

RETAIL HELL

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**Mid-Level
Management
Literary
Magazine**

Presents
RETAIL HELL

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Memo RE: Staffing / Mandatory Overtime

10/31/22

Hey Team!

With a bunch of people quitting/being fired recently, that means we're running short on staff. Business is suffering because of this, and until we're able to hire back up to minimum levels, that is going to mean mandatory overtime for everyone. NO EXCEPTIONS.

A few of you had vacation requests in for the next couple of weeks and those are just going to have to be rescinded. No one can take time off until we get more people hired. If you absolutely can't make your shift, it's your responsibility to find coverage for your shift. If you don't find coverage, and still don't show up for work, consider that yourself unemployed. NO EXCEPTIONS.

We won't be able to post schedules in advance, so you'll need to check every day to see what your next shift is. We won't read your shift to you over the phone and we won't send it in an email or text. You need to come in to see when you're scheduled to work. NO EXCEPTIONS.

It's your responsibility to be early to your shift. On time is late. Early is on time. NO EXCEPTIONS.

We may or may not be in office as our responsibilities don't require us on-site all the time. And as it shouldn't need to be said, but some of you need a reminder, the customer is always right. NO EXCEPTIONS.

- Management

Kelli Simpson

Day Job at the 7-11

lips wine thick
stinking drunk,

but on time
stinking drunk,

but smocked up
leaning on the register
ringing up hours
stinking clock
staggering second hand
stinking boss
smirking on our shoulders
for fuck's sake,

may we help you
for fuck's sake

Kevin Hopson

On The Run

A chiming of the door caused me to look up, and a twenty-something male hurried inside the pet store. He turned and pressed his palms against the glass door, attempting to close it.

“That door has a spring-loaded hinge,” I pointed out. “It closes on its own, so pushing it isn’t going to help.”

The man glanced over his shoulder at me, panting. He had a brown goatee and his t-shirt clung to a protruding belly.

“Can I help you?” I said.

“Does this door have a lock?” he asked, finally getting the door to close all of the way.

“Of course. I know this place isn’t much, but we prefer that random people off the street not wander in at night and steal our shit.”

The man inspected the door, noticing a deadbolt lever below the handle. He quickly put a hand to the lock and turned it.

“Technically, we’re still open,” I said. “Though I wouldn’t mind closing up early.”

“Oh, shit,” the man said, backing away from the door. “He’s coming.”

“Who is?”

The man stared at me with wide eyes. “Some lunatic who nearly ran me over in the parking lot.”

I got up from my chair and circled around the counter. It was past dusk, but I caught a glimpse of a figure outside, the parking lot lights revealing a large man in pursuit and getting closer.

“You must have done something,” I said. “People don’t normally run you down in the parking lot and then get out of their vehicle to chase after you.” I paused. “Do they?”

“I might have given him the finger,” the man said.

“Might have?”

“I was loading groceries into my car when he backed out of his parking space. His bumper came within a few feet of me. That asshole should watch where he’s going.”

“So, you just left your groceries there?”

“What else was I supposed to do?”

“Do you have any refrigerated items?”

“Just some produce. But it will be fine.”

I nodded. “What’s your name?”

“Jason.”

The pursuer stopped just outside the store. He was bigger than I initially thought. Not necessarily in a muscular way, but he was tall and round and imposing nonetheless. The guy tugged at the door handle. When it didn’t budge, he shouted and put a fist to the door, pounding the glass.

“Is there any way you can resolve this?” I asked Jason. “I’m pretty sure the owner has insurance, but he tends to be cheap. If anything happens on my watch, I don’t want it coming out of my paycheck.”

“If I go out there,” he said, “God knows what he’ll do to me.”

The guy continued to bang on the door, yelling obscenities. Then it went quiet. The man peered through the glass, his lips soon stretching into a grin.

“Is that a chameleon?” he asked, his voice muffled through the glass as he pointed to a tank near the front of the store.

“Yeah,” I shouted.

“Can I come in and check it out?”

“No way,” Jason said to me. “It’s a trick.”

“We don’t know that,” I replied. “I mean, I’d probably do something similar if I were in his shoes, but he could have a genuine love for chameleons.”

Jason’s eyes bulged as he gawked at me. “Dude. He’s going to kill me.”

“I think you’re overreacting. I don’t think he would kill you in front of me. I’m a witness after all.

He might rough you up a little bit, though.”

“He could kill both of us, then there’d be no witnesses.”

He had a point, but the guy didn’t look like a murderer. Then again, what the hell did I know about profiling killers?

“You two have to come to a truce,” I shouted to the man outside. “Otherwise, I’m not letting you in.”

The man eyed me, then Jason, but he saved the stink eye for Jason.

“Fine,” he finally said.

I glided a hand into my pants pocket and slid my phone from its resting place.

“If you don’t keep your word, I’ll call the cops,” I said, holding up the phone.

The man nodded.

I returned the phone to my pocket and walked toward the door, turning the lock and pulling open the door. I stood between the two of them just to be safe.

The man was several inches taller than me. He looked over my shoulder at Jason, his face stern at first. Then, his cheek and jaw muscles eased, and he turned his attention to the other side of the store. He smiled as he approached the chameleon tank.

“I had one of these when I was a kid,” he said. “His name was Predator.”

“Predator?” I said.

“Who the hell names their chameleon Predator?” Jason murmured.

I glared at Jason and frowned, shaking my head.

Thankfully, the man hadn’t heard or was choosing to ignore him.

“Yeah,” he said. “I named him after that creature in the Predator movie. The original,” he elaborated. “They’ve obviously made more movies since then.”

“I’ve seen some of the movies,” I said, “and I can see where you’d come up with that. You know, the whole camouflage thing and all.”

The man bobbed his head. “Exactly.” He leaned over to get a better look at the chameleon.

“This is a veiled chameleon?”

“Yeah. It’s the most popular breed. And the cheapest. It’s also good for beginners, but you’re obviously not a beginner.”

The man straightened. “When do you open tomorrow?”

“Nine o’clock.”

“Great. I’ll swing by first thing in the morning. I’d like to buy it. I’ll have to buy a bunch of supplies as well.”

“I’m assuming you’re aware of the costs,” I said. “The supplies are going to cost a lot more than the actual chameleon.”

“I know. I’m fine with that.” He glimpsed Jason. “Just make sure that guy isn’t here when I arrive.”

“No worries,” I said. “I’ll keep the door locked until you get here just to be safe.”

Jason rolled his eyes.

The man walked toward the door, eyeing Jason one last time. Then he tugged the handle and exited the store.

“Have a good evening,” I shouted as the door began to close.

With his back to me, the man raised a hand, quickly disappearing from view.

“Well,” I said. “I guess I owe you a thank you.”

“For what?” Jason said.

“Your little cat and mouse game brought in a new customer. The tank, lighting, plants, and food will run him a few hundred dollars alone.”

“Do I get a cut?”

“No. Just a thank you.”

“Damn. Just my luck.”

I glanced at the clock on the wall. “I appreciate the drama, but it’s time for you to go. I’ll be closing up soon.”

“But what if he’s waiting to jump me when I get back to my car?”

I shrugged. "I guess that's possible."

I put a hand to Jason's shoulder, nudging him out the door.

"You can't do this," Jason pleaded. "Walk me to my car, at least."

"Thanks again," I said, locking the door. "Have a good night. Don't come back."

L.M. Cole

Don't Leave The Register

Don't leave the register.

There is a customer in the fitting room.

Someone is singing opera in the shampoo aisle

— Puccini with the Pert and the Pantene.

The sun has set below the lip of the valley's bowl.

Don't leave the register.

Nobody has been in for hours.

Someone is smoking in the rafters

— the manager, absent, the vapor vague as whatever.

The intercom crackles, static, off, static, off. No message.

Don't leave the register.

There is still a customer in the fitting room.

The singing has stopped; the shelves are stocked.

— the light is flickering in the parking lot, flash, off, flash, off.

The camera overhead is watching, or isn't, but it's there.

Don't leave the register.

Is there still a customer in the store?

How many hours have passed, standing here alone
— locked in the fluorescent beam of the storefront?
The manager is somewhere in the rafters, whatever.

The lights will turn off soon. The rafters will be emptied.

The static cracks to the pulse of faltering parking lot lights.

Static, off, flash, off, static, flash, smoke, vapor.

There was never a customer in the fitting room. The light is broken.

Somewhere in the back aisles, someone is singing.

L.M. Cole

Poisonous

There exists an abandoned storefront
on a small-town outskirts roadside
near an empty, defunct restaurant,
gone now, once chain space occupied.

On a small-town outskirts roadside
where the valley rolls fog down the hills,
gone now, once chain space occupied,
the Alco store wouldn't pay the bills.

Where the valley rolls fog down the hills
(and the anhydrous breeze of a leak)
the Alco store wouldn't pay the bills
they couldn't close the doors midweek.

and the anhydrous breeze of a leak
seeped through the vents as a taunt
they couldn't close the doors midweek
now there exists an abandoned storefront.

Rosanne Ehrlich

Yom Kippur at Saks Fifth Avenue

It's 8:30 in the morning, Yom Kippur in New York. In the subway I look around a strangely empty car and note that no one "looks Jewish". Up the stairs and into the early morning light I see that the streets are merely crowded, not jammed, and I walk toward the department store where I am a "Sales Associate," what we used to call Salesgirls. Am I the only Jew out and about today? I wonder. As I enter the building and walk through the jewelry department and past my co-worker, Brandon's counter he looks up from counting his stock.

"Hi there. Why are you here? I thought everybody was supposed to take off."

"I don't observe," I tell him.

"Why? Your mother wasn't Jewish?" Brandon comes from the mid-West, another planet as it relates to New York Jewishness.

"No, she was Jewish, I just don't observe."

He pauses and then, as this is a new idea, says, "Okay, I hear you. Maybe I could be an honorary Jew."

"Oh," I tell him, "this holiday is not a celebration, it's to atone for your sins. You can't eat or drink all day."

“Well, then, never mind,” he says, “I’ll pass on honorary Jewishness.”

His phone rings, he answers it and walks away. I then reflect on the upsurge in religious practice. I wonder for the tenth time that day if I am the only non-observant Jew in New York. When I was a kid that wasn’t so unusual. My parents, themselves the progressive offspring of their own immigrant parents who only observed a few times a year, just didn’t stress it. When did it become like the McCarthy era for any non-religious people to be hounded or looked on with disapproval? Apparently there are some Christians (my co-workers: Lonny, Christo and Denny) who proclaim they sympathize with the religious and have taken this Jewish holiday off. To be more accurate, they knew it would be slow on the sales floor. In fact, traffic is at a stand-still, not even an early morning rush as we stand around waiting for customers. It’s mid-morning now and I do a few sets of Kegel exercises and think about Windexing the already clean countertops.

A woman approaches my Watch Counter while holding out a handful of papers and printouts from the Internet. Good, I think, she’s done her homework and is ready to buy.

“Hi,” I say brightly, “can I help you?”

“Yes,” she starts looking over the case of Michelle watches. “I’m looking to get one of these.” She looks up at me and holds out the papers which, I see, have pictures of several Michelle watches.

I take her papers, recognizing two watches and pointing to two images. “We have this one and this. Do you want to see them?”

She drops her large handbag on the counter between us and places her coat over it. I know we’re not allowed to let customers put anything on the counter as it makes shoplifting easier but I let it go. She’s a potential sale and could be my only one today. Anything I can do to make her comfortable. She peers down through the glass of the showcase.

“Yes, and there are a few more down there I want to see. Can I try them on?”

“Of course.” I pull out my key and start unlocking the case. “You should try them on.”

We start with a \$2,500 watch with a diamond bezel which I put on her wrist. A half an hour later I am still entertaining her, showing her every other watch she points to as a possible choice, changing the bands from red crocodile to pink lizard to wine suede to black satin to gray leather to prove how versatile they are.

“You know, after all this, I really like this one,” she says, pointing to the first watch. “What do you think?”

“I thought it looked really good on you when you tried it on.” There are watch bands and watch heads all over the counter. One of the security guards is now standing by, watching us. I am conscious of the fact that we have been told not to take too much merchandise out of the cases for a customer at once. Another rule broken.

She sees the security guard move closer to the counter

“Yes, that’s the one,” she says, reaching for her coat and handbag. “But I have to consult with my fiancée.”

I’m slightly shocked and mildly annoyed, knowing that it would be worse if we were busy and I lost out on other sales. “Should I put it aside for you?” I start putting everything away. “No, just write the style number down on your card.”

I know this request is either what she thinks is a graceful way of getting away from a sales person or a way of obtaining a style number so she can get the watch from another source, Ebay, a friend in the business, who knows?

I ignore a flash of irritation, pull out my card, write down a number which I make up as I write. Small revenge for wasting my time when I wasn’t doing anything else.

She puts on her coat, hoists her handbag over her shoulder and as she leaves I think: Next Yom Kippur I will definitely observe.

Daniel Addercouth

Her Dream Job

Nausea gripped Maggie's stomach as she walked across the shopping mall parking lot on the first day of her new job. She'd felt sick all weekend at the thought of starting again in retail. It might have been less stressful if she at least knew something about Lorelei, but she'd never even set foot in one of their stores. The fashion chain was brand new, and this was their first branch in her city. The job interview had taken place online. One of the interviewers, an older man called Nick with glasses and a neat beard, told her she was "the perfect candidate."

Working in a fashion store wasn't exactly Maggie's dream job, but all her work experience was in retail, so retail it had to be. She'd been unemployed since she finished her psychology PhD six months earlier. None of the companies she applied to were interested in a newly minted PhD with no relevant work experience. She wouldn't feel any qualms about moving on from Lorelei as soon as she could. She'd been laid off without warning so many times by stores in the past.

But when she arrived at the Lorelei store, nestled unobtrusively between Nike and Under Armour, she was pleasantly surprised. A smiling middle-aged woman was waiting for her by the entrance. She introduced herself as Taylor. "Think of me as your mentor," she said, shaking Maggie's hand. "We don't use the word 'boss' at Lorelei."

Taylor showed Maggie around the tastefully decorated store with its neat piles of sweaters, then took her into what she called "backstage", where employees could go on their

breaks. Instead of the windowless cinderblock room Maggie had expected, the area was fitted to the same high standards as the store itself, with exposed brickwork, wood floors and natural light. A lounge section had sofas and beanbags, and there was a well-equipped kitchen area. The thick carpet yielded invitingly under Maggie's sneakers, and the smell of freshly brewed coffee filled her nose. Taylor showed Maggie two packed fridges and a cupboard stocked with snacks. "All the food is free for staff." She took out a plastic-clad muffin to show her. "You just need to scan each item on our corporate app so we can keep track." She got Maggie on the wi-fi and helped her install the app, then showed her how to scan the muffin. "For later," she said, handing it to Maggie.

Taylor introduced Maggie to the rest of the team, whom she referred to as "stakeholders". Mostly young people like herself, they were chatty and friendly. Taylor showed her how to operate the cash register and scan merchandise. She shadowed Maggie unobtrusively during the day, and they handled the first few transactions together. At lunchtime, Maggie helped herself to a salad and a slice of cheesecake from the fridge, scanning the items as she'd been shown. They were as delicious as they looked. During a quiet spell, Taylor explained the other perks Lorelei offered, including free massages on Fridays and discounted gym membership. "It's so hard to retain people, we have to offer our stakeholders these little extras," Taylor explained.

At the end of her shift, Taylor showed Maggie into an office in the backstage area she hadn't noticed before. Sitting behind an antique desk was Nick from the interview. Taylor introduced him as their "in-house coach."

"Take a seat." Nick indicated a gleaming leather sofa in the corner. "I'd just like to ask you some questions about your day. Part of our stakeholder experience optimization program

here at Lorelei.” He worked through a short questionnaire on his tablet, asking Maggie about her stress levels and had she felt happy and productive during her shift. Maggie answered, truthfully, that she’d had a great day.

As she headed home, she couldn’t believe her luck. Maybe retail could be her dream job after all.

Her second day was even better. The customers were friendly, the store was lively without being busy, and she enjoyed chatting with the other staff. In the generous breaks which Taylor insisted they take, Maggie and the others helped themselves to the free food. “I can’t believe they give us all these great snacks,” one woman said. “I guess companies need to treat their staff well these days.”

At the end of her shift, Maggie had another chat with Nick. She told him she’d had a fantastic day. “I’m so pleased you like it here,” Nick said.

On her third day, Maggie noticed the surveillance cameras.

She supposed the cameras in the store were a normal precaution against shoplifting. But Maggie didn’t understand why there were cameras in the backstage area. She asked one of her co-workers, who’d never noticed them before. “Frankly, I don’t care. If they want to film me hanging out, let them. By the way, have you tried the tuna sandwiches? They’re incredible.”

During a quiet moment, Maggie plucked up courage and asked Taylor about the cameras. “Oh, they’re just here to help optimize the employee experience,” she replied breezily. Maggie

didn't understand what that meant, but she didn't want to press. She was just grateful to be working there.

Soon Maggie settled in and was loving her job. Her bank balance recovered and she left work every day feeling cheerful.

After a couple of weeks, she noticed something odd. Normally her moods were very stable, but now they were changing every few days. During the first week, she was full of energy, chatting to customers and her co-workers, joyfully folding sweaters. Then for a couple of days she felt listless. After that, her mood changed again and she felt hyper but strangely detached from her surroundings.

One weekend, some old takeout gave her a mild bout of food poisoning. On the Monday after, she took a tub of plain yogurt with her to work, but barely touched it. She didn't have any appetite on the Tuesday either, so she ended up going two days without eating any of the free food. It was then that she noticed something. She had returned to her usual neutral state, neither manic nor lethargic.

She was scanning a container of sushi for lunch when she suddenly remembered an experiment she'd done in the psychology lab, where rats had to pull a lever to get food pellets. She put the sushi back in the fridge and washed her hands. There was something wrong with the food, she was sure of that. And Nick had something to do with it. She was angry with him, but more than that she was furious with herself for not figuring it out earlier. She wondered if she should talk to him about it. She might lose her job, and she needed the money. But then she had an idea.

She confronted Nick during their daily chat. “There’s stuff in that free food, isn’t there? You’re testing something on us. That’s why you film us and ask us all these questions.”

Nick chuckled. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“And that’s why you track everything we eat with your app. So you can see how much drugs or medication or whatever we’ve consumed.”

Nick gave her a patronizing smile. “I don’t know why you’re complaining. You agreed to some of it in your employment contract, and the rest in the terms and conditions for the app. Assuming you even read them, which I suspect you didn’t.”

“One question: Why?”

Nick took off his glasses. “Did you really think selling pastel sweaters was our business? No, data is our real product. We test the effects of performance-enhancing drugs on workers on behalf of other companies. This information will be very valuable for the workplace of tomorrow.”

“Interesting,” said Maggie. “I’m sure the Times is going to find this fascinating.”

Nick sneered. “They’ll never believe you.”

“Except I’ve been livestreaming our conversation.” She held up her phone. The comments were scrolling up the screen faster than Nick could read them.

Nick's face went pale, then he forced a smile. "I see. Perhaps we can come to some kind of arrangement."

Maggie looked around the office, taking in the antique desk and the leather sofa. She could enjoy working in an office like this, evaluating the staff's performance. Being the observer and not the rat. Maybe even testing performance-enhancing drugs on Nick. It would certainly be better than selling sweaters. "Perhaps we can."

Stephen McGowan

Last Call

“There’s that skittering again.”

Jay didn’t look at Kev. Didn’t acknowledge him or the sound that had come and gone for the last few hours. He kept his eyes on the drink he was pouring. Fake beer in a polymer glass that looked watery as shit but was all he had to sell. The real ale line had gone dry three hours ago.

“Be careful!” said Kev. “You’ll spill it if you keep shaking like that.”

Jay closed his eyes for a minute and took a deep breath. He moved the glass to the bar and set it down. He took the drink token without looking at Kev.

“You alright? Seem a bit jumpy today, Jay.” said Kev. “‘Ere that rhymes! Today, Jay.”

Kev gave a hacking chortle, a hollow sound that was full of phlegm and mucus. He spat on the floor. Jay smiled hesitantly.

“I’m. Fine.” Jay enunciated each word carefully.

The skittering noise had gone. Jay eyed the backroom door nervously.

“Got any food?” Kev asked.

Out of the corner of his eye Jay saw Kev moving his arm or something like it. He closed his eyes again and counted to himself. *One, two, three-*

“Got any food?” Kev repeated. The worlds slurred slightly.

Kev hadn't had enough to be drunk, not that you could on this watered-down piss. He quickly passed over a cardboard tube of pressed starch chips without checking the flavour. It didn't matter.

“Thanks.” said Kev and the tube disappeared from Jay's limited view. He heard a pop, smelled the brief stink of vinegar, and then heard the crunch, crunch, crunch.

“That skittering's back again.” Kev said.

Small crumbs sprayed over the bar. One landed on Jay's hand and he violently snatched it away. It was back though. Jay hadn't noticed. He'd been trying to stop himself from looking at Kev. Begging himself not to look. Lost in morbid curiosity and horror. It was hard not to look.

“I don't suppose Keat's fixed the lock?” Kev asked.

Jay stopped thinking. Stopped breathing. He lifted his eyes to the backroom door. The console next to it was dark, powerless. Like him.

Crunch, Crunch, Crunch.

“Where is the bastard anyway?” Kev said.

“In. The. Back.” Jay said. He had to concentrate on each word. “He. Went. To. Change. The. Barrel.”

Saying so many words made him feel sick. He swallowed over and over again.

“Ah, yeah.” Said Kev. “Never mind ey. I’m sure he’ll be back out soon.”

The *soon* invaded Jay’s thoughts and stood there waving. He glanced at the clock. Nearly last call. Nearly time to go home. What home?

The front doors slid open and Jay started. The sounds from outside tore through the relative silence of the bar. Banging. Skittering Dragging. Screaming. They closed again, and the newcomers sat at a table by the door. Jay began to fill two more glasses of fake beer out of habit. The skittering from the backroom had stopped again. He carried the drinks to the table, realising that he would have to squeeze past Kev to get there. He stayed close to the wall as he did, moving his head to the side and trying to unsuccessfully hold his breath. Kev stank of body odour poorly disguised with cheap body spray and cologne. There was something else, mixed in with the human smells. Something stale and musty, like damp wood and bad fruit that made the bile begin to rise in his throat. He coughed and swallowed over and over as he put the glasses down and took the tokens. The newcomers didn’t say anything. One of the tokens was wet with something sticky and cream coloured. Jay stared down at it, bile and mucus leaking from his mouth as he coughed and tried to swallow but he didn’t care.

The backroom door slid open and automatically, Jay looked up towards it. His fist closed around the tokens painfully, his knuckles red. His limbs locked.

“Pull uz a pint of real” slurred Keats.

Jay’s eyes followed Keats as he limped from the backroom door to stand next to Kev at the end of the bar. Jay stared harder, his eyes watering and bloodshot.

“Pull uz a pint of real ah said” said Keats slowly. Jay saw Keats’s remaining eye twitch in its gaunt socket. The other, gone.

Jay’s eyes twitched towards the door then back at Keats. He couldn’t take his eyes away. Not now.

“Yew leavin?” Said Keats. *”It still sounded like Keats”*, Jay thought. He made his way back around the bar.

“Is not time to leave. Yor shiftsss not dun”.

“No.” Jay said. Eyes glued on him. He smelled the same as Kev now, but with the added stench of pipe smoke on its skin clothes. What was left of them.

“I got summin on me face?” Keats said cheerfully, eye blinking slowly.

“No.” repeated Jay.

He quickly looked away to the real ale pump. As soon as he tore his gaze from Keats he needed to look back. Desperately. The pump shuddered in quiet horror, and began to pour water straight onto the drip tray.

“Forgot the glash.” said Keats.

Jay grabbed a glass next to the pump and placed it in the stream.

“Jush give it a minit. Clear the pipesh.”

Painfully, slowly, the water cleared. Jay filled two glasses before it began to colour, but instead of the usual dark brown, it was a thick, sickly green. Bits floated to the surface. It looked like a stagnant pond. Fetid. Dirty.

He put the glass in front of Keats, sloshing some onto the bar. Keats took a sip and peered into the virescent liquid.

“Looksh like the burull needs changing. Be a good lad, sort it out.” slurred Keats.

“Yeah, be a good lad.” said Kev.

Jay turned to the backroom door. The skittering sound was back.

He began to cry.

nat raum

in which i have a panic attack behind the bar

there's purpose to my rhythm, my glide down the aisle between the Bench and the Clock and to my sideways shuffle to speak to the guests at 303 when table 2 is sat and the bar is full. i'd sit and spin and spin on a plastic disk when i was young and now i walk the same twenty feet back and forth every wednesday, friday, and sunday and i twirl my two-foot ponytail with eleven BIC pens stuck in its base. they say the beauty of an all-black uniform is that it doesn't stain, but i'll forget to call behind and wear sofrito on my chest by 8, at the latest, and still taste garlic and olive oil when i bite my fingernails later tonight. much later, years later, i will watch myself unravel here, over by the liquor well with a shaker in each hand. i will cry for all ten seats of my bar to see because it's been so long since i knew how my rhythm had purpose, how to catch your eye standing at the computer next to the window every time i used it and how to roll silverware without looking down so i never had to leave your gaze behind. i will share an old fashioned with the last woman who comes in, sobbing also, before i call you again and again at your new job or with your new girlfriend or wherever else it was convenient to avoid me that month. i'll kick the Estrella keg and tell myself it can be the opener's problem tomorrow.

Maria Prieto

Days of Conveyor Belt Sushi

I am closing tonight / with The Manager who insists / I personally make his iced coffee / as soon as I clock in. / The Manager reminds me / about breaks and California law. / But I'm not paid enough / to risk losing a table. / I compromise with cigarette breaks. / I still split my tips. / Halfway through my shift / I stuff myself with wrong orders / a game of chubby bunny with cut rolls. / The Sushi Bar Chef is getting suspicious / if my green tea is hot sake / and if I'm splitting my tips right. / The Regular walks in / ten minutes before closing. / The Manager welcomes him / with a fraternity handshake. / The Regular ignores the meaning of / market price / then refuses to pay / for the toro sushi times five / and the sake bombs times two. / The Regular waves the tip tray / a twenty as the carrot dangled / in front of my face. / Sir, please don't call me / jailbait / then request for a hug. / That night / and so many more after / I compromise my morals / for gas money / and actual non-slip shoes. / The evening drowns out the karaoke bar. / Refilling soy sauce becomes / a ritual / less sodium as long-lasting fragrance. / The conveyor belt stops / for now. / The neon OPEN sign / haunts my dreams .

Cynthia Gallaher

Deb at the Ham Slicer

In California, she'd be a surfer girl,
but here in Chicago,
in this thick ethnic neighborhood,
she's a landlocked mermaid with bleach-blond hair,
netted and enslaved at Neptune Discount.

I always know where to find her,
during my own work break
from 8-Days-a-Week Mini Mart next door;
Not aisle one,
where pink pearlescent nail polish
shimmers next to ghostly white lipstick;
Not aisle two,
where washcloths, cheesecloth,
and dishrags lie silently
as army issue regalia
waiting for domestic wars;
Not aisle three,
the sad fluorescent-lit alley
of misbegotten parakeets and tri-color goldfish.

But there, in aisle four, Deb at the ham slicer,
her toned arms moving steel and blade
like a women's war poster from the 40s,
her shocking platinum hair
veiled in the propriety
of a see-through hair net,
I barely move toward her
when she spots me,
calls me by name,
that echoes through the store,
Deb laughs loudly as a cheerleader,
but solemnly resumes slicing
as her boss approaches,
her face going into a trance,
reflecting dreams
of a someday built-in swimming pool,
a Tudor mansion and four-poster bed,
but at least by August,
the deepest tan possible
from her paint-peeled sun porch.

Deb is always tan, even in winter.

And the ham?

Slightly green around the edges,
year 'round.

Her boss tells her,

"If they buy it, sell it,"
while Deb continues to slice, slice,
the school year away.

Her shoes, Pappagallo,
the pantsuit beneath her smock,
Christian Dior,
the bracelets and rings
that jangle along the edges
of the ham slicer, 18 karat,
all ripped off from Marshall Field's
on her day off.

Deb keeps dreaming big,
slicing and selling meat,
saving her pennies
to position herself at a wealthy resort,
poolside, after graduation,
the glistening lifeguard
with Chanel behind her ears,
that pheromone for fools.

I lost track of Deb over the years,
but I heard she saved a young doctor
from drowning,
gave mouth-to-mouth
all pearly tooth and bronze,

her toned arms working him

like a warrior,

and when he came to,

She was selling it,

And he was buying it.

Cynthia Gallaher

*The Great Flood of '92**

View from Orleans Bridge to Marshall Field's Third Basement

Between Sociology 101
and Ancient City Planning 404,
I took to posing
for Italian Playboy posters,
kept the professional savvy
or plain chutzpah to turn down fold-outs,
instead, let Skrebneski focus on close-ups,
while I focused on the sample dresses,
cheap shoes and subway rides I needed
to attend elegant cocktail parties
with aging stars, jejune wannabees.

Yet by college graduation,
it was all over, washed out, as if a flood raged
through my thin dwelling,
carried off my trappings of success,
left me standing on the wobbly
wood planking where Uncle Stevie
first laid linoleum on Hamlin Avenue.

Could it be worse, when afterward,
elevator doors closed on strobe lights
and shot down three floors
to those gallows in Marshall Field's,
the first full-time job, a buyer trainee,
pushing a book cart
and a bag of dust rags down a narrow hall,
instead of swinging a photo portfolio
down Hubbard Street,
and in place of hot pants, heels and boas,
a blue smock, sensible shoes.

Recession liberal arts BAs
agitate redundant,
so I took the name "rag lady,"
from those funny fellow workers in hardcover books,
and as last hire, became initiated
as had each one of them,
twice a day, my footsteps echoed
in the third basement past
locked cages of Dostoyevsky,
while full-story washing machines
churned suds and rags all night long.

It's where book department's cobwebby rags

greeted dust rags soaked in spilled perfume
and pricey lotions from cosmetics
met oily rags that mopped janitors' brows
and wiped escalator banisters
all the way downstairs.

And the rag lady started dreaming
in languages with frayed edges,
hearing Spanish, Polish, Lithuanian,
and sweet talk from black
candy kitchen workers there at 6a.m.,
dreaming in the subterranean cafeteria's
endless hum where workers sipped cold coffee,
where air's chill grew so strong
the clock hands stuck,
and as if in the engine room
of an ocean liner,
topped by ten floors of luxury,
we heard a spectacular steam whistle blow
while steel ceilings weighed heavy and low.

Up high, in the book department itself,
raced its eternal stockboy, Larry,
kind, chatty, simple, yet swift-footed,
who never finished high school,
never read a page of the merchandise,

and died in the third basement,
where another worker found him collapsed
like a limp dog inside a stock cage,
cradling an armful of books he saved from falling.

And I, while a steady worker,
was destined to join the ranks of late-century job drifters,
despite degrees and determination,
wove in and out of stories and personas,
wrote out of tight corners,
read my way through lonely nights,
to not remain rag lady,
at least not for long, if I didn't want to,
a ten-story luxury inside my head,
where another day brought another floor
of scenes and phenomena,
and hours asleep brought images of buses,
trains, airplanes, always a way out,
options left to the rise and fall of elevator cables,
with no place to go but up.

A dry landing, Orleans Bridge,
today, my last day from a plush River North
window office in River North, to unemployment,
to a cramped cubicle in the northern suburbs
somewhere in the future,

and from here watch the Great Flood of '92
rise in my mind's eye through all three basements
to the main floor of Marshall Field's.

I send a plea to just this once
witness a swab and salvation
of the never-see-daylight decks of unseen workers
from subterranean waters,
a deluge of the wealthy's furs in storage to dance
in the same fishy whirlpools as those rags
I used to wad up and wheel around,
and finally, a scouring of the grave marker
of my fellow worker, Larry, his only way out,
a sweeping of his clean slate to a complicated cuneiform,
a purging of the unadorned pain of simple employment,
for the caretaking of what isn't understood
by which the company profited.

Though today the city finds me
between connections, on the street once more,
the flood waters will spare me,
far more than others,
my feet to rise above disaster
thanks to the power of the pen,
to complete another chapter, the next stanza,
to bide my time before crossing

another Chicago bridge.

chutzpah--audacity, guts.

jejune--callow.

*The Great Flood of '92 (April 1892) was Chicago's biggest disaster since the Great Fire of 1871. As new wooden pilings were being replaced in the Chicago River near Orleans Street, workers were unaware they were directly above part of Chicago's intricate, unique underground freight transportation system, which hadn't actively been used for decades, but nonetheless snaked throughout the downtown Chicago area, linking major buildings. The pilings broke through the underground casing and waters from the Chicago River rushed in, flooding basements, boiler rooms and lower levels of hundreds of Chicago buildings.

Keira Armstrong

Bored & Dying While Working Self-Checkout

The steady beep of people checking out
does little but stroke my want to leave
With a crinkly, plastic fist.

The clean, sharp lines of the shelved warehouse
resemble a very large, mildly clean jail.

I would know,
this bureaucrat-sunken place is
the only place that'll take felons.

To my left, prison gray walls turn into the face of a pale woman.
She's angry about the flickering lights on aisle 6.
I tell her "That's where we keep the all the broken things"
I remember my 'ma'am's' and drift behind the plexiglass barrier.

I imagine the woman yelling at me is spitting out fire.
I imagine my gum, found in aisle 5,
is in my tongue.
I imagine we are all dying.
And this is so much more exciting.

Kenneth Purscell

Straightening Up

A place for everything
and everything laid out
in its sequential place:
this is the very simple,
highly complicated
rule of stock.

This means the gum
I hang on this peg here
should never be the gum
with consequential
variations which I should
hang on that peg there.

Just so with all the blankets,
all the trikes,
all the mirrors and light bulbs
and every
thing has its place.

They never stay.

The moment that my back is

turned the children stray.

The bra amidst
the movies amongst
the cupcake tins amidst
the feminine supplies .

Look! There it blows!
The tissue nestled deep
behind the antifreeze.

The customers, I'm sure,
abet the chaos. Most times
it looks like plain abandonment,
though now and then
aggression rears its head.
I'm sure the Bear of Little Brain
did not of its own will climb
upon the barbecue
and close the lid. Shoppers, though,
might make it happen. Ban them
and the order would re-store
itself, though not, of course,
the store itself.

Perhaps
a native entropy
will always gently
undermine the rule,
the effort, all the work
of organization
no matter what
we try. Maybe marbles
always work their strange organic way
through diet aids until they reach
the promised land of greeting
cards. And nothing we might
say or do would ever
avail to stop them.

Kit Lascher

Last Time I Saw It

On a table

An endcap

Someone's basket

On the table outside the bathroom

Stuffed down someone's shirt until I said something.

"It says we have one but I can't find it."

"So there's no way... "

"It could be anywhere.

Do you want me to order it for you?"

"I NEED IT TODAY YOUR WEBSITE SAID – "

I want to break into corporate's offices

And steal their hard drives.

I want to dive to the bottom of the ocean.

My perforated eardrum doesn't bother me half as much

As the pipes down there

Feeding us Wi-fi

Feeding customers information

They shove in my face with phones at maximum brightness settings.

"I drove all this way."

I WILL KEY YOUR CAR

YOU CAN STAY HERE

UNTIL YOUR ORDER ARRIVES.

"You should talk to the people who run the website."

HEY A KID PICKED SOMETHING UP

AND DROPPED IT BEHIND A SHELF AND TOLD NO ONE.

THOUGHT YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW.

"Won't you just look for it?"

At the bottom of the ocean

There is only one customer.

She has two sets of teeth.

She knows what she wants.

She never asks for help.

Mel Reynes

Time and a Half

“If you’re doing your grocery shopping on a Sunday night, you done fucked up,” Chris said seriously. He was probably a little high. You needed to be on something to work the deli counter at a supermarket.

“Look at her, yo. Like, she could be home, watching the game. Sleeping. Getting laid. Whatever. But she gotta get wafers right now.. Go home, dummy, don’t stay here,” he gestured under the counter where customers couldn’t see. I looked out towards the big cookie display on an end cap. There was indeed one middle-aged woman, alone, dressed in a striped top and khakis like she was about to go boating. Our store was about an hour from the beach, in a desert made of identical ranch homes and strip malls. She should be on a pier in Boca Raton, not the south ass end of Miami-Dade County.

“Shoppix: where empty shelves are a pleasure,” he chuckled at his mangling of the store’s tagline. The woman by the end cap looked over at us and tensed her lips disapprovingly, and headed down to the dairy aisle. The aisles were indeed pretty bare. Almost everyone did their grocery shopping on Saturday, wiping out the fresh and best food.

I started cleaning the sandwich station, trying to get ahead so we could get out before ten. Sunday was the deep clean night with time and a half, but was also the short staff night, and we were expected to clean like we had double the people. Perfect for the college kid and stoner. Everything had to be broken down, soaked in cleaning solution for at least 20 minutes,

rinsed, and re-assembled. It took forever. My shoes were permanently damp from all the caustic cleaning solution and meat juices. My mom wouldn't even let my shoes in the house. I had to leave them on the porch.

Twenty-five minutes until closing. We could confidently turn her or anyone else away unless they wanted sliced meat. Company let us shutdown half an hour before closing so long as no one was in line. It looked like we'd be getting out on time. Hell yeah.

"Hey, Davey, I gotta go take my break, be back in twenty," Chris flashed me a sly smile and headed through the swinging back doors of the deli before I could say anything.

That was the only bad part of doing a shift with Chris. He was a beast when we had a big line. But he liked to time "breaks" for the last part of his shift. He'd go vape and breezily come back to "supervise" cleanup that was already done.

I didn't mind. I hummed along to the best hits of the 80s, 90s, and today from the supermarket speakers and set the sandwich bins to soak. With no customers bothering me, I would get this done in no time.

I did wonder where Chris went to get high. There were cameras everywhere. Employees used a key fob on a door through the meat department to get out. That meant having his card swipe on record for when he took his break during cleanup.

The deli section also had an emergency entrance that led behind the building, but that had an alarm. No cameras there. Cameras were to catch folks stealing from the store, not to catch the store committing food crimes.

That left the eerie storage areas. There were towers of food two stories high in there, always half-lit to save money. It was more like a tomb than a place for food. Once there had been a single potato on the ground for three weeks that no one touched. That potato had been damn weird.

Friendly chimes announced the store was closing in ten minutes. The lights went to half mode. It was enough to shop by, but the ominous lighting encouraged customers to finish up and get the fuck out.

I was carrying a tray of shredded lettuce when a huge crash came from the dairy department. The sound was gloppy with the crunch of plastic. I fumbled the tray, spraying wet gunk everywhere. I peered over the counter, but couldn't see anything.

“Hey, ya’ll alright back there?” I called out

No one responded, but then a single yogurt container was hurled out. Laying in the blue light of the dairy case, mangled and dripping. The air left my lungs. I had a very bad feeling about whatever had chucked yogurt that way.

A roar rolled out from the dairy aisle. A low wave of rage that hit me right in the chest. My heart started fighting to leave my chest. I fell down behind the counter.

Shaking, trying to control my body, I looked out through the meat and cheese. The bright fluorescent lights inside the case made the store beyond much, much darker. I could hear

something coming. A slow click-click-click of movement towards the deli. My ears were hot. I wanted to throw up.

I turned around and looked at the large swinging doors labeled IN and OUT. Just twenty feet from them was the emergency exit. I could probably dash across the two acre parking lot to the car and peel away before it got me. But whatever was coming would hear the alarm and follow me. Even a brainless zombie could push a door.

I looked around for a weapon. Surprisingly, there were very few real knives in a place dedicated to slicing meat. Just mounds of processed and smoked meats.

Right, there was the meat. If that thing didn't like yogurt, maybe it would like some meat. Carefully sliding open the door of the cooler enough to fit in my arm, I tried not to attract attention. The cool air from the case felt nice. I touched lots of cornered edges, which meant cheese. Not sure if this thing would be down for some colby jack. But then my hand landed on a rubbery tube, hopefully bologna. Everyone likes bologna.

I peeled off the plastic wrapper of the meat to expose a full log of liverwurst. It smelled strongly of dark iron. I turned it in my hands, imagining myself throwing it. I said a silent thank-you to Coach Burger and little league baseball for teaching this crappy little guy how to throw less-bad

I turned to face the counter fully, balancing in a crouch on the front of my feet. I imagined how it would go. I would stand, throw it like a spear—and once the monster went for it—I'd duck, and crawl to the swinging doors.

I counted to three and sprang up, miscalculating the ability of my sneakers to grip and stumbled back. My toss went wild, the liverwurst ended up in a case full of prepared foods near the deli. I fell on my ass into something wet.

The clicking sound sped up. A large, dark shape approached the prepared foods, shoving its mass into the plastic wrapped meats. It gave off another one of those roars that vibrated my bones. I jammed my head between my knees so it wouldn't see me.

I had to get something better. Visualize the case in my head. I'd just pulled out liverwurst. That was right next to the cheeses. Then there was: roast beef, turkey, ham. Get over to that side of the case. Pull out the roast beef. Throw it far as fuck and hope that the thing went for it.

Slowly, I crossed the tiled floor, wiping as I went so I wouldn't slip again, then paused for a fear spasm, inched forward, repeated. The thing was tearing through the prepped food case. Metal and glass collapsing with a crunch. It had crawled up over the low barrier and into the case. Fuck you Chris, where were you?

Distracted, the thing had found something to eat. I spied a big hunk of pastrami. Dear god, let it have an accepting palette.

I pulled out the pastrami, and layed down on the cool floor as electrical adrenaline coursed through me. If I missed, it would know I was here. I needed a run home like my life depended on it.

I rolled onto my stomach and eased back up into a crouch. I imagined myself standing up, legs planted wide, tossing the meat over the counter, towards the butcher department. The wall along that side of the deli would block it from seeing me. I'd ram through the emergency door, get mom's car, and be free.

I sprang up, pastrami raised over my head. The thing was huge. It's dark, ragged form filled the whole prepped foods case. It was turned away from me, digging its face further into whatever it was eating. I took a deep breath—let's make this throw count.

I threw with all the three years of little league had granted me.

...which turned out not to be very much.

The pastrami sailed on a short arc, hitting the monster between the shoulder blades. It landed about thirty feet short of my target. Fuck fuck fuck. Had I really thought I could throw ten pounds of meat forty feet away?

What a stupid way to die.

I ducked back behind the counter. The thing roared again. My teeth were chattering, trying to escape my body before the thing ate me.

It leapt out of the prepped foods case and slid on the wet floor. All the opened packages had made the floor slick and it crashed into some glass--the rosé wine display. The monster yelped and there was more scrambling and clicking as it tried to get up. I could smell the wine,

cheap and fruity. I choked back vomit. It had liked whatever it had found. Hopefully it was still hungry.

Wasn't a Game Day Special today?

Then it clicked, there were two big platters of meat rollups. Someone had ordered them and never picked them up. So we put them in that case hoping we could resell them before closing. Two big platters of sweet ham with honey mustard sauce. It had been eating store brand sweet ham. The sickly sweet smell drifted to my hiding place.

We sold loads of sweet ham on game days, sometimes up to three or four loaves. It was barely even ham, more like a giant version of canned meat. Packaged with "juices" so thick we had to wipe off the meat before we could slice it.

I chanced looking through the case, to see where the monster might be. It was way too close, I could see it licking up the stew of spilled rosé and platter ham. I had to get it to the other side of the deli, and keep it over there.

Under the slicers were the soaking bins, ready for cleanup. I pulled one slowly towards me, trying to move at my slowest pace. Sliding open the deli case one last time, three and a half bright pink loaves of ham were right by the opening. I pulled them into the bin and started tearing them open. I could chance throwing packaged meat, but it might decide to try for something easier, like me.

With the bin loaded up, I slowly crouch-walked away from my only exit towards the other side of the deli. I held the bin up off the floor to minimize noise. No time for fuck ups. I was headed to the sweet tea case.

I opened the door to the sweet tea case, breathing in the sugary tang of old iced tea and frost. This plan was, hopefully, simpler. I'd shove the bin as hard as I could through the ice tea case. It would pop out the other side. The noise and smell would attract it, I would run like hell.

I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, pulled the bin back a little and launched through the sweet tea case.

It burst through the other side and accelerated when it hit the slippery mix of meat and wine on the floor. With so much momentum it hit something hard, spinning further away from the deli. Thank the Dark Lords of Sweet Ham.

I eased the sweet tea case door closed, waited. I needed to know that thing had taken the bait. I needed it far from my exit.

And I heard it.

Click. Click. Click.

Carefully moving through the destruction. A shadow passed over the sweet tea display. It started nudging, sniffing, and investigating the ham bin.

Eat it. You fucking shaggy nightmare beast, it ain't got honey mustard, but it's all yours. Deeply discounted at free as fuck. Tonight only.

And then the thing started ripping into the sweet ham. With no bones, it could take big, wet gulps. But it couldn't get a grip on the floor. All the muck from the prepped foods made the floor too slick. It slid further away from the deli. Knocking into everything and pushing the ham further and further away. If it just calmed down, it'd get what it craved. This was my chance.

I dashed to the IN OUT doors and shimmied my thin frame through the smallest opening I could make.

I eased the door back into place. I laid down on the floor for a minute, letting my muscles spasm themselves out, trying not to think about how easy it would be to die right now. I just had to get to the car, get in, get away.

I rolled over to aim myself at the emergency exit—and it was open. Held ajar with an empty can of soda. Guess the alarms didn't work.

I heaved myself up and cautiously approached the door. If Chris was out there, something could have gotten him. I would have to shut the exit door before any more get in. Closer to the door, I could smell weed vape. I peered through the crack, Chris was scrolling on his phone in the dark, getting high. He hadn't heard any of it. Pushing open the door the rest of the way, I lunged at him.

“Hey, Davey, y'all finished up....” he started, but I grabbed him and pulled him towards the parking lot.

“We have to go...RUN!” I panted, trying to get my exhausted legs pumping. We must have been a sight--a skinny 140 pound kid covered in the most foul deli cocktail, trying to move a 300 pound stoner.

Chris finally got the idea and we booked it to my car. My legs ached, my sides burned, I breathed fire. But we made it into the car and I collapsed against the steering wheel. Weeping out big tears of snot. Chris put on his seatbelt and waited. He looked comically large in my mom's little economy sized hatchback.

When I cried it all out, he said, “Fuck yeah, Davey, going rogue. Shoppix: where quitting is a pleasure.”

I laughed and started up the car, might as well take him home with me. Mom usually made a casserole.

Sally Weston Ziph

Free Lunch

At five I stop by McDonald's drive-thru for fries, craving salt,
"Caleb" and "Jalen-the-cook" stand by, take my cash,
make my fries, their labor optimized,
saving the company money and time,
A.I. rules the day at McDonald's,
new normal, algorithms keeping
staff running, never knowing when their next shift
will be, finding out the afternoon of the day
before, always on call (no time for a "life"),
losing time on the clock if they're one minute late,
(time theft with a capital "T," stealing from The Company),
in the weeds, pouring coffee that's one-hundred-and-eighty-degrees
while America's teams of M.B.A.'s
at McDonald's, Amazon Prime, and Wal-Mart—sons of Sam's
Club, work on new ways to make money
on the backs of the small fry.

Caleb hands me my change, my receipt: Lady,
if you go to this site, (looking into my face, my eyes)
fill out this survey and tell them today Caleb and Jalen-the-cook
did an excellent job, that's Jalen with an "e,"

we will get a free lunch, we won't have to pay
if you do this today, Ma'am you'll get a free
Quarter Pounder with cheese, that's right, all for free
next time you buy a Quarter Pounder with cheese!
Just bring this receipt, this 9 digit code
from the site. I was craving fries, craving
salt, I almost drove by: now I sigh, driving
home, dreading the McDonald's website,
screen time at night after working 9-5, my
eyes are tired, and they'll require private data
to fill in the lines and of course, Digi-Sign.

I work for the school that trains MBAs, the bosses who boss
these workers all day, the optimizers of labor, stop-watchtiming
bathroom breaks, the name of the game
is work-harder-work-faster with fewer.

Of course I go back to get my free Quarter Pounder with Cheese
"Hello, Hello?" "Welcome to McDonald's," a female voice greets,
"I've got a coupon, I say, Buy one, get one free! I filled in the 9-digit
code, I'm ready to go."

"Ok, Ma'am, please pull up to the first window."

Scrambling through my wallet, I hand her the receipt, she
glances at it, then back at me—her name is "Monique,"
probably hungry for lunch.

Samuel Milligan

Ballot Day

The mosquito net baby is crying again. Little red face, little red clenched fists. An older woman – the kid’s grandma, I assume – sits on a park bench every morning and feeds it spoonfuls of mashed peas. When she’s not feeding the thing, it sits in its stroller covered in white mosquito netting while Grams takes a smoke break in the sweet pepperbushes. Sometimes she even turns her back to the stroller, to the baby. I walk past them every morning on my way to work and, once a week, I think: I could steal that baby. But I never do. It’s always wailing on about something or another.

It’s a big day at work. It’s Ballot Day and it’s Big Meeting Day. Every third Thursday of the month, the regional manager calls all the senior store managers into our location – we have the biggest table in any HARVEST dining room in the tri-state area – and they talk loudly about how much focaccia goes on a sandwich and managing employee bathroom sitting times and optimal ice bucket drainage techniques and whether the data on red pepper flake usage should be broken down by shift and personnel. Those Wisconsin Street bastards are pushing for a more expansive data collection process. That way, they can fire Steve and Janet and whoever else they don’t like by couching it in numbers. Sorry, Davy boy, but the spreadsheets say you’ve got a heavy hand on the cold brew pour. Get fucked. Our shift manager, Rita, tells me to find something to do, so I set myself up at the focaccia station and cut all the crusts off the big pans of bread. Close enough that I can listen, but with a job that keeps my eyes down so it doesn’t look like I’m listening.

“I mean who knows, right?” the regional manager is saying. He’s been calling for a tiny ceramic cup of espresso every twenty minutes. I don’t know how the dude isn’t shaking out of his chair already. A little bit of chest hair leans over his collar like a king looking over a parapet. “Maybe on a given day it’s just that Bruce is over scooping the ice cream for affogatos. But then you can look at the numbers, broken down by shift, broken down by who is working and when, and you can say huh...Bruce is overscooping every day. Or maybe Bruce is walking out with whole goddamn pints at the end of his shift. Maybe he’s making gifts of it out in the street when we’re not there. Some salmon evade bald eagles, yeah? Even though every bald eagle deserves to rip open every juicy salmon. Some’ll get through. You know what I mean?”

All the senior store managers nod like lemons in an earthquake.

After Big Meeting, Rita hands out the ballots. You’re supposed to fill it out on break but I take my fifteen minutes just standing in the deep freeze. I imagine I’m a big rig engine running too hot. I imagine I’m a weapon that needs to be kept in a room surrounded by a moat of liquid nitrogen. I imagine that my skin doesn’t feel like hot, greasy parchment paper, that my feet don’t hurt, that my fingers aren’t perforated by a million tiny cuts.

We’re testing out pre-made dough for these sweet little pot pies we’re rolling out soon as a pilot location. In the deep freeze, I poke smiley faces in the top of every pot pie with a metal straw. There’s like eight full sheet pans worth of frozen dough shells and I only get through a third of the pot pies on my fifteen minutes. Oh well. Some will be happy and others won’t. I wait until Rita leaves for lunch – she always takes the bus down to WildCorn, all the way down the hill toward Peak Mall, so we know she’ll be gone until like 2PM – and then look at my ballot.

“Who are you ranking?” asks Shannon. She’s older than me and I wish she was my sister. She’s the one that taught me about the secret dumpster. We never rank each other low, even though I know she hates how I use the plastic cup instead of the metal ice scoop. The scoop gets too cold too fast and I never get to hold it long enough to warm it up. The cup is much quicker and less traumatic for my fingers. I’ve never been someone who wants the temperature to change fast. And I’m not the only person doing hateful things. Shannon once scraped mold off the top of a cream cheese tub that had sat under the counter unrefrigerated for three days and served customers the formerly moldy cream cheese. That’s the type of thing I’d rank her low for, if she wasn’t so fucking pleasant and kind to me.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I hate this whole process.”

“It comes faster every month.”

“We were able to get rid of Kevin that one time though,” I point out.

“Which Kevin? Tall Kevin?”

“Kevin Grackle.”

“Oh,” says Shannon. She draws the word out like she’s rolling dough. She shakes her personal cup. It’s a third full of chunked ice. Two thirds empty, if you look at it another way. Ha ha. She shakes it again like she’s checking to make sure it’s just ice. A panhandling sound. A ghost in the wall. An accident at a construction site. “There’s always another Kevin Grackle, though,” she says.

“Remember when he took a sheet out without oven mitts?”

“Remember when he did the thing with the jelly doughnuts?”

“Remember when he was slicing all the meat backwards?”

“Remember when he wore his shirt inside out for a double?”

I smile at that. We could play Remember When all day long. “Kevin Grackle wasn’t even that bad,” I say. “In retrospect.”

Shannon sips from her empty cup. “You know he reapplied to work here?”

“When?”

“A few months after he got fired.”

“I can’t even imagine that. Imagine that! Everyone votes for you to get fired and you...show back up? Voluntarily?”

“He was just dull,” says Shannon. “He probably thought we’d have all gotten balloted out by then too.”

“Dumb is at least better than being, you know, evil.”

“We can’t ballot ‘evil’ out fast enough,” says Shannon.

“No kidding,” I say. “Evil gets promoted to senior store manager.” I flatten my ballot, grab a sharper grease pencil, and make my selections. “Maybe this is the one,” I tell Shannon. “Maybe this is the one round of balloting where the company sees we’re actually operating at peak performance, peak efficiency, no overservers or oversharers or overshitters or any of that stuff they’re all worried about. They’ll look at us and say hey! We don’t need to make them fire anyone, they can just have the same team forever and ever. Top to bottom in tippy top shape.” I gesture like I’m calling a runner safe at the plate in the fourth inning of a ten-run game.

“Nope,” says Shannon. “There will always be a new Kevin. Keeps the rest of us cleaning when we could be leaning.”

When I walk home, Granny and the baby are still orbiting the same bench they were on that morning. “Do you want one more spoonful?” she’s saying. “One more for the wee monster?” she coos. I imagine the baby looking her right in the face and saying: “Hit me, GramGram. Another shot of pea moosh.” The baby knocking them back. It’s been eating since I walked through the park early in the morning and I want to comment. I want to walk up to her and say: Hey lady, that’s a hungry fucking baby.

But what business is it of mine how much green slop some other person’s kid eats? I walk on by. Grandma tucks a cigarette behind her ear. “One more spoonful!” she prays aloud.

Lisa Haneberg

Early Bird Special

Old folks lined up ready to storm the all-you-can-eat buffet for the 4:30 p.m. early bird special. Only the first seating was guaranteed their fill of foot-long pan-fried frog legs before the day's ration ran out. Not literally...the frogs, long dead and unable to run or hop, were delivered flash frozen from Detroit frog farmers to Florida food halls. *Ranchers* seems better, as in goat or emu ranchers, but frog farmers or froggers is what they were called. This was when frog legs were a bigger deal and worthy of rearranging one's social calendar to consume. Like today, when fast food chains launch a god-damned new chicken sandwich. This one, with its slightly different sauce and pickle slices, or that sandwich with grilled instead of chopped onions, for early-adopters eager to snap social media selfies with their boring lunch. Seniors holding buckets of frog legs would make great selfies if froggers ever mount a market resurgence.

My hostess job at the Anchor Inn wasn't all about the fogies and frog legs; there were jackasses there, too. I remember the off the shoulder chocolate brown polyester hostess dress I wore to work. Pulled low so I'd look like a pirate's escort, the pirate being the perverted general manager, Stan. He enjoyed watching my budding, untethered breasts jiggle in every direction as I sat septuagenarians more aroused by the smell of golden-brown frog legs. Stan was a smallish man who stuck his tongue out at young ladies he couldn't wait to hire and watch bounce and sway through the dining room during the early bird rush. This was before strapless

bras were among the things teenagers knew anything about and some years after farmed frog legs peaked in popularity.

Stan, man, you were a sad pirate, past your prime still looking for life's prize. Eager for treasure you'd never hold and willing to pay handsomely for the tease of it. More skin and shakes, please, in exchange for days off, pay raises, and free reign to blare the cocktail bar jukebox before letting the frog-hungry line in to eat. *Hit Me with Your Best Shot* was my anthem for navigating bad-mannered managers and pickled penny-pinchers. Frog legs and flesh on display at the early bird special.



F. Jordan Carnice

Service Crew for Minute Angel Burger Delight Machine, Duties and Functions

The Service Crew of Minute Angel Burger Delight Machine (MABDM of Calcetta Company Ltd.) commits to perform the following responsibilities under the direct supervision of his or her supervisor as provided in contract (see separate file), to wit:

- a. Works on weekends, holidays, and the pre-apocalypse
- b. Prays over the machine
- c. Listens only to the machine, no exceptions
- d. Views the workplace as paradise for all because the divine is in the details approved by management
- e. Attends the prescribed in-house or third-party training set by corporate and re-echoes learning to ears that have long shut down
- f. Complies with directives of supervisor, stays within his or her shadow, becomes the shadow
- g. Submits required reports on the tiniest details: dents on appliances and equipment, grime gathering on grout, the missing centavo, the ghost that howls in the bathroom
- h. Monitors performance of colleague: speed of walk, arm-reach, curses under the breath
- i. Oversees daily operations (with emphasis on “daily”)

- j. Provides quality customer service to all customers—the customer is not only right but the customer is also the coin
- k. Limits the use of words (that are not limited to) “break”, “grievance”, and “raise”
- l. Answers queries and complaints with the patience of a rope (when it takes the shape of a noose, contact immediate superior immediately)
- m. Cascades official communications to colleagues, to vendors, to the walls, to the staccato calls of the clock
- n. Manages and secures the assigned inventory, locks oneself with said inventory when necessary
- o. Keeps all stock in the right temperature—in case of power outage, keeps all meat in the right temperature
- p. Thinks ahead of time more than the oracle could ever do
- q. Disposes rubbish and leftovers before roving errant noses and ravenous mouths appear from the fringes
- r. Overrides biometric exceptions and registers manually when all else fails—presence must be recorded for the great seeing eye sometimes misses
- s. Assesses the skies and the possibility of inclement weather to better adjust dreams, expectations
- t. Functions as supervisor when direct communication to immediate superior and/or corporate are unavailable for more than an hour; this is the only chance to become god
- u. Allows the image of an angel to be tattooed on left side of chest, close to the heart
- v. Greets approaching customer or customers: “Blessed burger every minute!” (Mondays to Fridays), “Dive into the divine delight!” (Saturdays and Sundays)
- w. Bids good-bye to departing customer or customers: “Please come back to the machine!”

- x. Performs other tasks that may be assigned by supervisor (i.e. dance a Zumba routine when you are told to, sing for functions when you are told to, donate for the death of the CEO's child when you are told to)
- y. Believes in what the man in the top floor reaches for
- z. Serves burgers hot and juicy and holy

CONTRIBUTORS

Keira Armstrong, a young author and poet, is the founder of Verum Literary Press and a staff contributor at Cloudy Magazine. Their work has been published or is forthcoming in Healthline Zine, Corporeal Lit, Sage Cigarettes, Anti-Heroin Chic, and more. You can find them at <https://keira-armstrong.carrd.co>

Daniel Addercouth was almost fired from his first job for hiding messages in product packaging. Later, he had to pretend to understand the corporate world in order to write Business English textbooks. Now happily employed in the public sector, he hopes he will never have to face the rigors of the free market again. He can be found on Twitter at [@RuralUnease](#)

F. Jordan Carnice believes most hustles, if not all, benefit only the hustled for. He has been a communications specialist for a food company, a features contributor for a community paper, an HR initiatives associate for a utilities company, and is currently a contractual information systems analyst for a government agency in the Philippines. His works have been published in Anomaly, Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine, Quarterly Literary Review Singapore, among several others. He has authored two poetry chapbooks—Weights & Cushions (2018) and How to Make an Accident (2019). Also a visual artist, he can be found on Twitter [@thebullfrog__](#) and Instagram [@thebullfrog__](#) and [@art.bullfrog](#)

L.M. Cole was once an assistant supervisor and donation center lead for a blood bank. She has also been a trainer in almost every other company she's worked for, which is both fulfilling and disheartening. She has poems published in *Roi Faineant*, *Unfortunately Lit*, *Morning Fruit Magazine* and forthcoming in *Olney*, *Moss Puppy*, *Gastropoda* and others. She can be found on Twitter: [@_scoops__](#)

Rosanne Ehrlich's work has appeared in Persimmon Tree, Panoplazine, Chicken Soup for the Soul, The Voices Project, and Vine Leaves Press, among others. She has worked in retail from her first job at F.W. Woolworth at 16, to Alexanders Department Store, to Arader Art Gallery and, finally, Saks Fifth Avenue. It was what went on "behind the scenes" in Retail that was the most fascinating.

Cynthia Gallaher, a Chicago-based poet, is author of four poetry collections, many with themes, including *Epicurean Ecstasy: More Poems About Food, Drink, Herbs and Spices*, and three chapbooks, including *Drenched*. Her nonfiction/memoir/creativity guide *Frugal Poets' Guide to Life: How to Live a Poetic Life, Even If You Aren't a Poet* won a National Indie Excellence Award. She was recently selected to be the final judge for the 2022 Prairie State Poetry Prize.

Lisa Haneberg earned an MFA from Goddard College and is the Co-Founder of the Lexington Writer's Room, a nonprofit coworking space for writers. She writes both fiction and nonfiction and enjoys telling stories about science, writing, food, nature, travel, and the humorous aspects of every-day experiences. In addition to essays and short stories, Lisa has published a mystery series and over a dozen business books. Her first book was called, *High Impact Middle Management*. Twitter [@lisahaneberg](#)

Kevin Hopson has dabbled in many genres over the years. A couple of his stories have been contest/award winners, and Kevin's work has appeared in more than twenty anthologies. You can learn more about Kevin by visiting his website at <http://www.kmhopson.com>.

Kit Lascher has been tracking down more receipt paper and charging \$0.10 for bags for most of her professional life. When she's not wearing her badge, she makes stories, images, and scenes. Her work has appeared on multiple stages and pages (including Lyric Theatre, *beestung*, *Copious Love*, and *Punk Monk Magazine*). You can find out more at trashwonderland.com and at her workplace, where she will ask you if you are finding everything okay. You can tell her you're not okay. It's okay. You're in the right place.

Stephen McGowan is an emerging poet and author from the UK. He is a mature creative writing student at Northumbria University in his last year, and is active at spoken word events throughout the North East of England. Twitter: [@geekdaddyprime](#)

Samuel Milligan (he/him) writes when he isn't fishing his cat out of the kitchen sink or playing defense-first pickup basketball with the old men in his neighborhood. He believes there's nothing wrong with trading a little paint when you parallel park. His work has appeared in *Rejection Letters*, *Bear Creek Gazette*, *Expat Lit*, and elsewhere. He is [@sawmilligan](#) on Twitter.

Maria Prieto (she/her) has worked in the fast food industry and at sushi bar restaurants for years to live off tips. She occasionally worked retail during summers and when it was time for Black Friday shopping. Nowadays, she mostly works from home via Zoom. Her book reflections and recommendations can be found on Instagram [@mpjustreading](#).

Kenneth Purscell is a retired retail cashier, customer service representative, adjunct professor, and pastor--and if you add up all those salaries, you understand how he came to work retail jobs for KMart and for Ollie's Bargain Outlet in Wise, Virginia (same physical store, even). He has accidentally deflated Santa Claus, had a case of cast iron skillet fall on his head, and mopped unspeakable substances that trailed 150 feet through the store. Despite all this, he found a perverse pleasure in assisting so many customers, and he even once went ten consecutive shifts with a perfect count in the till. He and his wife currently live in the south suburbs of Chicago.

nat raum (b. 1996) is a disabled artist, writer, and genderless disaster from Baltimore, MD. They have a BFA (in photography) from Maryland Institute College of Art and are a current MFA candidate at the University of Baltimore. They are also the founder and editor-in-chief of fifth wheel press and managing editor of Welter Journal. Past and upcoming publishers of nat's writing include Olney Magazine, perhappened, CLOVES, and trampset. Find them online: natraum.com/links.

Mel Reynes writes about the fantastical terror of living in the early 21st century. Mel is afraid of the woods, frogs, biking at night, and using her phone. Mel has three spooky cats and enjoys living in Rhode Island. If you ever meet Mel in real life, offer her a tasty duck and run away.

Kelli Simpson is the winner of the 2021 Poetry Super Highway Poetry Contest. Her work has appeared in Lamplit Underground, Green Ink Poetry, One Art Poetry Journal, and elsewhere. A mother, poet, and former teacher, she makes her home in Norman, Oklahoma.

Sally Weston Ziph's poems and short stories have appeared in The Five-Two, Bear River Review, Third Wednesday, Rat's Ass Review, and Quartet, among others. She is a University of Michigan Hopwood Award winner and received her MFA degree from Miami University's Low Residency MFA program, where she was the first runner-up for the 2020 Miami American Academy of Poets Prize. She works as a reference librarian at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business in Ann Arbor.

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- Tim Batson, EIC