

**Sarah Mook Poetry Contest 2017, Grades 9-12, Second place,
“Job”**

Writing about one’s parent in a forthright way is challenging, yet the second place poem, “Job” in the 9-12 grade group, is prize-winner that explores a mother / daughter relationship. This intriguing poem takes an inanimate concept, a ‘job,’ and vividly brings it to life. The poem illustrates that a non-existent ‘job’ controls both characters’ lives in the poem in an almost malevolent way. The poet uses personification, metaphor, and concise and original diction to reveal this challenging situation.

The opening two stanzas introduce the power that the missing job holds over the mother and daughter—the speaker of the poem—so much so, that it becomes a third character in the poem. It “lurk[s] in every family photo / grinning, a strand of my mom’s hair / caught in its mouth.” The command of the lost job is clear: it establishes its control in “family photos” and even goes so far as to show its mastery over the mother by catching a “strand” of her hair in “its mouth”—a show of ultimate familiarity and even contempt. Other unpleasant aspects of the job are its breath, “an aftertaste,” and the casual way it inhabits the home: “it’s legs flung open across the conversation.” The poet goes on to disclose that she “rubbed elbows with it” and “learned about its home life that filled / in the blanks of ours,” while its “clock . . . thieved ten hours” of theirs. The job makes itself paramount for this family; its very absence mocks their need. Note the verbs “lurked,” “grinning,” and “lounged” that personify this “job” and indicate its authority over their lives.

The next two sections continue the devastation of having no job in the year and a half search for one. Comparing the job to a family member who has left, the speaker describes it as having “scratched its face out of frames / kicked back at the table,” and “left the front / door a gaping reminder.” The fourth stanza delineates the results of this absence:

Without it, the house mourns.
My mom sinks into a swatch of light
in the living room, maps out her life
in advance without the job there
to steady, to engulf.

The lack of a job is so severe that the house “mourns” and the mom is lit by only one “swatch of light” as if she is in the process of disappearing. She now has no engulfing presence steadying her life.

The poem's focus changes in the next few stanzas. The speaker, not her mother, finds a job "that she doesn't want" in a bakery ruled by the "bells on the door," and one where what "*she* wants doesn't matter" [emphasis mine]. When she hears of the Orlando nightclub shooting "through a flurry of texts," she cannot "wear her emotions / where the customer can see," alluding to her job's capacity to stifle feeling.

That the speaker dislikes her job in the "customer service" sector is indicative of this job's menial nature. Not all jobs are alike—some, like this one, illustrate a company's need to find easy-to-hire, short-term staffers, versus a job that reflects one's preparation for a long career. How ironic that a job the speaker holds is not valued, and yet the job the mother doesn't have is greatly desired.

At the end of the poem, the speaker wonders about the big job and its ability to "devour" "opening nights" and "T-ball games" with its demands. (Note the menacing verb "devour.") On the contrary, the speaker's job "stinks up my room with coffee beans" but is not essential enough to "find its way to family dinners." When the speaker's mom admits, "I don't know / if I'm going to find a new one," the job leaves as if satisfied with the mayhem it has caused, the despair it has engendered:

The malicious job slides out the window,
its canines softened, its lanky legs
turned graceful, its pervasiveness not
a burden, but something to grab at night.

Note the metaphorical reference to dogs that can bite with the word choice, "canines."

The last stanza is the poem's coda; offering a summation concerning the nature and consequence of the absent job for the mother:

Unemployment is a clawed safety.
It doesn't rip out pieces of my mom's life
it just suggests that she doesn't deserve them.

The writer concludes that the lack of a job is insidious. "Unemployment with its "clawed safety," . . . "rips out" a person's self-esteem, as if he or she doesn't deserve all of the constructive, joyful, and pleasing aspects of a life.

The poem, "Job," explains how a lack of employment negatively affects the family, especially the mother; the poet handles this adult issue in a mature, hard-hitting, and measured way. More importantly, the writer's love, concern, and frustration for her mother is evident, but not to any maudlin degree. The adroit use of personification elevates the poem from one of simple complaint to one of sophisticated analysis. Kudos to this talented writer!

Thank you for the pleasure of reading your work!

Marie Kane

Final Judge

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