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Amazing Grace Punished  
*Gerard Sarnat*

Silent guy cleaned tiny  
heaps behind me at  
our gourmet grocery  
salad bar

for many years  
without words among  
us, but feeling bad each  
time I sped through  
finally I said

¡*Hola amigo!*  
then apologized about  
messes left around  
almost every bin from  
mixed greens

toward carrots,  
spinach, bell peppers,  
olives, sunflower seeds  
cranberries, tomatoes,  
garbanzos

& vowed to  
do better *nada* just  
myself but also by  
organizing some  
other local

patrons to turn  
neater, since if we  
did the management  
promised not to bump  
already too

high prices --  
however, an unintended  
consequence was that  
young man got fired

because they  
wormily claimed to  
no longer need such a large  
dedicated worker crew  
+ Jesus had zip seniority.e.

*Gerard Sarnat MD's authored HOMELESS CHRONICLES (2010), Disputes, 17s, Melting Ice King (2016). Gerry's published by Gargoyle, Oberlin, Harvard, Brown, Stanford, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, American Journal Of Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, Brooklyn Review, LA Review, San Francisco Magazine, New York Times. MountAnalogue selected KADDISH for distribution nationwide Inauguration Day. You can find more at [gerardsarnat.com](http://gerardsarnat.com) .*

## The tumor collector

*Janette Schafer*

Everyone in Richmond, Virginia has some terrible disease.

The client says, I hope you don't get cancer.

(That makes two of us.)

A summer of working collections for cable TV  
has made my ears blistered and calloused.

She chokes on my request

as I clear my throat with a swig of coffee  
and adjust my headphones.

I tell her where to fax her doctor's note  
as she catches her breath.

There are people who lie about tumors  
to keep their basic cable—

the words flick off my tongue

like ninja stars because I sit next to

a fax machine that never prints

except for today, except for this one time,

and though hundreds of miles of freeway  
separate us, I see the blood spatter here in Pittsburgh.

If she wasn't sick before I called her,

she was surely sick now

as I collect on that which is past due  
in the Northern Neck of Virginia.

*Janette Schafer is a poet, nature photographer, part-time rock singer and full-time banker living in Pittsburgh, PA. She is pursuing her Masters in Creative Writing from Chatham University. Her play Mad Virginia won the 2018 Pittsburgh Original Short Play Series. Her work has been published in numerous journals, magazines, and newspapers. She is chief editor of "The Dreamer's Anthology" which was released by Beautiful Cadaver Project Pittsburgh in April 2019*

"Freelancing in Unit 128"

*Adrian Slonaker*

His Iowa State ID listed Unit 128  
at the Days Inn-  
just a few speed bumps off Merle Hay Road-  
as his legal address,  
a fact fueled by  
seven years and six months spent  
on the first floor across the grimy game room where kids  
shrieked at air hockey and spilled Sprite.  
The hotel hobo had decamped to Des Moines  
since Seattle's techies were too cliquish, and  
he'd been priced out of Pasadena.  
Cocooning in a king-sized bed with  
a view of the parking lot,  
this lexical artist pounced on  
waves of complimentary wifi and translated  
employee satisfaction surveys for a salary  
from the tongue of Tolstoy  
to the language of Lovecraft.  
Housekeepers in sky blue  
always asked about his Christmas cactus  
when they cleaned on Monday mornings,  
and the sitcomesque managers who  
never raised his rent  
brought him curried cauliflower in Tupperware tubs.  
The receptionist with the sea monster tattoo and  
pastel pink fingernail polish  
disclosed her dirty dramas to him during Marlboro breaks  
while the purr of the snowplow and moan of the lawn mower  
soothed the silences on weekends when  
his family forgot him.  
But when lip-chapping,  
spirit-walloping  
winters finally pushed the wanderer  
toward the fiery sprawl of Phoenix,  
his beloved lair reverted back to

an Expedia special.

*Zigzagging back and forth across the Canadian/US border, Adrian Slonaker works as a copywriter and copy editor. Adrian's poetry has been nominated for a Best of the Net award and appeared in Algebra of Owls, WINK: Writers in the Know, Dodging the Rain, Aerodrome, and elsewhere.*

I stayed home today  
*John C. Mannone*

I stayed home today pretending  
to be sick, or that my car was  
broken, but the truth is I am  
broke with just enough gas for a one way  
trip to the city. I understand  
better the concept  
of living paycheck to paycheck.

It's early March with daffodils pushing  
the winter dirt off their leaves;  
bright petals perfume the air,  
but they don't know about the hard  
frost coming tonight. Do they  
feel pain? Just as my life was flowering,  
there's a chilling air, a lingering winter.

I understand about single moms  
working three jobs to make sure there's food  
for their daughters, but still not enough  
for a new bra or for the insurance  
money for the car, which they had to hide  
from time to time from repossessioners.  
Or when the lights get cut off in the middle  
of winter, and they are forced to buy  
into a compromising situation. They had nothing  
else to sell.

I understand about old men  
counting change to buy a cup of coffee  
but leaving their last dollar for that single mom  
waitress at the Waffle House on a late night shift  
and winking at her, but being grumpy  
at the price-gouging gas pump. Sometimes  
the Social Security doesn't come in on time,  
well, it does, but the bills come faster.  
It's a good thing old men don't eat much

while helping out their sons and daughters  
also struggling with legalized loan sharks  
who thrive with sharp credit card teeth,  
who prey on old men. They are wholly  
committed to extortion of our last cent  
and any dignity we might have had.

Yes, I understand about single moms  
and lonely old men looking for some sweet  
conversation while raking their forks  
over scrambled eggs & toast and waiting  
for a break, a chance to recover from a falling  
dollar, for that answer to an over prayed prayer,  
and perhaps for a simple hug that lasts.

**John C. Mannone** has poetry in *Artemis Journal*, *Poetry South*, *Blue Fifth Review* and others. He won the coveted *Appalachian Jean Ritchie Fellowship* (2017) and served as celebrity judge (*National Federation of State Poetry Societies*, 2018). He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex* and others. He's a retired physics professor living in Tennessee.  
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Campbell Soup Can At A Time  
Kristin Garth

*When your career is taking off your clothes,  
a day will come when tourism slows. No  
salesmen in town or golfing trips just those  
suburban regulars, meager tips. Know*

*your nipples, color, size (erect always  
for all the guys) — thousands, years you work  
at your hometown strip club. They pay  
bartender singles. Dancers snub them, smirks*

*stilettos shimmy past to VIP  
where out of town cash is amassed  
with table dances. Tonight the busy  
Brazilian whispers shopping list, downcast,*

*you tempt locals together, wintertime  
take it "one Campbell soup can at a time."*

*Kristin Garth is a Pushcart, Best of the Net & Rhysling nominated sonnet stalker. Her poetry has stalked magazines like Glass, Yes, Five:2: One, Former Cactus, Occulum & many more. She has six chapbooks including Shakespeare for Sociopaths (Hedgehog Poetry Press), Pink Plastic House (Maverick Duck Press), Puritan U (Rhythm & Bones Press March 2019), The Legend of the Were Mer (Thirty West Publishing House March 2019), Candy Cigarette Womanchild Noir, i(The Hedgehog Poetry Press), and she has a fantasy collaborative full length A Victorian Dollhousing Ceremony forthcoming in June (Rhythm & Bones Lit) and Flutter: A Southern Gothic Fever Dream (TwistiT Press) in January 2020. Follow her on Twitter: (@lolaandjolie), and her website [kristingarth.com](http://kristingarth.com)*

## THE ASSISTANT TOWN DRUNK AT INTERREGNUM

Todd Mercer

The Assistant Town Drunk doesn't want the pressure that goes part and parcel with managerial titles. So he lives in Town Drunk's shadow. Call it messing up at messing up.

He has laid down and will again stretch out in a drainage ditch, in an actual gutter, so far all face-up. At age fifty he prefers to intersperse binges with periods of moderated foolishness. He goes through the paces on Wednesdays and Thursdays, said the last performance review.

Someone must be the angel on a shoulder to The Town Drunk, hand him water when he treats gin like lemonade in the August heat wave. We aren't so young, The Assistant would say, and maybe stay the bottle hand. Lord knows how many devils whisper to the boss from his other shoulder. Were the two of them real friends, beyond the Drunk Department positions? The Assistant hoped so, but wondered.

If the Town Drunk were so careless as to drink himself to death—automatic promotion for the limelight-dodging Assistant. He doesn't wish to hold the standard; he's the helper, backup insurance, the guy on the bench most of the game.

The Assistant imbibes one too many, sometimes, embarrass himself, a little. Work is work, we have our assigned tasks. But he doesn't relish spectacle or covet greater local fame.

He's at it because he's better at drinking than interacting with others, or thinking. Leave a man alone to fill the shade beside a legendary figure. Screwing up as a screw up, but still not swimming the mainstream.

The entire situation changed when a mail carrier found The Town Drunk face-down in a ditch, three inches of rainwater his killer.

"Come in tomorrow," The Sheriff told the Assistant Town Drunk on the phone. "We'll say a few words about the departed at the council meeting, then we'll make your promotion official."

"No can do," said The Assistant. "If nominated I will not serve. You folks need an outside candidate." His reasoning: townspeople have fairly rigid expectations, even if those expectations are negative, as in re their Town Drunks. The Assistant had fetishized drinking irresponsibly precisely because he was sick of expectations and not fulfilling them. "So no," he reiterated to The Sheriff. "Get yourself another go-getter to run the Drunk Department."

Nobody outright loved The Assistant, but everyone in town was familiar with him, and the bar is set pretty low for public drunks compared to what's in the job descriptions of other municipal officials. There was a universal assumption that The Assistant would one day take over. Since he didn't, the issue was thrown into civic disarray.

After much more deliberation than a reasonable person would think would be necessary, the council decided to leave The Town Drunk position vacant. How long? Until a surprisingly divided town could reach a consensus on a replacement's term. Did they hope to be served by a Temporary, Interim, Part-time Town Drunk? Half the townsfolk wanted the Town Drunk position to be professionalized. Those people wanted someone with multiple rehab stints and legal run-ins on their resume. Others advocated for a more spontaneous, free-form approach to Town-Drinking. Arguments were passionate, feathers ruffled, offense was taken, etc.

The debate raged on three years before the wording of the job posting was finalized. The Assistant Town Drunk hung back from the fray, so pleased to be free of political ambition. Screw ambition, he figured. The Assistant was free to drink way too much when he chose to, without being required to be seen drinking in public every day. He liked the balance.

The Sheriff appealed to The Assistant again after people complained to him about the drinking methods of the Temporary Interim Part-Time Drunk. "Take the reins, man."

The Assistant wouldn't consider it. "Hey, there's a process in place for this. It doesn't have to make sense. It's a process."

Crazy like a fox in that inexplicably long gap between official full time Town Drunks, The Assistant stayed the course and dodged a firestorm.

*Todd Mercer was nominated for Best of the Net by in 2018. His chapbook Lifewish Maintenance is posted at Right Hand Pointing. Recent work appears in: A New Ulster, Clementine Unbound, The Lake, and Soft Cartel.*

## THE FATHER

*S.J. Justice*

Ethan Little had never been part of any kind of mafia, but it was clear that he had thought about it.

He joked about his own last name far more than anyone else, a joke that reeked of an insecurity that would always be masked by the shade of an ever-present chuckle.

"They should call me Ethan Big," he would smirk, over and over, to anyone who would listen, "I'm not that little, am I?"

Ethan liked to think of himself as an entrepreneur, a man who could drive a hard bargain and whittle a decent deal out of anyone who was bold enough to work with him. Mark Harris had first come into contact with Ethan when the man had hired him to do a few odd jobs. Odd was the word used in the classified ad, and looking back, Mark had to admit that it was a fairly accurate description. Straight away, the younger man had been struck by Ethan's aimless ambition, the unstoppable desire to follow his dreams, even if he couldn't ever be quite certain what those dreams entailed.

Mark would never forget the time he managed to make a joke about Ethan starting his own organised crime syndicate, and the far off look that had appeared in his boss's eyes as a result.

"Yeah," he nodded, "Reckon I'd be good at that."

"You'd be good at organised crime?"

"I mean," Ethan had frowned as he attempted to explain his comment, "Crime, maybe not. But organised. Could be organised."

Mark had settled on a polite nod as his response, focusing on getting back to the task at hand. Since then, he had thought of Ethan as 'The Father'. Don Little, ready to get organised as soon as the necessity presented itself. Don Big, as he would have undoubtedly renamed himself.

Although Ethan lacked the outright audacity to break any serious laws, he seemed to gain confidence from the petty misdemeanors that he would carry out to save a few bucks here and there.

"Don't pay it just yet," he had instructed Mark on the day his aging Hyundai had been given a parking ticket, "Go put it on the hood of the car across the street."

"I'm sorry?"

"If they're not paying attention, they'll pay it without checking the details," Ethan had advised, with the wistful grin that Mark knew meant he was already picturing himself in the fancy Italian suit of a mafia boss, brushing away the few stray hairs of the cat he would be stroking when he got home to stare out of his imaginary third story window.

"And if they are paying attention?"

"They won't be paying attention," Ethan smirked as he turned around and walked back towards the rusty gates that scraped the pavement of his well-worn driveway.

Mark nodded, making a show of walking towards the BMW on the other side of the road, before tucking the ticket carefully into his belt. Glancing over his shoulder to see that Ethan was heading inside, he grabbed an old receipt from his pocket and stuck it to the BMW, just in case Ethan came back to check. 'Don't ask,' he wrote on the back of the receipt with a fading pen he happened to be carrying.

Over the years that followed the initial work Mark had done for Ethan Little, he would regularly find himself called on for one random task or another. Mark had proved himself to be a reliable worker, apparently, one who could follow instructions.

"You're one of the good ones," Ethan had often said to him at the completion of a job well done, "They're not all like you, you know."

Mark nodded, knowing that he should accept the compliment without further comment, but feeling unable to stop himself from poking the bear, just enough that he would stir.

"What happens to the others?"

"Well," Ethan had huffed, straightening his shoulders as he contemplated the question, "We won't talk about the others."

Mark had accepted the answer in silence, knowing better than anyone that the worst those 'others' had ever received was the anonymous theft of one of their good work boots. One, but not the other. Ethan was the kind of man who wanted to keep his enemies guessing.

Although Mark liked the occasional extra cash that would be slipped to him in an unmarked envelope after his latest job for Ethan Little, his girlfriend was not such a fan. Amy seemed to have a sixth sense for knowing when it was 'The Father' calling Mark's mobile at any hour of the day or night.

"Was that him?" she would demand, once Mark had slunk back into the room after hanging up the phone.

"Was that who?"

"Mark," she would glare at him over her aggressively crossed arms, "You need to stop answering when he calls you."

"Good money, though."

Amy seemed to know that it wasn't so much the money that appealed to him as it was the endless amusement he could collect from a single interaction with Ethan Little. Thankfully, she rarely pressed her irritation further than a few half-hearted complaints.

At first, Ethan had presented the work he wanted Mark to complete in a fairly professional format, explained over the phone before the terms would be agreed upon. After a while, it became apparent that Mark was game for just about anything, as long as it came with the promise of a good laugh, a bit of cash and a six-pack of beer.

"What are we doing today, boss?"

Ethan smirked, waiting to explain today's task until he had ensured that the door was firmly closed behind them. He was already nodding to himself, clearly pleased with whatever scheme he had whipped up this time.

"We're gonna sell some fruit," he explained, in a tone that was laced with what Mark considered to be baffling levels of sinister intention.

"Ok."

"Wanna know where we're gonna get that fruit?" Ethan followed up quickly, grinning like a game show contestant who has just seen all his opponents bomb out on an easy question.

"Very much so."

"Ok," Ethan nodded, "Here's what we're gonna do."

He turned around and started striding through the dimly lit corridor that lead to his lounge room. Despite having received no instruction whatsoever, Mark figured that he was probably supposed to be following. After reaching the dusty couch, the ancient TV set up and the endless broken gadgets that lined the room, Mark trailed Ethan to the window, where the blinds had been propped slightly open. Ethan leaned against the wall next to the window, gesturing with his hands to indicate that Mark should look outside.

"See that?"

Mark frowned, looking out over the dry, suburban landscape and struggling to figure out what he was supposed to be seeing.

"Fruit trees," Ethan explained, without waiting for Mark's response.

"You mean Mrs Lassiter's mandarin trees?"

"Those," Ethan grinned, staring out into the distance, "And others just like them."

Mark could practically see the cartoon dollar signs springing up in Ethan's eyes, but he still couldn't figure out what had inspired them. He opened his mouth



and closed it again, so lost that he wasn't even sure what question he could ask to make any sense out of the cryptic suggestion.

"You see, Mark," Ethan continued without needing a prompt, to Mark's great relief, "We have a lot of neighbours. A lot of those neighbours grow fruit. Big, bushy trees full of it, spilling out over their fences. Ready for the picking."

"You want us to steal fruit from our neighbours."

"That's the best part," Ethan cackled, so loudly that Mark struggled to prevent himself from taking a small step away from him, "They don't mind if you just take it!"

"I think they do mind."

Ethan shook his head in response, still laughing at his own perceived genius without pausing to consider Mark's hesitation.

"It's foolproof. They grow the fruit, we make the money," he congratulated himself, "Think smarter, not harder."

It was an expression the man was often heard repeating, one of his favourite catch-phrases. Mark had yet to work up the courage to inform him that he'd been getting the idiom wrong the entire time.

After a minimal amount of further discussion, Mark was sent home with his beers, his white envelope and a head full of confused ideas about mandarin sales.

"What does he want you to do this time?" Amy demanded, seeing the expression on Mark's face as he walked in and sat himself on the couch.

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

His theory was, that as often happened, Ethan would re-examine the finer details of his latest scheme and realise that it was completely and utterly ridiculous. Mark had never once heard him admit to such a thing, but he always knew well enough what had happened when 'The Father' would call him back with a new plan, leaving the old one completely, silently behind.

Mark was glad that Amy was already at work when his phone rang the next morning.

“Mark,” Ethan’s voice boomed confidently down the phone line, “I’ve got an idea.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

It was a cycle that never seemed to end, though it did have a tendency to ebb and flow with the frequency of Ethan’s ideas. Very few of these schemes achieved any degree of success whatsoever, but Mark still managed to walk away with his white envelope, his six-pack of beer, and a new story to tell his friends. He didn’t like to think that he was making fun of his boss when he retold these stories. In all honesty, he admired the man very much and he would consistently say so to his friends, as long as Amy was out of earshot. Mark had always found something very encouraging about the way Ethan remained full of bottomless optimism, no matter how many of his ideas ended up in the scrap heap behind his house, next to the rusted bain-marie he had hoped to one day install in a hypothetical food truck. Time and time again, Ethan would bounce back from failure with a new idea, a new scheme that he trusted Mark to help him implement. It was refreshing. Even a bit inspiring. That inspiration was the reason he would give to people when they asked him why he was always answering the phone, ready to trot off back to work for ‘The Father’, no matter what it was he’d been asked to do this time.

That, and he really liked the beer.

*S.J. Justice is an established writer across many genres. Her career highlights have included being named a National Finalist in the 2018 Australian Poetry Slam, being invited to present her work at the 2019 Adelaide Writer's Week, and performing an original one-woman show as part of the 2016 Adelaide Fringe Festival.*

## KNOCK OFF

*DW McKinney*

Working in food service is a bitter prospect that gnaws at my psyche. Rising like a thick fog amidst my financial concerns, it weighs on me, presses on my back, and shoves me into a small dark space with my teenage self. There, a smell clogs my nostrils. Mildew from a dirty industrial mop. Wet garlic bread. Rancid grease mixed with stale cooking odors. This smell belongs to a pair of knock-off Reeboks I discarded a lifetime ago.

My mother bought them at Payless the day after a manager offered me employment while I attended the San Diego Zoo's job fair. The shoes were white and resembled the ill-conceived byproduct from fusing a sneaker and a bowling shoe. Calling them ugly would've been unjust, but they were functional for my needs and nothing more. As the cash register whined and rattled, I couldn't stop staring at them, at the ankle collars and paneling and languid shoelaces, as I tried to divine their heartstrings. The interview tugged on my focus. I worried the shoes weren't white enough. Not good enough. Already ruined.

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I worked at the Treetops Café in the San Diego Zoo the summer I was sixteen. Employees wore an assigned button up shirt—a black background with muddled leaves and flowers that disguised the foulest stains—paired with our own khaki pants and white shoes. The latter seemed antithetical to working in food service. We were bound to spill something on them, blurring the illusion of cleanliness and decorum. Making it worse: I hated stains. Dirt. Spots. Triggering my obsessive-compulsive behavior, they wormed into my imagination and addled my capabilities. These writhing thoughts stalled me the first time I stood in my hallway bathroom dressed in full uniform. I stared at the white tops, afraid to move and spoil them, wondering how long until I couldn't wash away the inevitable filth.

Crossing the zoo before my shift was like entering a time machine to a long-forgotten childhood memory. Sunlight shattered across the canopies and fell to the ground in amber patchwork. Colorful banners fluttered above people dawdling on the paths, gazing at their park maps. Children raced around them. Their footsteps clattered like thunder, scaring the rest of us out of their way. I

paused at the primate enclosures to soak in what would be a summer-long free pass to marvel at exotic animals lazing in their dens and whooping in the trees.

My coworkers at Treetops were mostly adult teenagers. Our Team leads, however, were two men in their late twenties. They chatted about sports or gossiped about a woman from our sister restaurant as she crossed through the café after her shift. They materialized from the back kitchen only when we needed assistance. I had a passing relationship with the one other Black girl on staff. Seizing a rare opportunity away from the others, I leaned over the counter toward her. *Did they talk to you? About your hair?* My eyes flicked up toward the burgundy stripe cutting through her sew-in, which was pulled under her ball cap into a loose chignon. She cocked her head. *No. Why?* Her eyes became cartoonish in their roundness as I explained. *No, they didn't say anything like that to me! But I worked here last year. Maybe it's 'cause I didn't have to interview again?* We stared at each other. A fraught history recited itself in the quiet expanse before we shook our heads and parted ways. I never brought it up again.

The work was quick. We served customers buffet style from a preset menu that allowed them to choose Italian-inspired meals like parmesan chicken, pizza, spaghetti, or soup bread bowls. The meals came with either a side salad or a garlic bread stick. Not both, but customers often argued for both or extra breadsticks free-of-charge. Families rushed into the restaurant on a tidal wave of euphoria. They giggled in line, eager to soak up the premium zoo experience by just being there. Joy dripped from them and lit up the room. It was impossible to look at them and not be happy too. These were the park visitors who genuinely asked about my day and sought advice about the best exhibits. They sometimes asked me what it was like working at the zoo. My heart ached at the ruddy-faced kids who leaned against the sneeze guard in rapt attention.

A line snaked out the door when the lunch rush hit. My pride ballooned as I ladled sauces and soups at lightning speed. Customers grinned as they watched. *You're doing a great job!* Their compliments reinforced my resolve and embellished the well-worn responsibility that draped from my shoulders.

Closing the café provided a welcome reprieve. The Team Lead on-duty cleaned the concession stand while I, and sometimes another coworker, sanitized the buffet line and the kitchen. A grey, soggy mop served double duty as a broom. The mop yarn drooped over the crumbs as I struggled to sweep them into the

dustpan. The lingering food waste clumped together in the scummy water and clotted the floor drain. My arms burned from the intensive work, but I kept going, thankful for the quiet, my still thoughts, and the opportunity to be alone.

When I left at night, well after the park emptied, the faint breeze and blanketing quiet imbued me with a greater duty. I was guarding the sacrosanct. A watcher woman protecting a cradle of wonder. This was the family-friendly utopia the interviewers alluded to in my job interview.

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The shine dulled after a week. The happy, smiling families became grim-faced hordes as I slapped overcooked lasagna onto their plates. The lunch rush swelled as the week progressed and the summer grew. Customers murmured and toe-tapped their impatience while they waited.

There was an occasional agitator, always a white man, who complained about being unable to Frankenstein the menu options. *It doesn't make sense! How hard can it be!* These men called me *stupid* and *slow*. Their mouths opened into a sharp-edged abyss as they shouted down at me. We made exceptions for them. A Team Lead would appear from the kitchen with his face screwed up in false concern. *Why, yes! Sir, that's not a problem. She can do that for you.* I served the cobbled meal as these smug men scrutinized my every move, smirking as I handed them their meals. Forced to smile and say thank you as they snatched away their food.

I retreated to a downstairs patio far-removed from the public to take my breaks. I plopped into a chair ensconced by large tree fronds and stared off into the distance. I had hoped to walk away from that summer job more assured of my place in this world. Every day at work refuted the possibility of that dream. I recomposed myself in the restroom before resuming my shift. I studied myself in the mirror. *You're not stupid.* An obscene smile stretched across my face as I assumed a mask of normalcy. Giving myself a final check, I buffed my shoes and pinched the lines in my khakis before heading upstairs.

As a young girl, my father taught me how to press creases into my pants. He coated his slacks with starch while I sat cross-legged on the bed he shared with my mother. Steam snorted and hissed from the iron as he flattened out every wrinkle. His pants were scalding hot and buttery when he finished. *Gotta stay*

*sharp. Don't give these motherfuckas a reason.* Yet there was always that one reason we couldn't suppress with clean, neat clothes and good diction. But I still tried.

I worked harder. The coffee pots were always filled. The counters were wiped clean and the floor swept. The food was presented in an appetizing manner when we weren't serving customers. I did so much that there weren't any other tasks for my coworkers and me to do on our down time. *You can't just stand around!* The Team Leads ordered us to clean everything again.

Misplaced expectations muddled my mind and pooled together with the feeling that I always had to be doing more to be enough. I pressed sharper creases into my khakis and tucked my shirts tighter until my uniform became one fluid-moving extension of myself. Yet, I could not shake the acrid smell that clung to me after I left work. I shampooed and conditioned my hair then repeated the process three times until a light floral scent blessed my locks. I emerged fresh from the shower only to follow the smell to my closet. It had burrowed into my knock offs. The stench wafted up at night and clogged my nose until I buried my head under the covers. I washed the shoes each weekend and set them outside to dry, hoping the sunlight would obliterate the hidden decay I was sure had nested in the spongy soles.

As I rolled off my futon one morning, I stopped short at the sight of my shoes. Their stitching swirled and morphed into different patterns. *I must be dizzy.* I laid back down, closed my eyes and counted to ten. I inhaled and rose again for a better look. My hands slapped across the vinyl flooring as I crawled out of bed and into the closet to confront the undeniable truth. Ants scrambled in and around the shoes in spidery trails that flowed from a gap beneath a baseboard. White and brown lumps bobbed above their heads. Their antennae scanned the greasy soles and greying laces.

I restrained an urge to smash them and obliterate evidence of their existence. I was disgusted, not at them but that, despite my efforts, something foul had managed to take root, and the ants were now dragging it out for me to see. A bitter taste rose in my mouth the longer I watched the lines weaving around the floor. The ants were just trying to make a way out of the dirt and grime. Out of nothing. But I couldn't leave them there. I had been taught that they were a pestilence; their presence signified a greater corruption. I retrieved Raid from under the bathroom sink. The ants tumbled off in clumps as I tapped the shoes

against the floor. Then they jerked and seized when the spray rained down on them. A few stragglers ran toward the baseboards in a futile effort to escape the poison that had already tainted them. Minutes later, my shoes wiped clean, I swept up the broken black bodies and threw them away; then I dressed for work.

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Cynicism bloomed then choked the picturesque vision I once had. Children screaming in the park annoyed me. I hustled by the monkeys swinging around their fake habitats. The smile I gave customers wavered. Disdain grew with each customer complaint and returned meal eaten in full but somehow *wasn't good*. Each refund was a slap in my face, a peremptory judgement of my ability to perform.

At closing, I scrubbed my hands until every raw cell hummed and begged for mercy. I left for the day, refusing to wipe down my shoes, ignoring the slow putrefaction happening beneath my feet. Every limb on my body hanged exhausted and threadbare as I walked toward my father's car waiting beyond the zoo's entrance. Every breath clotted and scored against my airways. I tried to ignore the finality that came with this. That I was over it all. But ever a completionist, I had to see the job through to the end.

While walking to the café's kitchen elevator one afternoon, I crossed paths with the restaurant's supervisor. He smiled and asked me how I was doing, if I had any concerns. *I hear you're doing a great job.* My mouth opened and closed. What I said must've made sense, but my thoughts sizzled and snapped as I talked. I worried that he was testing me. Trying to assess my worthiness. I spoke faster, hoping to outrace the stench wafting from my shoes, myself, the past. My supervisor patted my shoulder as he left. *Keep up the good work!*

His smile lingered as the elevator doors closed behind me. I shut my eyes and fell into a memory summoned by his pearl-white teeth. We first met at the zoo's job fair earlier that spring. My brother and I waited in line with what seemed like half the city to be interviewed by various managers seated in tents lined up in the zoo's massive parking lot. My palms left dewy prints on the folder protecting copies of my resume as I waited my turn. A man beckoned me to a seat. He sat across the table from me beside another white man. Delight tinkled between their words as we spoke. They wanted to hire me. One of them would be my

supervisor. *You'd be perfect for a job I have.* They told me I was wonderful. Impressive. Different. Articulate.

But there was a problem with my hair.

*It's too...ethnic.* My not-yet supervisor pointed to his scalp and feigned scratching his head while looking at mine. The other man looked as if he were listening to my eulogy. *Can you change it?* Their next words fizzled in the deafening roar in my ears. Have an image. Family friendly. Appropriate. *Will that be a problem? Keep in mind, this will make a difference if we hire you.*

A few seconds passed before I answered, but a lifetime lived and died within them. My body warred against itself. My nerves jumped and begged me to run from the tent. I tightened my muscles to rein myself in, but then tears began to rise. I blinked them back and clenched my stomach against the rage roiling in my gut. The men pursed their lips and waited.

That morning I had gathered my crochet braids into different hairstyles, opting for the most professional. Though they were installed a few weeks prior, I borrowed a jar of Let's Jam from my sister to slick them down. I knew the image that braids conveyed in the wider world and I hoped the gel would bring any loose strands into submission. I couldn't *give the mothafuckas a reason.* I still asked my mother if my hair was okay, if it would be acceptable. I knew that she would tell me the truth about the thin platinum stripe on either side of my brown hair. She rolled her eyes. *You look fine.*

Yet there I was, seated in front of these two men, being asked to change. To be more acceptable. Anger swarmed in my mouth. My parents had impressed upon my brother and me that we needed these jobs. *Money don't grow on trees.* I thought about my parents and what they would say if I rejected their offer. I twisted my face into a smile and nodded. *Yes. I can do that.*

I signed the necessary paperwork and shook their hands. The employment packet crinkled as I clutched it to my tight chest and exited. The blinding light halted me for a second, forcing me to take in the scene. Overworked people queued outside the tents in crooked, endless lines. No one looked eager, but everyone was in need. I swallowed the compliance souring my tongue and continued forward. The words stuck to my dry throat and tore at my withering pride as they eased downward.



*DW McKinney serves as the creative nonfiction editor for The Tishman Review. Her work has appeared in Stoneboat, TAYO Literary Magazine, Cagibi, Sidereal Magazine, and elsewhere. Visit [dwmckinney.com](http://dwmckinney.com) for her current projects or follow her on Twitter @thedwmckinney.*

## THE TROUBLE WITH BEING POOR IS THAT IT TAKES UP ALL OF YOUR TIME

*Fawn Ponzar*

Standing in line at the food pantry, she sighs as her son tugs on her shirt. He has grown impatient with the wait. Truth be told, she has, too. Each Saturday morning, she walks the five blocks with her three kids, carrying bags, pulling a wagon, to get food for their weekly meals. The snot on the little boy's face has crusted on his upper lip, but she has nothing with her to clean it other than the hem of her t-shirt.

Loading the wagon up and filling the bags as heavy as the kids can carry, they make their way home... slowly. With three kids under 6, someone always has to cry, complain, or pee before they get back. It takes a couple of shoulder pushes to get the front door unstuck before they can enter, and when they do, it's a task to side-step the toys, clothes, and boxes to get the food into the kitchen. Hefting a bulging bag of dented cans, rice and bruised fruit onto the counter, she nearly sends the stacks of dirty pans to the floor. Her middle boy is crying, and the girl is yelling, "I told you to stay out of here!" A roach runs out from under the dog bowl in the corner of the room. She lets out a long, weary breath.

At 24, she feels so worn down. Moving 6 hours away from her family to be with him, she expected more, but he's never home. The kids aren't his (their pigmentation would fool no one), but she makes them call him *Daddy*. Desperate for any bit of normalcy, the kids comply.

The microwave beeps, telling her the Spaghetti O's are warm. She burns her finger on the toaster, and sets three cups of Kool-Aid on the rickety card table where her kids eat their meals.

Retreating into the bedroom, she gently closes the door behind her. The unframed mattress sits directly on the floor and has no sheets, only a wadded up quilt her great grandma had given her. She folds her legs up under her as she sits and pulls a cigarette from its pack. She tries not to smoke around the children, especially since her youngest has been coughing and congested so much recently. Not five seconds after she takes her first drag, she hears that barking sound from under the crack of her door.

The girl says, "Cover your mouth. You're disgusting." Her little brother cries, "I can't help it. My froat hurts."

She feels guilty and knows that this cough has lasted much longer than is normal, but she has no way to get her baby to the doctor, and they won't prescribe medicine without seeing him. She's tried. She's also begged her

boyfriend to take her and the kids to the Urgent Care on Broadway. He doesn't even have to stay; she'll worry about how to get home after the boy has been seen. Last night he didn't come in until 1, and the Urgent Care was already closed. Two nights ago when he got home at 6, he was too tired to make the drive. The truth is he just didn't want to make the time. There's never any time. Sure everyone gets the same 24 hours in a day, but when you're the sole caregiver for three young children, and you don't have anything to give them but love, you spend all your time doing what is *needed* just to make it through the day. *If I had time...* she thinks, *I'd clean up this house; I'd find someone who wants to be with me; I would go back to school; I'd learn to drive.* She shamefully stops herself from entertaining the next thought: she would have waited to have kids. However, when you're 18 and in "love," you don't consider time. You only consider the moment. *Planning for the future? What's that?* She's now stuck in that future decided in a series of moments. The moment she said yes in a courthouse. The moment she waited anxiously to see the lines appear on the white stick. The moment he left her, seven months pregnant, standing in her parents' yard after she learned her third baby would be the same age as her husband's girlfriend's. The moment she made the decision to move her kids across state to be with a man she only knew from the Internet, boarding a train with only one suitcase for the four of them. *This is my life,* she accepts. She pushes the tip of the cigarette into the ashtray and takes a xanax. *There is no way out.* In the other room, she kisses each kid on the head, knowing already they're destined to feel the same way.

*Fawn Ponzar is a high school English teacher that has learned that the best way to teach students is to first learn who she is. Growing up in a household doused in abuse, she was determined to become more than she was born-into. It is only through reliving the stories of her upbringing that she has come to understand the motivation behind others' actions.*

RESUME

Kate Telling



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Recycle Today For A Better Tomorrow



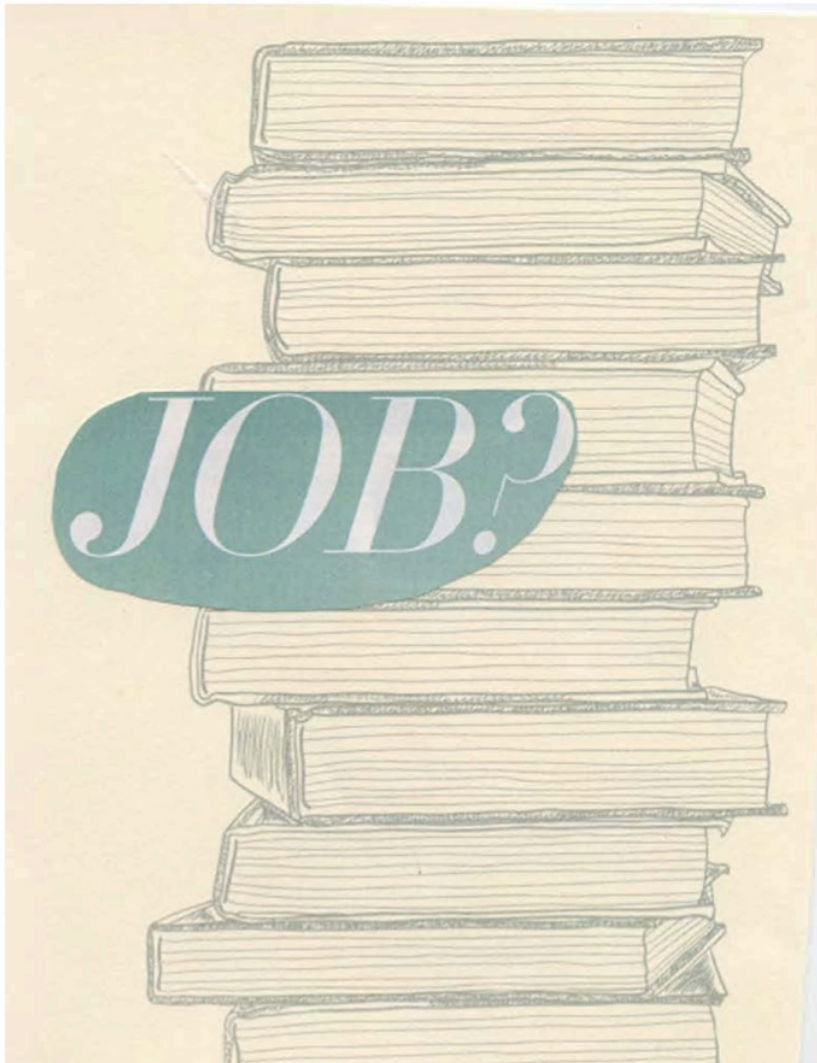


THANK YOU

“How Long?”

Night  
COOK

REVENGE



*Katy Telling is a writer, mixed media artist, and former Party Girl (in the Parker Posey sense of the phrase) currently editing her first chapbook. See new work @PoeticRituals on Instagram or twitter, as well as, in upcoming editions of Botticelli Magazine, Riggwelter Press, Detritus Online and more.*