

**Sarah Mook Poetry Contest 2017, Grades 9-12, First place,  
“The Janitor at the Liberty Science Center”**

This character-driven poem placed first in the high school group because of its sharp, minimal, and yet expansive view of a janitor at a tourist attraction, the Liberty Science Center. In prose, character is most likely revealed through many descriptions and complex character interactions, while in poetry, characterization must be focused and concentrated. One way to disclose character is through a person's occupation, which this poem skillfully accomplishes. However, the poet does not fall prey to stereotypical expectations of a janitor's character; he or she reveals the janitor as a complex individual. That the poet does so in twenty-seven short lines attests to the writer's skill with accurate and telling details, sharp line breaks, and excellent diction.

The poem's straightforward title, “The Janitor at the Liberty Science Center,” also functions as its first line; thus, we are immediately placed in the poem. After this factual title-as-first-line double duty, it is the next six lines that surprise the reader:

doesn't like his job.  
He is, after all, allergic  
to latex and his gloves  
the center provides,  
and he hates wasting money  
on the ones at the drugstore.

I appreciate the writer's talent using minor, explicit elements to divulge character. First of all, the fact that the janitor “doesn't like his job” because of an allergic reaction to the latex gloves he must wear, can be easily fixed by buying his own “at the drugstore.” However, he “hates wasting money” to buy his own, leading one to believe that he is parsimonious. The speaker does not say he can't *afford* different gloves, just that he doesn't like “wasting” money on purchasing them—or ask his employer for non-latex gloves. Because of these small specifics, we can conclude that the janitor is perhaps a kind of martyr who will not “waste” his money to buy gloves he needs in order to prevent an allergic reaction—he'd rather suffer—mildly, but suffer none-the-less. How effortlessly the poet leads us to that conclusion!

The next six lines bring up another reason why the janitor doesn't like his job:

He doesn't enjoy how  
his presence makes all

the kids cry, his height  
towering over them  
like the monsters they  
had been warned about.

The janitor's "towering" stature separates him from the children at the museum, not his job title. Because of his height, the speaker compares the janitor to a "monster"—certainly a divide between him and others. Perhaps he views himself that way also?

When the children misbehave, parents make "flustered apologies," which he "hates." Other aspects of his job he derides are the "smell of Windex / that sticks relentlessly to his skin" and teenagers' "minty gum" spit out and "ground under their heels." The speaker presents precise, telling, and compressed particulars concerning the janitor. The poet is not afraid to situate the reader directly into the setting of the poem through resonant particulars and explicit imagery.

The poem changes tone and setting abruptly in the next five lines.

*You'll be a great basketball star*  
his high school physics teacher  
had said, not knowing  
the janitor, then,  
student, hated basketball.

With these well-chosen five lines, we see a janitor who is trapped in his job. Being tall led everyone to assume that he would be a basketball player, but he hates basketball. All that his height has brought him is to be deemed a monster in the eyes of the children at the Science Center. The most surprising information in this section is that it is the janitor's physics teacher who predicts his future success in basketball. That the janitor took physics as a subject in school shows that perhaps his interest in physics led him to work at the Science Center, where he most likely aspires to be something more than a janitor. Also note the meaningful line break between "then" and "student."

The final three lines of the poem confirm the above:

His locker inside the employee lounge  
has a NASA sticker next to the coat hook,  
stuck above his shoes.

We now see the janitor for what he yearns to be—a member of NASA, a scientist in his own right. This well-rounded and grounded character becomes one we can sympathize with by the end of the poem. I find the ending of the poem unexpected, yet not improbable. Through telling personal revelations, the poet leads the reader to an unforeseen conclusion. And I don't feel that the poem is forced at the end; instead, it allows the reader to appreciate the janitor's true character.

Because of this writer's talent with diction, purpose, and pertinent detail, the janitor becomes memorable, with more depth than readers might grant him due to his job title. I heartily encourage this poet to continue writing with this controlled, knowing voice. Bravo!

*Thank you for the pleasure of reading your work!*

*Marie Kane*

Final Judge.

Sarah Mook Poetry Contest, 2017

[www.mariekanepoetry.com](http://www.mariekanepoetry.com)