arrest, Sonny. For peddlin'...."

"Hey, I ain't got no bicycle, Jack."

"For selling dope, funny man. You know, heroin, smack, or whatever you junkies are callin' it now."

I decide through my hazy thoughts that I might just be trippin'. Yeah, trippin'!

"Is this some kind of a joke, man?"

The man's pointed kneecap in my back and the shiny chrome-plated bracelets he is so lovingly clamping on my wrists

are sure signs that it is not. The baton across the back of my head cracks like lightning through the clouds from the heroin.

The tornado that ensues inside the apartment does little to help the DA's case against me, but it completely destroys everything that I hold dear. They rip the top cover from the piano and the bench, cut holes in the drums, tear apart the cases for the brass, and smash the guitar.

Even the records are suspected of hiding drugs that they are so certain they will find. No one will be playing them again. The apartment floor is littered with torn up record sleeves and broken vinyl. My precious wax.

I'm sure this is out of spite. They're just mad cause they can't find no dope here. I'd heard they been watchin' the crib cause there are a lot of cats that hang around the place, mostly just jammin'! But ya know, rent ain't free, and that bitch ain't either, so yeah, I gotta flip a little.

I ain't saying I'm a pusher, but I ain't no angel either. I just do what I gotta do to make the rent, dig? Besides, I like to stay high. It makes me feel bright in this dark world. When I'm ridin' that horse and my fingers caress those sweet smooth keys, I feel the whole shit of the world just melt away in the sun.

The booking area is full up. It's always full up. Drunks hollerin' at the cops, hookers hollerin' at the drunks, and the cops hollerin' at everybody, it's crazy! This ain't no place for a cat like me, and once I'm out in GP, I'm gonna be surrounded by dangerous criminals!

We're all cuffed to this long wooden bench in the hallway waitin' to use the phone. I got no one to call, I am hit. I feel worn and dull like the grey paint on the concrete floor. I look up like there may be some hidden exit, but there is nothing but the water-stained, sagging ceiling and the fluorescent lamps. Every corner is lit up, but the place is still full of darkness. It soaks in slow and steady like drops from a leaking faucet.

I watch everyone ahead of me take their turn at the phone. You can tell right away the ones that'll make bail. They exhale deeply and their shoulders start to relax the moment they hear the words, "I'm comin' to get you out."

I suppose I could call my brother, but I haven't talked to him in over a year. He'd just scold me like a child who just spilled Kool-Aid on the carpet. I think I'd rather stay in here than listen to one of his, "Hey, come on Sonny, what's wrong with you, man?" lectures. He always talks to me like I'm a kid. It's always the same—he's the man who doesn't hear a word I say, and I'm the kid brother who is supposed to just shut up and listen. It's finally my turn to use the phone.

Rat ta tat tat ... Rat ta tat tat ... I take a pass.

My name is called, and I approach the judge for arraignment. I try to explain to him that my ignorance is the reason I'm here, but he is an alabaster pillar. The DA, with his files and clipboards held firmly to his heart, slinks quietly to the judge. He reminds him that I have violated my parole and that I'm an evil man, guilty of evil deeds—a pusher of heroin and a threat to public safety. The whole deal is jive. He judges me by my tattered appearance and my eyes that are red like the devil. Bail denied.

I know that when I get outta here I'll have nothin', and it won't be any time soon. The rent's already a week late, and the landlord sure ain't cuttin' me no slack again this month, not after he sees the place. The wreckage of my life is broken and scattered all over the floor. Even the few things spared from the fury of the raid will be tossed in a dumpster.

Rat ta tat tat ... Rat ta tat tat ... my stuff's in the trash.

The eight by eight cell at Riker's is cold and sharp. It reeks of body odor, feces, and despair. On the toilet/sink combo in the back is a short, fat, dark-skinned man in his forties. He's bald on top, and the little hair that remains is greased down and wavy. He hollers out to me, "Soon as I'm done takin' a sit, we'll talk about how things go 'round here." He smiles with a gaping wide grin and slaps his knee. "Just to clear the air!" He has a loud heckling sort of laugh.

Things were looking bad before. Shoot, I'm in jail, ain't got no scratch, the withdrawals from the smack is kicking in with full force, and now I got a crazy cellmate named Tubs who likes to make jokes while he fills the air with nerve gas.

Days blur into months, and each one rasps away a little more of me. Even when it's sunny outside I feel dark and lonely, but Saturdays are the worst. That's when you can have family or friends come to visit. In nine months nobody's been up here to see me. I haven't gotten a single piece of mail.

Every night I wonder if my brother knows where I'm at, or if he even cares. He probably does know, but doesn't want his brother, who is a convicted felon and a heroin junkie, screwing things up for him and his family. It feels like having all of my bones broken knowing that no one misses me. I am loved by no one. Maybe I belong to this darkness.

Sometimes I think about sending my brother a letter, not to ask for money or anything like that, but just to see how Isabel, him, and the kids are doin'. Being locked up in here got me off the dope and has given me time to clear my head. I miss all of them so much, I regret all of the time that is lost.

Rat ta tat tat ... Rat ta tat tat ... can't get it back.

That steady beat kept me up all night.

We been waiting in the lunch line for years it seems like. I've been silent, making sure not to make any eye contact. Tubs is wearin' that big silly grin he gets when he can't wait to tell ya somethin'.

"See, I'm a Blues man," he tells me as he rocks back and forth, heel to toes, with both hands hanging out of his pockets by the thumbs, "and ain't no place will give ya the blues like this place here." I agree.

"Blues?" I tell him, "You can't dance to The Blues! How you gonna dance to The Blues?"

Rat ta tat tat ... Rat ta tat tat ... Can't dance 'cause you fat!

"Man," I tell him, with my hand patting him on the shoulder, "jazz is my bag. Baby, it's the cat's meow! You dig?"

"All you guys tryin' to be like Duke or Diz these days," he chuckles a little. "Yeah, you young pups like that whole scene, but it's got no soul to it."

"Jazz is about being alive, dig? It don't need no soul, souls are for when you dead!"

"The Blues is about livin'." This time it is him who puts his condescending hand on my shoulder, "Now look here son, what was you doin' before you got here? Besides playing the keys."

“You know what I was doin’!” He sounds like my brother warming up for one of his speeches.

“You wasn’t livin’,” he says patting my shoulder, looking me straight in the eye without blinking. “What you was doin’ was hiding from life.”

“Wait a minute, man. You sound like my brother now,” I say jerking back to free my shoulder from the oppression of his hand. “Don’t you for a minute think that you can judge me! We do share a cell in prison, remember?”

“I ain’t judgin’ you, I’m just sayin’ I understand what it’s like. Man, I would get so high on that Junk and beat them skins until they took me clean off the Earth. Then one night I was playin’ with my Uncle Creole and them. After we jammed he took me aside and told me that I wasn’t feeling my music, the only feeling I had was high.”

“See, it ain’t that I need to be high....”

“You’re missing the point. When you let go of all the darkness, and let your music flow straight out from your soul, it will free you from the shackles of pain suffered in your life. That, my friend, is The Blues.”

Me and Tubs finish up our lunch and head back to the cell where most days I like to read because it takes me away from this place for a little bit. Tubs always sits for a while and then takes a nap. For the last few days I’ve been reading *Notes of a Native Son* by a guy named James Baldwin. He grew up in Harlem not too far from where we did. It’s cool, but I’ve got something else to read.

Today I finally got a letter. The return address says it’s from my brother. I am flooded with happiness. My vision gets blurry, and I struggle to hold back tears. It’s been close to two years since I’ve heard from him.

I open the letter, and my eyes immediately zero in on the words, “Gracie is dead.” My hands begin to tremble. Gracie is dead. I read them over and over. They might as well be the only thing written on the page. The joyous tears I had been holding back are washed away by hard tears of sorrow.

Out of the darkness, from somewhere far away, I hear Tubs, “Hey man, you okay?”

“Gracie is dead,” is all that I can say. It is tar that sticks to my mind all day. I don’t bother with dinner or anything else.

The lights are about to go out, and I lay here thinking about what Tubs had told me earlier, my life, the letter that I got from my brother, Gracie, Ma and Pops, and all the hard times we have lived through. I close my eyes and start humming a tune I’ve never heard before. It’s slow, soothing, and seems to embrace pain. I don’t have to think about it, it just flows out free and pure, like spring water.

Number Nine

Terry Grigsby

Heaven sports an All-Star Team

Full of sharp lifeless folks.

Cure to Cancer in the grassy knolls.

Inventor of the famous iPhone.

Heaven gleams with amazing people.

Why is death even a real thing?

 Thirty-eight presidents talkin' politics.

 Wilt Chamberlin shootin' hoops.

Heaven is really number nine

A planet of its own, glowing sky high.

 Mothers and fathers smiling down.

 Henry Ford out for a cruise on the town.

Why can't we just all stay together?

All of those monumental corpses.

Heaven will forever be paradise.

Living with all those All-Stars must be nice.

Contributors' Notes

Douglas Anderson was born into a working class family in the heart of South Omaha's meat packing industry where he still lives today. After graduating from Omaha South High, he enrolled in an apprenticeship program and later attended classes at the University of Iowa's Labor Center. When an injury ended his career in construction, he resumed his education at Metropolitan Community College among an exceptionally diverse population that helped to solidify his belief that there are no absolutes and nothing is black and white in the world, only lenses that make it appear that way.

Nate Detty was born and raised in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, although he has lived in Lincoln and Omaha for the last fifteen. He has spent the entirety of his adult life working dead-end restaurant jobs and living in relative poverty in order to develop the angst needed to write creatively. Although his head is still pressed firmly against the glass ceiling of those same dead-end jobs, he is now furthering his education by studying the liberal arts at Metropolitan Community College. He enjoys writing and thinks of it as a cathartic way to organize his thoughts and make sense of the world around him. He hopes his studies will help him to hone his craft.

Laura Dick is currently a student in the commercial photography program and will graduate in November 2016 with her associate degree.

Adrian Galindo is a Hispanic artist based in Omaha, Nebraska, who specializes in photo-realism portraits and still life. While he is mainly self taught, he received formal instruction at Metropolitan Community College. Bettie Page has been a muse and inspiration to him from an early age, and by drawing her in black and white, he hoped to emphasize the facial aesthetics of a 1950s cultural icon.

Laurie Jordan is a Wisconsin native but has lived in Iowa most of her life. She and her husband Jeff have been married for twenty four years. She enjoys traveling and has journeyed to many historic and exotic locations. Laurie is a former hairdresser and spent twelve years behind the chair before deciding it was time for a career change. She has been working for Nebraska Furniture Mart for the past sixteen years. In between working and taking college classes, she spends her time walking for exercise, thrift shopping, planning vacations, and binging on reality TV. For the past five years, she has been working toward her associate degree. She plans to transfer to Bellevue University after she graduates from Metropolitan Community College.

Joseph McGuire completed his credits at Metropolitan Community College last summer and is currently finishing his undergraduate work at University of Nebraska at Omaha in Health Administration. He will be starting the MA in Sociology program at UNO this fall.

Amanda McLeay was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska. She recently graduated from University of Nebraska at Omaha with a degree in General Studies with an emphasis in Art, Architecture, and Communication.

Ryan Redler was born in Omaha, Nebraska, on July 21, 1984. He was educated in the Omaha Public Schools and attended Metropolitan Community College in Omaha. He was encouraged to continue writing by his teachers as he showed great promise as a writer. Ryan spent a year in the Philippines working in the orthodontic industry and traveling in Asia. He is a self-taught guitar player and loves to write his own songs. Ryan has a great love of writing and hopes to become famous.

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