

# LUMPEN

A JOURNAL FOR POOR AND WORKING CLASS WRITERS



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**LUMPEN: A JOURNAL FOR POOR AND WORKING-CLASS WRITERS**

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# **LUMPEN#17**

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## **WORK**

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# EDITORIAL

Zosia Brom

When I was younger, almost every radical left space I was hanging out at had this poster stuck up the wall, the one showing a person cosied up in bed and proclaiming: “I didn’t go to work today, I don’t think I’ll go tomorrow.” At the bottom, it said: ‘Let’s take control of our lives and live for pleasure not profit.’

Now, I have no issues with people refusing to work, for whatever reason really, however there was always something that really bothered me in this poster and its popularity, and it was the level of inexplicit privilege it displayed. The thing is, back then I was hanging out mainly with the squatters, the anarchists, the ravers and the lot, and there were, to simplify it, two main groups of such: the people who could easily choose to disengage from any kind of labour with little consequence, and those who, should they not comply with the capitalist requirement to engage in work, would see their lives spiralling out of control pretty fast and pretty bad, and on many levels. Some of course

chose this route, but in my books they didn’t so much choose to not work as much as they chose to disengage from the mainstream capitalist forms of labour, instead “making their living” by all sorts of other, more “underground”, less “respected” and more “antisocial” forms: work it was regardless and I commend (almost) all of them. There was also the group who had no such choice at all and they were simply denied work opportunities by the society we live in: this predicament was a horrible, life-changing type of struggle for them.

Not too many had the choice as presented in the poster in question, that is, to roll from one side of the bed to the other carelessly while making dismissive statements about something that is a basic experience of the vast majority of humans. And of course, while the years passed, we all realised that those who could afford this privilege, usually enjoyed a whole spectrum of other privileges, be it the comfort of sleeping in while knowing that the Bank of Mum and Dad would always bail them out, or the comfort of knowing that no matter how much they mess up, there is always going to be some money waiting for them in the trust fund. Or that, if and when they do decide to work, their first job will elevate them several

social ladder steps right to the top of it, over the heads of the regular folk, and that this privilege was given to them at birth and that they always knew it was there whenever they chose to take it.

Back then, like many less privileged peers, I worked in all sorts of roles that I either considered enjoyable and worthwhile or not: most of them was outdoor labour. Whatever I thought of them, there was never a question that I would be able to voluntarily and without far-fetching consequences opt out of work, and this silly popular poster was rather symbolic of the general detachment of what is called the leisure class. After all, for the regular mortals in our society, the saying “two paycheques away from eviction” is not a slogan, it is a pretty scary reality.

There are, of course, other forms of work besides the paid type that are required to make our societies keep rolling, such as emotional or reproductive labour. These are often undertaken on top of paid work, and, more often than not, they are assigned to class, gender or racially oppressed people. These need to be recognised too, and they too leave little room or choice for, to quote that poster again, taking “control of our lives and live for pleasure not profit” - although life based on pleasure over anything else does sound like a nice if unachievable idea.

In this issue of Lumpen, we feature texts describing various experiences of work, paid or unpaid, respected or dismissed by our society, legal or illegal. We hear what work means in our lives, why do we engage in it, or why not. How do we survive in a society that requires us to make money to live, and how do we handle that while also navigating our lives and unpaid work. •

# THE WORK OF THE CHILD

Tammi D.

*Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life...*

I call bullshit. Popular narrative tells that hard work leads to upward mobility, but that story assumes a starting point that many of us never had. When you begin from scarcity, work is survival rather than delivering an escape.

My first job was looking after my autistic brother. Of course, it being the early 80s, we didn't call him autistic. He was slow, remedial, weird, clumsy. An embarrassment. And, eight years younger than me, a fucking burden.

I wasn't allowed to be a child for long enough. For me, work didn't begin with a job title, a payslip, or even a choice. It began in a house (that didn't feel like a home), where once a drunken parent ruled. Our survival depended on vigilance, and silence. That only lasted just over a decade. That watchful work changed suddenly.

Next, I was given the homework that wasn't done at a bedroom desk, or a dining table. It was the work that kept

the world from falling apart. It was picking my brother up from the childminders, making him tea, trying to not kill him, reading him a story, putting him to bed. It was the work done in secret, not to be told to authorities. They would *take us away*. I often wished *they* would.

My work was wiping a shitty arse. Loading laundry, making clean, making good. It was noticing moods before they exploded. It was dealing with crises with the quiet competent desperation of someone who knows there is no backup plan.

None of this labour was named or rewarded. It didn't come with sick days, or praise. It came with the unspoken knowledge that if I failed, everything else would too. I worked to keep people safe, to manage chaos, to hold myself together, tightly, in the absence of support.

I was a worker long before I was an employee.

That labour shaped me, for better and for worse. It gave me skills, but it also left scars. Any honest conversation about work must make room for stories like mine - not as exceptions, but as evidence that the system we have is not neutral, fair, or inevitable.

*'I was a worker long before I was an employee.*

*That labour shaped me, for better and for worse. It gave me skills, but it also left scars. Any honest conversation about work must make room for stories like mine - not as exceptions, but as evidence that the system we have is not neutral, fair, or inevitable.'*

I learnt that work was responsibility without recognition, effort without rest. Poverty narrows the imagination. It forces us to prioritise survival over satisfaction, stability over meaning.

By the time I was legally old enough to work, I had already been doing it for years. I started working outside the house to escape. The two hour paper rounds before school. That Saturday job in British Home Stores - quickly rising ranks until I was responsible for all the cash, at the tender age of sixteen, still a schoolgirl.

Leicester's Haymarket Theatre gleefully accepted me into their ranks of sparkies, adding light to big shows with big directors and even bigger performers.

This was it - I was on my way.

Always thankful for a state funded place at university, those four years were great. Place,

meaning, good grades. But I didn't have the contacts to succeed. No nepo baby here. More echo baby - the same story, in a different place.

Shitty jobs to pay the rent. Falling out of it all to sit in squatted communes, tuning out with a joint or five, fortnightly visits to attest that *No, I hadn't done any work in the last two weeks*. Apart from the work of staying alive, connected, busy busy busy.

And the burnout of those early years began to fizzle at the edges. Periods of deep downward spiralling followed by the orgasmic times of bipolar ups. "She's having an episode", they whispered. "I am having the time of my life", I shouted.

The disabled are crippled by societal barriers that are greater than the impairment - when systems are designed without us in mind, and then judge us for struggling to fit in, there is no way to succeed.

Woe, betide the poverty-stricken, our stakes are even higher. No financial cushion to soften a bad month, a health crisis, an unexpected or ignored bill. Every job matters because losing it means losing everything. Risk is a luxury to never be afforded.

My work patterns followed my moods. I either gave everything or nothing at all. Rest felt dangerous. Idleness felt like negligence. I would rail against those that went home at clocking off time. Those that didn't give the extra mile, yard or inch. And yet authority was something to be either survived or railed against, rather than trusted.

This wide eyed child became a good mother. Her hyper-vigilance helped three young children stay safe in the storm of marital violence, dark moods and charred nerves.

On returning to the workplace I worked harder than necessary, accepting exploitative conditions. The bosses that caressed legs under the table, that invited me to their beds, that stole an unbidden kiss in the cupboard. I struggled to recognise when a request turned to a demand, when a demand turned to exploitation. The dynamics were familiar: keep your head down, do not complain, do not be a problem. Safety, once again, depended on performance. Often mistaken for dedication.

Employers often praise this kind of worker. We are reliable, flexible, committed. What they rarely see is the cost. When the nervous system has been trained by fear, work is never just work - It is a risk assessment.

So, Eileen - your raised voice? The meeting where I laughed as a trigger response, shaped by years of survival? You remember - the one where you should have been calm, supportive, encouraging? When you spiralled out of control? The one that led to my signing a non disclosure agreement? Yeah - that. Fuck you.

In all this, I forgot to look out for me. For decades. It took a gentle, guiding therapist that introduced me to that younger version of me. Counsellors had tried. Read a psychology book or two, eager to try out the theory. I am a complex case.

This therapist was different. One that has healing in their bones. And ever so carefully, ever so gently, they held my hand while I said a tentative hello. Embraced the whale eyed watcher child. Soothed her while I let her unload. Her value lay in her usefulness, in how well she could anticipate needs, and prevent harm.

The world of work is built around the myth of consistency: steady output, predictable energy, linear progress. But I can't work that way. I am a child of turbulence. A progeny of tempestuous storms followed by calm sunny days, of long nights of listening and days of fleeing the biting, needling sleet.

There are periods where my mind moves fast, ideas come easily, and productivity flows. These moments are rewarded, celebrated. But they are followed by crashes—periods of exhaustion, sinking inwards, cognitive fog.

At these times, just showing up is an achievement.

I continue to work. I am trying to renegotiate my relationship with it. I am learning, slowly and imperfectly, that work does not have to mean self-erasure. That my worth is not measured solely by output. That rest is not a moral failing.

I am learning to set boundaries. I spent decades not knowing that it was possible. I dwell in a family that regards self sacrifice as a strength, martyrdom as spiritual attainment.

I have begun choosing environments that value sustainability over sacrifice. Where self care is celebrated. When accepting that some days, survival is enough.

I am so capable of work. But it must be like withies that weave together, circles within circles that spiral. My work here isn't linear, it branches, and breaks and reforms. I have created my own work, because my differences are my strengths.

I learn when I teach.

The summer sun lends me his fire, as I cavort in brilliant fields directing people and holding spaces.

I pour my heart into the food I create for communities, loving them back into conversation, friendships and healing.

And when the fluctuations are too strong, I write. Mostly just for me. I thought my neurodivergence and bipolar were personal failures. I understand now that my body and mind, my Self, just don't behave on a schedule.

When I stop masking, I stop hiding my Self, I stop pushing through. All this self regulation is labour too: the constant self-monitoring, the effort needed to appear 'normal', the fear of being exposed as unreliable.

Our definitions of work are far too small. By celebrating productivity, we ignore the invisible labour that keeps families, communities, and individuals afloat. We praise resilience without questioning why so many people are required to be resilient in the first place. We treat work as a test of character rather than a social arrangement that can be designed more humanely.

I still don't know how to work casually. But I am trying to widen my work to encourage care of the Self.

Now give your Self a hug xx •

*NB: No names have been changed to protect the innocent, or guilty.*

*Tammi lives in rural Wales, and writes to process her life as a neurodivergent, lower class woman. She teaches permaculture, weaves communities and gardens to calm her mind.*

*She is late to the Substack party... but her handle is <https://permaculturetammi.substack.com/>*

# IN IT TOGETHER. DIFFERENTLY. ENTIRELY.

**thiru**

When I was sixteen, I was kicked out of home for repeated trouble with the police, and expelled from school in the same year. I ended up living with my dad in London for a while, who recently died from many years of drug and alcohol addiction, before getting housing benefits to move into a flat with my mate and surviving on low-paid work and selling drugs. This went on for a few years before being held at knifepoint after a rave, and then subsequently kicking all my mates out of my flat because there wasn't any more weed to smoke after the ordeal. As I sat in my dingy flat alone, I decided something in my life needed to change. I moved back in with my mum in Brighton, got off drugs, and started to rebuild my life.

After working shitty telesales jobs and working in bars and pubs, I eventually re-enrolled in college and completed an Access to Higher Education course to go to university. To say this decision changed my life is an understatement. Not only did I have the chance to

move to a new city, but I was also exposed to people with different ideas and experiences. I had the opportunity to study abroad and became politicised around global issues of injustice, power and inequality. A master's degree in social change followed, yet through all this time I still hadn't learnt to integrate that learning into my own life — my embodied history, my relationships and networks, my opportunities and constraints.

The integration phase post-master's was hard. Moving to London to try and find work aligned with my values and aspirations to make a difference. Instead, I ended up doing hospitality temp work to get by. My girlfriend at the time had support with bills from her mum, so she was able to take on unpaid internships to get a leg up to gain experience and make progress in her career. I was back working in restaurants and bars. Eventually we broke up, she said I wasn't as much fun as I used to be (whilst trying to earn enough money to pay rent, apply for jobs and do unpaid work to try and get opportunities in paid changemaking spaces).

Eventually, I found a guardianship to live in which kept the costs down, and started working for a small mental health charity in Hackney, 4 days a

week. It was a great job and gave me a bit more space to focus on my activism, getting involved in direct actions across London, and volunteering with a peace and reconciliation centre. After the 2019 XR October Rebellion, I decided it was time to give myself fully to my activism and I quit my job and left the guardianship to travel around getting involved with nature-connection projects as a volunteer, finding a lot of meaning at the expense of financial security.

After moving around for a while and living in my tent in between projects, I volunteered at Schumacher College to have somewhere to live over the winter. I was really excited to have the opportunity to experience this live-in holistic science earth-centred school, and, in many ways, it was an amazing experience. Yet in the day-to-day as a volunteer, I couldn't shake the reality that I was providing unpaid labour: literally washing dishes, preparing food, maintaining the space for wealthy international students to attend courses on ecological design and systems change theory. I was starting to notice how inequity played out around me, not just in big problems 'out there'.

After all my volunteering, I began to get more paid gigs as a facilitator, eventually setting up a collective with peers to run camps around power and privilege. After our first camp, we met up to debrief and read feedback from the course we'd just run. The feedback was generally good. People wrote about feeling supported to meet power and difference in more honest ways, about conversations and changes that now felt possible in their organisations. This was the work I cared about, what I live(d) for: helping groups and movements look directly at systemic inequity as it plays out in our groups and relationships, not just in theory.

After the feedback, we then moved on to the money and what we were going to pay ourselves. We were practising what is sometimes called a "money

pile." The idea is to have an honest conversation about our needs at that time and then distribute money through relationship, responding to where financial resources are most needed at that moment. We wrote the total amount the course had brought in on a piece of paper and placed it in the centre of the circle. Around it, we laid out scraps of paper for different needs: how much we wanted to pass on to a cause we cared about; how much was needed for admin and printing; and then what remained to be split between us as fees.

We began naming our current financial situations. Two of the facilitators owned houses. The other had enough capital to buy one if they wanted to. They had savings or families who could help if things went wrong. I remember how scattered my thinking became as this was revealed, heat and activation throughout my body — at once wanting to run away and re-invisibilise this difference and also wanting to scream in outrage at our difference. I was living month to month, relying on Universal Credit as a buffer and topping it up with paid activist work when I could get it. Until that moment, I had believed we were in this together. That choosing change-making work meant choosing financial precarity — purpose over profit — as a shared sacrifice. We might have shared values, political analysis, and commitment. But we did not share risk. And that difference mattered more than I had wanted to admit. I've felt a chasm in those relationships ever since.

*‘Until that moment, I had believed we were in this together. That choosing change-making work meant choosing financial precarity — purpose over profit — as a shared sacrifice. We might have shared values, political analysis, and commitment. But we did not share risk. And that difference mattered more than I had wanted to admit.’*

That first money pile did lead to positive change for me in many ways. It forced me to take my own financial sustainability more seriously and to monetise my work. Eventually, working as part of a small collective, we secured a more stable income flow through client work and paid ourselves a fixed monthly amount. But it was still modest, and the sense of month-to-month precarity never fully disappeared.

I continued to work as a facilitator with change-making organisations — professional NGOs, grassroots activist groups, and direct action movements — running trainings on systemic power and privilege, and facilitating conflict when power inequities surfaced inside teams and movements. Our centre of gravity was always towards those most systemically marginalised: people who were already carrying the emotional and political labour of inequity without support.

We were paid by the groups we supported. We had no core funding. Grassroots collectives regularly reached out for help we genuinely wanted to give. But unpaid work doesn't pay rent.

More often than not, I felt like I was paddling furiously underwater while having to appear calm, grounded, and resourced above the surface. I had flexibility and autonomy as a freelancer, but it was underpinned by a constant, low-level pressure: there was no safety net. No savings. No one to catch me if I couldn't make it work. Rest was technically possible, but often carried a sense of risk. Long-term sickness removed the illusion that I could simply keep paddling harder. My body began to fail. I tried to keep going.

There was no definitive moment of 'becoming ill', just a slow narrowing of my life. Needing more time in bed. Getting tired more easily. Working, then collapsing straight back into rest. Until eventually, I couldn't get out of bed again.

*thiru is a facilitator and artist based in South Devon. Their work explores the impact of power on intimacy and connection.*

I've now spent over a year mostly lying down, still very much in recovery, not knowing if or when I'll get better. I had to step back from my work and hand everything over. Without paid work, I became dependent on Universal Credit and began the process of applying for disability benefits.

It took about six months to complete my assessment. I had to maintain fortnightly calls with the jobcentre, and was sanctioned at one point for being too unwell to reach the phone in time for my call. I could just about afford food, bills and rent if I was meticulous. There was nothing spare at the end of each month. I was so unwell, yet the stress and anxiety of living so close to the edge, and preparing for assessment to get more financial support was all-consuming.

I did eventually get additional disability benefit support. I still don't have much, but the payments arrive consistently, at the same time each month. I can pay my bills. Buy food. Pay for therapies that support my recovery.

And yet it feels conditional. Reassessment looms in the background. It isn't clear when my health will recover, if at all. Welfare feels politically fragile. It is difficult to trust that this support will endure. •

# IF YOU WORK FOR A LIVING WHY DO YOU KILL YOURSELF WORKING?

**Tom Priestley**

“If you work for a living, why do you kill yourself working?” It is a phrase that has haunted me for the majority of my working life. Since leaving school, I haven’t had what you would call a “fixed occupation.” The thought of staying in one job until retirement has always turned my stomach.

I have worked in numerous places across multiple roles: stacking shelves, customer service, warehouse work, mail sorting, and picking and packing—along with the occasional fraudulent benefits claim and being labeled a “Key Worker” during the pandemic. The one thing I’ve learned through my myriad career choices is that we simply work to survive, not to live. No matter how much we earn through contracted hours or overtime, our wages are eaten up by pension funds, National Insurance, rent, taxes, and the cost of living, which seems to rise via inflation on an all-too-regular basis. Until we win the lottery or find a better-paid job, we simply have to stay put.

I’ve been in my current job for six years, yet my hopes of becoming a successful author have not diminished. I have two short stories to write, an article to start, and a handful of poems to email to promising zines in the hope of getting some exposure. My novel also needs editing. Outside of writing, I drum and play harmonica and guitar for local Leeds band The Beer Snobs. We rehearse every Friday and are currently writing our third album while preparing for festival season. We have a collection of gigs coming up—some paid, some not. It’s not about the money, of course, but it’s always nice to be paid for something you’re passionate about. The fifty quid I’ll get for this piece, if accepted, will be a nice little bonus.

On top of all this, there is a backlog at work. This means extra hours to clear the ordering system just so I can earn a 48-hour reprieve. In between the loading and unloading of delivery vans, stock replenishment, and clearing conveyor belts, the one thing I actually want to do takes a back seat.

I have to tell myself to take it easy; things happen when they are supposed to happen. Sometimes I even have to convince myself that my tasks are already completed, trying to maintain that frame of

*'I think that if I simply went home and focused on my independent projects, they would be done in no time. Then, reality sets in. I realize there is no way in hell I could commit such a thoughtless act. My no-frills, minimum-wage income may not offer adventurous escapades to faraway lands, but at least it keeps me warm, fed, and sheltered.'*

mind until they actually are. Besides, it's not like my writing is going to make a world of difference in the long run. My stories and poems are often concocted for my own amusement; to place pressure on myself with deadlines and release dates feels as pointless as watching a weather forecast when it's clearly raining outside my window.

I could easily blame my lack of creativity on the job that pays my bills, and I must admit there are moments of boring drudgery where I feel my time is being stolen. I think that if I simply went home and focused on my independent projects, they would be done in no time. Then, reality sets in. I realize there is no way in hell I could commit such a thoughtless act. My no-frills, minimum-wage income may not offer adventurous escapades to faraway lands, but at least it keeps me warm, fed, and sheltered.

I guess it's all a matter of balance—one I still need to master.

I suppose I'll just have to keep sweating it out like all the other hopeless (but not aimless) chancers. I'll keep working, hoping that something good is bound to happen, and try not to grumble so much. Maybe a modern-day John Martin or Max Perkins

will show up so I can finally make my mark—and the retirement age will return to something reasonable.

It reminds me of the lyrics from "Clash City Rockers" by The Clash: *"So don't complain about your useless employment / Jack it in forever tonight / Or shut your mouth and pretend you enjoy it / Think of all the money you've got."* •

*Tom Priestley was born in Leeds in 1988. Tom began writing poetry and fiction at the age of 19. Inspired by Hunter S. Thompson, Charles Bukowski, Jack Kerouac and John Cooper Clarke. At the behest of a friend began performing his poetry at open mic nights around Leeds.*

*He has self-published nearly 13 collections of poetry, released 3 albums with Martin Trippett and organised events around Yorkshire.*

# WHATEVER COMES...

## Mumlet

**Content warning: descriptions of domestic and sexual abuse.**

From memory, I think my first work experience was helping to clean the floors of the children's home where my brothers and I were from the ages of 7-10 years old. We kids had to clean, Hoover and dust so that Santa could come. I didn't even know who that was, coming from a Hindu Swaminarayan faith family. My parents came from farming families in India to the UK a year before I was born, with my sister, who was 8 years old, and my brother, who was under 1 year old. I also helped younger children at my primary school to read Ladybird Peter and Jane books, which was lovely. When I came out of the children's home, I went back to live with my dad and a woman whom I did not know, my stepmum. Prior to the children's home, my dad and my mum would be in mental institutes leaving my sister to bring us up. They were medicated, drugged and electrocuted, leaving them dazed and crazy minded when they got home, which resulted in us being placed in the children's home. While we were in the children's home, my poor mum was beside herself trying

to find us. Nobody had told her where we were; my dad had locked her out, leaving her destitute and homeless. After sleeping in public toilets and phone boxes for some time, she ended up in a women's hostel, which was eventually set on fire, killing her and 9 other women all at once.

So to come back to a home where she was replaced by this other woman, who was awful to us, was like living in a nightmare. We had to do everything she said, and if we didn't, we got the beats; if we did the chores and got them wrong, we got beaten. We got beaten by both her and my dad. Also, my dad had been hit by a drunk driver while we were in the children's home, leaving him crippled in his 30s and so limited with work options. He used to be a bricklayer and labourer.

My brothers soon got a job delivering the local paper, and so I was shamed into helping them, which I did anyway because I loved my brothers and it was good to get away from the parents. My brothers fared very well, getting paper rounds and a job in a local linen shop and warehouse. I was belittled and beaten, hurt, and yelled at constantly for being a useless girl. I would wish I died in a fire like my mum and would try to let the only heater in our home burn me, but to no satisfaction. At some

point, my stepmum told me not to come home from school without a job, so I would walk to local businesses on my way home, dragging my heels even more than usual and bracing myself to speak to the owners, asking for work for many months. Once, my stepmum threw a load of shoes and footwear at me at the doorstep for returning without a job and shut the door on me, leaving me wanting to just drop dead right there.

Anyway, as time went on, I finally managed to get a job in a shop at the age of 11. With great relief and excitement, I was accepted into my home for once, but it didn't stop the beatings and shaming, though. This was a Xmas temp job, helping customers, stocking up, organising and tidying, and it paid 50p an hour, much less than my brothers who were getting £1 each.

After Xmas, I was back walking the streets after school, feeling shit and hopeless for goodness knows how long until I was accepted in a newsagent (I was 13 years old then) by a lovely Indian man named Raj! He offered to pay me £1 per hour!! This put me in a slightly better position at home, but still didn't stop the aggression and daily beatings. I would stock up everything in the shop, organise and tidy everything, serve the customers and chat. While there, the owner retired, and new ones came in. I was there for 2 years or longer. I even served cigarettes. The shopkeepers were generous; they would pay me and offer me sweets for myself and my new little half-sister. They would also let me try new treats when they came in! But I found it hard to resist all the treats out the back, I would enjoy a bite of something, then put the rest of it back and take a bite out of something else and put it back to every chocolate! The rats got the blame for that, sadly, so I decided not to do that again! I also would nick the odd cigarettes from the loose cigarette packs and whole packets!! Once, the shopkeepers had to leave me in the shop alone, one of the regular buyers from the top shelf came to the counter with his usual stack of porn

magazines. I made a point of looking through every page to find the price, causing him embarrassment as a queue built up behind him. I eventually found the price, and he asked for a paper bag for the mag. I told him we had run out of them lol.

Also, to note that before I got these jobs, I would nick money from my dad's and stepmum's pockets. My stepmum kept a chit with denominations of money in her purse, I cleverly changed the denominations accordingly. I only took 50p maximum for my ice-cream treats at school. I deserved it, and they tasted so much sweeter for my efforts!

At 16 years old, I ran away to my sister's, who was an outcast for not returning home from the youth hostel. I was still working at the newsagents' when this Indian man approached me, telling me he knew my beloved mother and that he helped her into the women's refuge. He offered me a cleaning job at his home, so I took it. He would be watching blue movies and invite me to watch them with him, to which I would decline. Then one day, he told me he wanted to introduce me to his son. He did. The first time I clapped eyes on his hideous son was when he was lying in bed. I was asked to go into the room, get naked and get in the bed. I did. I was confused. This man wanted to do things to me for £50 or something. I said no, went to leave the room, and found the door locked. I asked the other man to let me out; luckily, he did. I left there, never to return. So ashamed and confused that someone would do that to a little broken me. He was a solicitor for goodness sake! Anyway, I went to the shopkeeper at the newsagent's and told them about this customer. They banned him at least.

*'At some point, my stepmum told me not to come home from school without a job, so I would walk to local businesses on my way home, dragging my heels even more than usual and bracing myself to speak to the owners, asking for work for many months.'*

A few weeks later, I secured my first taxed job at Macro Wholesalers as a full-time general assistant in the outerwear department, paying a nice £3.40 per hour to have to myself now that I lived with my sister. I just had to pay my share of food and rent, and the rest was MINE! I also worked as a leatherwear merchandiser there on Sundays and volunteered to help get the outfits ready for young kids with Down syndrome for a fashion show there, which was so nice.

I was there for 4 years and left knowing that everyone (300 + staff) there loved me, I had even connected with the management that many didn't like, which was special. I then moved out of the city and went to work as an Xmas temp at Argos, which was also fun. I used to pretend I was in the Generation Game on TV when I collected the orders from the warehouse out the back to rally to the front to the customers.

After that, I got a job at a kebab van, helping get veggies and food wrap paper ready with little cleaning, etc.

I decided to move back to the city because we were bored out of the city and got the odd Xmas job at pound store. Eventually, I landed a permanent job handing out scratch cards at an amusement centre. This was fun as they would let me choose costumes for their themes, i.e., western, Halloween, Xmas, and I would enact whatever I wanted with my colleagues. I got promoted to work inside the store and then, at some point, to a supervisor! Well regarded! Not really. They took me for a ride, or tried to. I covered 12-hour shifts for many months while they were trying to find a replacement manager. Then one day, the area manager turned up with a new manager. I wasn't happy. He hadn't even asked me, thanked me, or paid me a manager's wage while I kept their shop going! I left, throwing the big bunch of keys I used into the face of the area manager and telling him to fuck off. And then I sued them and got £800 for exploiting me!

I then got a job as a bus passenger surveyor. I loved that, especially as some passengers would get worried and show me their bus ticket. They mistook me for a ticket inspector, so I played on it once. I went upstairs, shouting, "Tickets please!" and people started showing me their tickets! I felt sorry

for them as they were school kids, and told them I was just having fun and was only a surveyor.

I then got a job at a bingo hall in their amusements to my dismay, but hey ho, it was money to pay the rent, etc. At least I got to call bingo to a bigger crowd occasionally, which was fun.

From there I got a job at a betting shop and made way up to deputy manager in no time. It was a fast-paced, very aggressive job! People would get very excited very quick but then would get very angry very quickly too. They would smash things up, get barred, police would come, etc., etc. I got things thrown at me, was threatened and spat at. I realised that the gambling and retail industries only serve to make people poorer. Many people lost their livelihoods in the gambling shops to pay my wages! I wasn't having that anymore, so I left after getting some volunteering experience doing office admin and reception work at a textile recycling company.

From there, I got paid temp work at the council and business offices, which led to temp work with the NHS. My first one was at the mental health services.

This helped me to start to think about my dear mum and dad, who suffered under these services. Such a horrid service. But the people meant well, just did horrid things to get paid. From there, I got work inside hospitals, in urology, and then a permanent job in Physiotherapy and then Therapies, which included physio, occupational, hearing, speech and language, and dietetics.

I gave this up when my daughter turned 5 years old to home educate her. Then took to temp recycling advising work with councils and environmental agencies.

I just wanted to work doing positive things that caused less harm to myself and others. It was hard juggling childcare and work, so I took some night work on weekends as a minicab booking

agent, dealing with customers, drivers, complaints, etc. I felt good there; I would be the listening ear for everyone.

Then we moved out of the city again, and this time to farm as farm helpers on an off-grid, low-till, no-dig, single, plastic-free, livestock-free, vegan, organic food forest farm. I had to give up the booking agent job because I didn't have a good internet connection. Well, as we had sold the shared ownership home to move here, we had that little bit of cash to live on. We, that's me, my partner and our daughter, decided we needed a well-earned rest from paid enslavement and just enjoyed these last few years because we don't think we would get this chance in this lifetime! We have been working here, chopping logs, planting trees, mulching, weeding, chopping and dropping. Helping with childcare for our friends, etc.

Last winter, I managed to get a job as a trade plate driver where I would commute to pick up vehicles, check them for safety, roadworthiness, scratches, dents and disfigurements and drive them to their locations. Although I felt powerful driving these vehicles, this job was awful, I was totally exploited for a pittance, I would be crying when left stranded or with electric vehicles which couldn't be charged up. I missed out on important events with my daughter. So I left after only one month.

Oh, I've also been doing supporting-artist (TV extra) work on and off since I was working at the betting shop, and I still do to this day, and I love it. I get paid to sit around lounging and waiting

to be called, to have my hair, face and costume fussed over and pampered. I get food and drinks for free and get treated super special, I get to chat to people and be with the main cast. They also pay travel and holiday pay!

Right now, I am cleaning people's homes, which feels meaningful. I am a vital part of the lives of an elderly couple, an elderly woman with carers, a couple with a 1-year-old baby girl, and a couple with kids who have just flown their nest. I am received with hugs and love!

Right now, I am hoping to get work primarily remotely, and/or dog walking or pet sitting. I have applied for jobs with training, such as probation support or bus driver positions. Actually, applying for jobs is a bloody job in itself! Not like before, when I could just walk into a business and land myself a job! Grrrrr! This system really sucks!

Anyway. That's all now, thanks for reading and lots of love to you!!! •

*Mumlet is a brave, strong, courageous and resilient young spirited and mostly open minded raised poor, working class East Asian woman of the global majority who has survived and come through endless traumas, distresses and challenges valiantly with a light that shines bright and strong to this day still, and that she will carry through any remaining challenges yet to come.*

# OMELAS

L. A. Mercurius

Today's performance is delayed to a 13:24 start time.

In my morning panic, I stumble over a belt that throws me into a 2004 school day. Although I began my day, mildly frantic and hurriedly packing my bag, I find myself reliving the feeling of sore skin, bruises, and a confused mind that is desperate for a hug from the very parent who sanctioned such violence. I do not have the luxury of postponing my performance of wellness, but my body is shattered from a lifetime of bracing. Complex PTSD has wrung me dry after countless medications that do not seem to fix the problem that is 'me'. In time, the feeling quiets but I am angry and ashamed that years of therapy have not allowed me to negotiate an appropriate time for another flashback. I've missed my meeting. I am thankfully 27 again, but I have missed my meeting.

The inexhaustible magic of childhood imagination, coupled with the need to shield myself from unending trauma, led to a lifelong interest in utopian fiction. When extended periods of time are spent creating and embodying utopias to escape pain, you become intimately aware of the

real-life attempts to construct them, particularly when they exclude scores of people. The most notable example is that of 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' – a short story written by Ursula K. Le Guin. Herein, the utopian city of Omelas is predicated on the existence of a dejected, severely mistreated child. I became fixated on Ursula's world-building because it seemed to be an abstraction of today's flawed political project. The poignance of this world rested in the fact that this infallible city: bright and prosperous, derived its virtues from the continued existence of this exiled child with no distinguishable characteristics outside of its neurodivergence and sickness.

To me, it was equal parts fascinating and distressing to notice that in both modern society and fiction, disability and chronic illness render you a deserving outsider to the utopian project. The devoted self-care necessary for pain

management, relapse prevention and the maintenance of remission, is inconsistent with normative ideas of good citizenship based on economic contribution. The political promise of a modern capitalism that works for all, and promises endless growth, loses its legitimacy when our minds and bodies resist its claims. One cannot devote themselves to the progress of capitalist incline when trauma locks you within a convincingly eternal past. In adulthood, it brought me great pain to notice that many institutions reproduce the same dynamics characteristic of childhood neglect and abuse. The exhaustion of parentification and the need to be 'good' in fear of severe physical punishment had ceased to exist. But in its place was the punishment of excruciating wait times for treatment, limited by funding, and not clinical need. The terrors of childhood had eclipsed, and yet I had the seemingly impossible task of grounding myself in a world that is hostile and unsafe. At first glance, it felt like a losing game to reconcile the compassionate self-concept posited in therapy with a society that viewed disability as an affront to its utopian project of eternal progress. Where are we progressing to? Who gets to go and why is it not possible to tend to what is right here?

Amid destabilising trauma therapy, the cacophony of this ableism was infuriating. My task was not only the processing of my past and its lingering impact on my body and mind. I now

had to contend with a future marked by malignant policies relating to disability. In the last decade, successive UK governments have fully embraced ableist language, such as 'work shy', to characterise those in receipt of disability benefits. These harmful judgements are inherently disabling, but it has become government policy or at least, a negligent omission, to shame those who rely on the welfare state. Our 'ill' is the failure to constantly produce, despite the all-encompassing labour of self-care. At the height of my symptoms, I found it uniquely corrosive to my humanity to be disabled, in addition to being a black, queer woman. The fiction of capitalist-mediated ableism seemed to reinforce those bigotries. Sustained emotional neglect and abuse teach a version of worthiness that is tied to our economic contributions. The violence of withheld or conditional love and care is the perfect precursor to this falsehood because it supports the dominant discourse that illness and disability is antithetical to the health and upward trajectory of modern capitalist society. If I cannot be helpful or 'good' within the narrow parameters offered by society, who am I and what do I have to offer? In the face of unyielding symptoms, the internalisation of this rhetoric led to self-isolation, neglect and poor self-concept. Akin to the child of Omelas, I believed the falsehood that my state of being could only be tolerated on the fringes of society.

This self-imposed isolation from public life forced me to reckon with the parts of myself that pain punctuated, and in connection with others, I saw it as worthy of my compassion. The importance of online disabled communities and the friendships that deepened when my symptoms were particularly debilitating revealed the fiction of this capitalist social organisation. Ultimately, it is a

*'TO ME, IT WAS EQUAL PARTS FASCINATING AND DISTRESSING TO NOTICE THAT IN BOTH MODERN SOCIETY AND FICTION, DISABILITY AND CHRONIC ILLNESS RENDER YOU A DESERVING OUTSIDER TO THE UTOPIAN PROJECT. THE DEVOTED SELF-CARE NECESSARY FOR PAIN MANAGEMENT, RELAPSE PREVENTION AND THE MAINTENANCE OF REMISSION, IS INCONSISTENT WITH NORMATIVE IDEAS OF GOOD CITIZENSHIP BASED ON ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION.'*

privilege to subscribe and adequately perform wellness and thus work without obstruction. To imagine all that we could be is a characteristically human endeavour, but any utopian project whose success rests on the exclusion of a marginalised other is a fiction of unimaginable cruelty.

Within the UK, it became apparent to me that political parties across the ideological spectrum will happily meet on the bridge of ableism, in their walk towards utopia. In this 'perfect nowhere', constructive marginalisation is a necessary response to enduring pain and disability, despite the catastrophic consequences. Should you fail to achieve the requisite number of points to receive PIP (Personal Independence Payment) or provide an answer that emboldens their suspicion, the financial safety net providing independence and security dissolves. Work capability assessment forms don't lend themselves to the variegated, intangible experience of illness, flares, relapses, or remissions. In a world that seeks to build Omelas by chipping away at the welfare state, these stringent criteria no longer screen you for the sake of care. Rather, it seeks to identify you as the necessary detritus that must be promptly swept to the side. As Ursula K. Le Guin writes: "They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity

of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there snivelling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer". The indignity of ableism isn't incidental, but a necessary supporting prong of their project. Indeed, this is the underlying rhetoric of Prime Minister Keir Starmer's ongoing plan for social welfare reform: the success of our nation's economic recovery 'necessitated a reform of devastating disability benefits', despite disability benefits being a vital safety net. More than 65% of homeless people in the UK have enduring illnesses, and yet it is their care and financial security net which is deemed a worthy site of sacrifice. The dominant discourse is that disability benefits that supplement work and provide maintenance are an affront to taxpayers, when in fact, an invisible and unreachable class of people possess incomprehensible and untaxable wealth. It is clear, with sparkling clarity, that modern welfare has departed from its theoretical meaning. Instead, it seeks to scrutinise and monitor our experiences of illness, so it can remove or diminish the financial safeguards against inaccessibility, homelessness and inadequate treatment. The dehumanisation of this process is the societally accepted sanction of failing to 'push through' an invisible disability that is so often diminished. If one does not achieve the societally acceptable 'hero' narrative, suspicion is the worthy response. Truthfully, I felt resentful in my experience: whilst others continued towards the utopian Omelas, I felt stagnant due to debilitating experiences. The need to take frequent breaks from higher education, my tolerance to yet another SSRI or the slow decline of my physical baseline seemed to speak to my stasis.

These feelings only continued to fester under the pressure to avoid the tropes of hysteria or that of the 'angry, black woman', deserving of policing instead of a kind, validating ear.

Complex PTSD reinforces the ableist notion that the only way I am stitched into the fabric of society is with shame as its thread. To unpick myself from its violence requires me to place shame where it deserves to lie and to imagine a tapestry where compassionate access and care are the norm. If we wish to recognise the inalienable magic of every human being, outside the construct of work and endless progress, one must dare to imagine utopia at the fringe of society and capitalist expectation. Today I will walk away from Omelas. My performance of wellness is cancelled, and I surrender to rest. •

*Lin is an emerging writer, based in London. Her personal essays reflect on life with complex, enduring illness and the disregarded but enduring humanity of those on the 'fringes' of society. She loves speculative fiction and believes that the magic of writing and storytelling is a necessary starting point for materialising a kinder world. She read Law at university and draws on her studies to also examine contemporary culture, literature and politics.*

*Find her at @linmercury on Substack and @\_linessa on Instagram.*

# ON BUYING TIME: NOTES FROM A COLD ATTIC

## Working-class Researcher

The billionaire, Warren Buffet, once said, “I can buy anything I want [...], but I can’t buy time.” One night, standing outside the pub, I realised they were wrong. You can buy time; just most of us can’t afford it.

I was leaning against the brick wall with my friend Antoine, rolling a cigarette with hands that wouldn’t stop shaking. I was home for Christmas, and the night before I was returning to the States, I had gathered friends for a farewell pint. He knew I was having a bad time. Severely burnt out, overworked and underpaid, I had developed chronic insomnia. That summer, my teammate had been unfairly fired, and HR took the opportunity to remind me that I, too, could be let go without notice. They know I am on a visa. My boyfriend had broken up with me, leaving me with rent I couldn’t afford alone. With no credit score and no guarantor (which you need if you don’t make 80 times the monthly rent) I was quickly running out of options.

Antoine turned to me, he said, casually, “Just quit. Come back.”

I automatically protested, “I can’t, Antoine. I need a job.”

Unemployment is at its highest since the pandemic, and incomes are flatlining. Finding a new job is a job in itself — the hours that go into applications, preparation for interviews, the variety of tasks, and exams. Even if I were lucky enough to get an offer, would it pay enough to live well? Most of the jobs are in expensive cities, and the rent in London has gone up between 32%-37% in the last 5 years. The average room in a shared house is now £995/month. That number alone was enough to keep me in my place.

While that conversation ran silently in my head. He continued.

“It’s not like before,” he said. “You’ve got people who can support you. We have a spare room, you can come live with Leah and me for a while.”

I protested. He insisted. He seemed serious. I took a drag on my cigarette. Maybe the pint had gone to my head. I felt giddy, like a kid who’d stolen something. A big smile crawled across my face, betraying me. “Imagine,” I said. “Imagine if I did it. If I just quit.”

And for three weeks, I did just that. I imagined it. I’d sit across from my boss, nodding as she spoke

about deliverables and impact, while my mind wandered into tender possibilities. I don't actually have to be here, I'd think. I don't have to listen to you ever again. Perhaps I could learn the cello? Is that insane? What if I started painting again? What if I did nothing at all?

It felt like standing on the edge of a diving board — terrifying and exhilarating. And I wanted to jump. Up until that moment, I had never considered not having a job. To me, unemployment wasn't something you chose; it was a threat. I had been in continuous employment since I was 15 years old, sometimes two jobs at a time. Not out of virtue or ambition, but out of fear. Fear that my luck might run out.

I have always been acutely aware of how lucky I am. A fragile infrastructure, made up of a thousand helping hands, lifting me to this position.

I am lucky to have a mum who encouraged me; lucky to grow up in the 90s in social housing, when benefits were enough, and food banks barely existed. Lucky, too, in the quiet ways people don't like to name: that I was a white girl with good grades who wasn't off-rolled like most of my friends, who could bunk off, smoke by the tree, even turn up high, and it mostly went unnoticed. That luck propelled me into an "elite" university, even if I hated it. I was lucky to find work wherever I could — waitressing, bakery, hotel, ice-cream van, painting — lucky when a wealthier friend took me in so I could do an unpaid internship at an NGO. Lucky to land the second, and especially the third job, where my boss was working class and, for once, so was everyone else. Lucky when my boss nudged me towards the job in New York. And now lucky to be offered an escape route.

Luck has been my welfare state.  
Then, a voice note came through.

"Oh hey... so actually Leah isn't keen. She might want her parents to come visit or friends stay in the spare room. I probably shouldn't have offered without asking her anyway, you probably want to go to Paris, or Berlin, or something, I am sure you have loads of plans..."

He was so casual. Nonchalant even. Like he had changed his mind about sharing his sandwich.

I went very still. A hot, prickling shame crept up the back of my neck and stung my eyes. How could I be so stupid? I thought. Why did I take him seriously? Why did I allow myself to go there? I could hear my own voice scolding me (the one I use on my sister when she's being naive): People love to offer, it makes them feel good, but they rarely follow through. Especially people with money.

And the cello, really? Lessons are expensive. Where would I even get a cello? Where would I practise? Am I really going to lug one around? Get a grip.

"I get it," I replied.

I spiralled. What hurt was the way the offer evaporated - so quickly, so lightly - as if it hadn't mattered. I felt embarrassed that it had meant everything to me and furious that he didn't understand what he had done. I wasn't one of his rich friends. It wasn't just "a place to stay." What he'd offered was something I couldn't afford: Time. It was a break. It was the possibility of a soft place to land while I figured things out.

*'I had seen what the middle class had, and I wanted it, too. I had watched wealthier friends quit jobs simply because they "needed to" or wanted to pursue writing, acting, or travel. They could hold out for a "better" job. They could study without working forty hours a week on the side.'*

It fucked with my head. Growing up watching my older brother and sister, I had learned not to let my imagination out of its cage. But it was too late; it had escaped. I had seen what the middle class had, and I wanted it, too. I had watched wealthier friends quit jobs simply because they "needed to" or wanted to pursue writing, acting, or travel. They could hold out for a "better" job. They could study without working forty hours a week on the side.

I am ashamed to admit it, but I felt sorry for myself. I didn't feel lucky, I felt trapped.

The maths just didn't add up. In twelve years, I had moved eighteen times. I have an unknown amount of student debt (I can't bear to check), and I have paid approximately \$150,000 in rent. I didn't even have ten per cent of that sum in my own bank account. And there I was still struggling to rent.

I existed in a state of professional cognitive dissonance. Every day, I occupied spaces of the middle and upper classes. I shared lunch with people who thought dressage (or as I like to call it, "horse dancing") was a normal hobby or who reminisced about participating in the Model UN. I could wear the blazer, carry a business card; I would be asked to share my opinion on housing, polarisation, or taxation. But the "propertied" part of class didn't rub off on me, no matter how hard I brush up against it.

There is a kind of exhausted fury gripping much of the world right now. It comes from decades of being sold a false promise while successive governments allowed the super wealthy to line their pockets, profit from our public services, and get away with not paying fair wages or the taxes they owe. We were told—again and again—that if we work hard it will be rewarded. I wrote about this, and the solutions to it, for a living. Yet, I realised I'd been treating myself as a mere observer to these trends, as if I weren't one of the numbers in the statistics I frequently quoted. I had fallen for the myth of meritocracy; I believed that if I just applied myself enough, read enough, and sacrificed enough, I could finally cross the line. On the other side, I'd

*‘My mum was the one to snap me out of my spiral. She had grown up in a different kind of scarcity—one of six children raised by a single mother in the shadow of the Spanish dictatorship. To her, my existential crisis was a luxury she couldn’t recognise.’*

find job security, and perhaps I could afford to rent a studio of my own and, finally, stop moving. This realisation devastated me. I was approaching thirty, and I wasn’t arriving.

My mum was the one to snap me out of my spiral. She had grown up in a different kind of scarcity—one of six children raised by a single mother in the shadow of the Spanish dictatorship. To her, my existential crisis was a luxury she couldn’t recognise.

‘I don’t know where you get these ideas from,’ she said, her voice flat and unsympathetic. ‘I don’t understand why you surround yourself with people like that. You may work with them, but you aren’t one of them.’

On the one hand, I was relieved to be put back in my place; on the other hand, I felt guilty for being lucky. And the weight of it bent my back once again into gratitude. But the gratitude was now mixed with shame and anger.

I couldn’t tell Antoine any of this without sounding dramatic, without making him feel guilty, risking breaking something tender in our friendship — so I swallowed it.

But I peeled away.

I took solace in my friends from a similar class origin. I found a well of anger there, too. But then Arana said, “You are holding on too tightly to this job and the life in New York, sometimes you need to know when to let it go.” But before I could repeat my rehearsed narrative, she challenged me, “But what would really happen if you quit your job?” She was right. I looked at the “worst-case scenario” and realised I’d been ignoring my real safety net. I didn’t have a trust fund, but I had a different kind of capital: people who loved me. Arana had already offered me to stay with her family in Toronto, Aaraj spoke to his mum and said I would be welcome there, I knew three people with a spare bed or sofa. I could stay with my mum in the village where I grew up, and when we invariably clashed, I could stay at Ollie’s while his parents were away. My savings wouldn’t be incinerated by rent immediately. I wouldn’t be on the street. I had connections, ideas, and years of work experience. That wasn’t nothing. I just had to grow up and readjust my expectations to fit the reality of the ground I actually stood on.

So, I kept going.

That summer in New York became a season of farewells. I lived month-to-month, not knowing if I'd find a room or lose my visa. But luck kept catching me. A friend's sublet gifted me eighty days; a summer trip home saved thirty more. Finally, Katy, who earned enough to not need a guarantor, invited me to live with her and her friends from high school (all of whom were from a working-class background). For the first time, I had an affordable apartment and had surrounded myself with people more like me.

But then everything changed. Things at work deteriorated. As my colleague, Soph, would say, I had gained a reputation as a "shit disturber." For over a year, I had encouraged junior staff to share their salaries and uncovered pay gaps of over \$10,000. I encouraged my colleagues to collectively push back on our pay and conditions. When I raised it in meetings, that in addition to the inequities, our wages were not keeping up with inflation, I was encouraged to "decouple my value from my wages." When I reminded them I worked for a wage, and as an inequalities researcher, advocating for fairness was quite literally in my job description, he, who had been at the organisation just 6 months, said in front of everyone, "If you aren't happy here, I suggest you look elsewhere."

The breaking point arrived with the annual performance reviews. They had listened. They awarded a pay rise to everyone — except me. People with

fewer years of experience and less responsibility were suddenly out-earning me. I became the lowest-paid employee. It was a public humiliation, orchestrated through a "secret voting system" that felt more like a Conclave than a professional workplace, let alone an NGO. When I asked why, my boss ignored me.

In that moment, my pride finally outweighed my fear. I resigned.

The first time she responded was to my resignation letter, with HR copied in, of course, and she told me how much she'd miss me. She didn't say Goodbye, she didn't even put a dollar towards my leaving gift. Four years of late nights, working weekends, all the care and commitment evaporated into a cold, professional void. I felt small. I realised that to them, my ideas and my dedication meant nothing.

But I didn't have time to dwell. 60 days to find a job and pack up my life before my visa ran out. I could do it. I knew the script: keep moving. I was applying every day. I just needed any job to support me; it could be a stepping stone, I told myself. I swallowed my pride and reached out to friends, asking if I might be able to stay for a little while. Then, luckily, Francesca (who had taken me in a decade ago) was moving to Berlin in January, and had offered me to sublet her room in London. She warned me, the room was an attic with rickety stairs, small windows, and it got terribly cold in the winter. But there was no deposit, no lease, and it wasn't legal, so it was cheap. Perfect. I just have to get to December. While I was packing, I found a letter from the pension plan company amongst my papers. It dawned on me that perhaps I should call up, although I was pretty sure I had opted out.

Then, as if on cue, luck showed up again.

When the man on the phone told me the number, my jaw dropped. FUCK. It turns out I hadn't opted out. And after the 1st year, the university had matched the contribution I didn't realise I was making. When I told him I was leaving the next day, he told me I had a choice. I could leave it, transfer it to a UK pension plan, or withdraw the whole thing (I'd just have to pay thirty per cent of it to tax). Ignoring the voice in my head that it was indeed just about the only pension contribution I had ever made, I withdrew it without hesitation. I paused. I tried to take this in. It wasn't Buffett money, but it was more than I ever had, more than my mum, sister, or brother ever had.

And then something strange happened.

I stopped applying for jobs.

At first, I told myself it was just the packing, the emotion of leaving my life behind, the jet lag, admin, exhaustion — a few days to recover, and then I'd get back to it. But the days passed. Then a week. Then another. I kept waiting for the old panic to return, the one that usually whips me into motion, and it didn't. One morning, I was genuinely bewildered, and I realised why: I just didn't want to.

For the first time in my adult life, I could afford to listen to my own reluctance. I had cheap rent and money in the bank. I had — in the most literal sense — Time.

It has only been a couple of months, but I won't lie. Time hasn't felt like freedom. It certainly isn't pleasurable. At least not yet. It is a blank space I don't know how to inhabit. Without the pressure, I found I didn't know how to move one foot in front of the other, or whether to go left or right. It took all my energy just to wake up, shower, eat, and put clothes on. The days slipped by. I was not depressed exactly, but deeply unmotivated. Unmoored. I

probably watched way too much TV.

I sacrificed the only pension contribution I've made to sit in a cold attic and watch the dust motes dance in the light of a small window. But in that emptiness, a few things have started to take root. I made a list of all the things I hadn't had time for previously: applying for a new passport, attending to health issues, and applying for a job that I really wanted. I had the cushion to take a short-term contract. I applied for a PhD. I wrote this essay. I still have plans to paint. And sometimes I even think about learning the cello. •



*Image: author's own*

# SKY DIVING WITH FRED DIBNAH

Simon Warwick Green



Did I ever mention the time I went skydiving with Fred Dibnah? Some day that was—a cracker of a day. Made all other big days seem like little days, and normal good days difficult to remember.

“Come on, lad, get a riddle on. Time we were gone.”

In a two-man glider, off a cliff edge, off we flew. Flying across crag tops, holding on for dear life with loop-the-loops, n’job lot, across Steetly Viaducts and Lady’s Valley, where a person once hung themselves from a treetop—according to Dibnah, that was—who gave a running commentary on all we saw, like having a Discovery Channel-style voiceover right in your earhole.

Then shooting up the road past Greasy Lil’s chip shop and that boggy alley. This mad dog knew it all, and some more.

“Come on, lad, let’s try a change of scenery!”

Up above Scot Pines, way up high, then dipping down again, gliding through railway tunnels, then back up some more. Getting dizzy around steeplejacks and places where steeplejacks once stood but stood no more. In that two-man hand glider, Fred knew them all. In wind and rain, gripping on, but none of it was too much for Dibnah to handle.

Above the clouds where the sun shone bright, where everything was peaceful—not even a bird in sight.

"Here, get 'y laghin' gear 'round that. Summet 't wet 'y lips on."

I don't know for the life of me how, but he managed to open a flask of tea and pour us both one out. All the while we glided on the spot, watching our work boots dangle above candy floss clouds.

"It can get lonely at the top, kid."

"It sure can, Fred."

"Y'got 't have a stout heart in this old game."

"Indeed you do, Fred."

"But it's good to have summet to battle with now and again."

"That's true, Fred."

"Dunt know abart 'y sen, but I right fancy demolishing a great lump of steak 'n a big plate of chips.

What's up, lad? 'y gone quiet."

"Well, there's something I wanted to tell you, Fred. I've been meaning to say something all day, but I just can't get the words out."

"Well, go on, lad, spit it out."

"Y'not going to like it, Fred."

"Come on, I'll get maggots in being kept waiting."

"Ok, here it goes; I'm vegetarian."

"Y what?"

"I said you wouldn't like it."

"Are y'pullin' mi leg?"

"No, I'm not, Fred. It's all true. I don't eat meat no more. In fact, I'm planning to go vegan soon."

"Bloody hell. Think I need a sip of tea. Oh well, lad. Am sure we can rustle up some beans 'n toast. Y' still eat beans 'n toast, don't 'y?"

"Oh yea, I still eat beans 'n toast. I'll always eat beans 'n toast, so long as there's no butter on."

"There we go, then, lad. Jobs a good 'un. Hey! Sithi! Look daahn thear. Skeg ón that me old bean."

When looking down, I could see what Fred could see. It was some kind of private jet flying past, probably going hundreds of miles an hour, but up so high as we were, it just drifted slowly by.

"Y'know who's that is, dunt y?"

"No."

"Jeff Bezos, that."

"Y'wha?"

"Tellin'y. That's Jeff Bezos's private jet, that."

"Nar, it could be anyone that. What makes you think it's him?"

"Only Bezos would have a wrap-around sunroof on a plane."

“Sunroof on a plane?”

“That’s Bezos’s foy ‘y. Come on, let’s go down an’ av a neb.”

Then suddenly—and I’ve no idea how—but Fred being Fred, somehow managed to fly into a crazy wind tunnel that shot us along as fast as any jet could possibly go. Tears streaming from our eyes.

“What ‘y doing now, Fred?”

“Am going into an inverted dive.”

“Y’gonna do whaa?”

Just like Maverick and Goose in *Top Gun*, Dibnah managed to skillfully flip the glider upside down above Jeff Bezo’s cockpit.

“There he is, look. What did I tell thi?”

Sure enough, Jeff Bezo’s was sat looking up at us through the sunroof, with cocktail in hand, stunned at the impossibility of what he could see. Bezo’s removed his mirrored aviator sunglasses for a better look. And the moment eye contact was fully established, that beautiful moment came. It was a moment that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

Fred flipped him the birdie.

“Here baldy locks ‘av summer that!”

The look on Bezos’s face was priceless. Staring up at us, staring down at him. His expression was a mix of confusion and

outrage, with Fred flicking him the birdie. Then me flicking the birdie too.

“Look at that. He’s got a face like a smacked arse! Don’t know what’s hit him. That’ll give him something to stew on.”

And in that moment, it dawned on me that perhaps the most fantastical detail to this whole entire episode was the way Fred’s flat cap remained perfectly in place. Despite everything we had been through, it was as if his flat cap was welded to his head, or held magical gravity-defying properties. That despite everything, including the inverted dive, it just couldn’t be shuck and remained perfectly in place. But no sooner had this thought passed through my mind, we shot off again.

Doing a full-blown loop-the-loop, and turning back round, the right way round. Laughing our heads off as we glided down to earth. Our work boots making contact with the dirt. Tears in our eyes. We slowed to a stop and uncoupled ourselves. Then as if Fred could tell what I had been thinking, he took his cap off to wipe his head before putting it back on again.

Then off we went to the all-you-can-eat café at the bottom of Northcliffe Road.

It was some day, was that, I can tell you. The day I went skydiving with Fred Dibnah. That was something else. •

*Simon Warwick Green is a writer, filmmaker and visual artist from Sheffield (b. 1978). His poetry fuses magical realism and deadpan humour. His work has appeared in The Bolton Review, Becoming Feral and Big Red Cat, and on 5" vinyl via Do It Thissen Records.*

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# THE WORKING GLOOM

Leigh McTaggart

There is nothing more dreadful than being out somewhere and someone asking, “So, what do you do for work?” A seemingly innocuous and even quite polite question, and yet the internal flood of anguish and fear that immediately washes over me must be so palpable to whoever it was that asked me; they must think they said something wrong. And it’s funny to me to have this reaction, since I have a fairly regular, low-effort, low-risk, corporate Excel job that provides me with a regular salary. It’s not like it’s an embarrassing, socially unacceptable, or illegal job. It’s a job that must seem like a dream to the majority of the unemployed population trying their hardest to get involved, but yet when I have to talk about it or myself in relation to it, I feel nothing but a strong aversion to the question. I don’t fall into the regular category of work-related shame, which comes from not having a job; instead, I endure a self of shame that stems from the feeling that, by having the job I do, I am betraying myself and denying my soul the vibrance it wants.

How sad it is that, across the globe, all our civilisations are built on the framework of making money to spend it. Money is at the centre of our global understanding of life. Without money, there is no life. How odd, you would think that humanity itself, and a desire to be allowed to truly

live a fruitful and free life, would be at the core of our societal structures and missions, but I guess not! If you do not have money then you must make some, and to make money you have to sell something, whether it be a product, a service, an idea, something has to be given. If you want to exist in the world, then you have to participate in the game that has been established, and therefore, you have to sell yourself as labour in some capacity in order to be rewarded with the money required to exist. You cannot just exist. You must provide a monetary purpose to be justified in your existence. You have a fiduciary duty to the society you were born in.

Whether or not you engage in regular, socially accepted forms of work has become the ultimate social litmus test that signals to others if you are a ‘valid’ member of society or not. Do you engage in the unwritten social contract that our civilisations are tied together by, the contract that we all involuntarily signed once we entered this world, the contract that states that you will do

*You choose to work, you choose to play the game for the benefit of your status in society, fine. But now you are reckoned with the forever dependence on work. Especially in a modern Britain, where housing is forever spiralling upwards, inflation and cost-of-living crises, all paired with stagnant and mismatched wages, you cannot afford not to work unless you are lucky enough to be born into a family with the money to sustain a life. The rest of us are living in a subscription-based economy. Subscription packages for your housing, phone contracts, car contracts, using klarna to buy clothes or food at restaurants. We are never able to buy things, and instead are forced to pay our tithes towards the landowners, the business owners, the economy owners. We are now subject to a new type of ownership society, call it technofeudalism.*

everything in your power over your entire life time to work and make money, or do you choose to become a degenerate outcast, a rebel who dismisses such notions of the world and chooses to abstain.

Productivity is what drives the world! Are you engaging in global production? Are you generating income for the economy? Are you spending all that you earn or everything and nothing so that the money goes back into the economy? Congratulations! You have successfully passed your citizen brain training. Your reward is that you must keep it up for the remainder of your existence.

It's distressing to be forced to reckon with a world that doesn't care for you. Obviously, when one interacts with the material realities of our existence, that must be duly considered; food, housing, bills, debt, there's no time to consider the world in such metaphysical terms as "global unwritten social contracts". But at the same time, to have these feelings themselves requires some sort of root from which they are spreading. Feelings of uselessness when you don't participate in work, the confusion of whether or not your place in the world is valid or not, they must stem from somewhere in our societies, some sort of overarching unseeable force impacting your every move. This unknowing force cannot be physically defined or identified, but that does not mean it does not exist. This unobservable force has placed your fellow citizens in the role of the ultimate wardens of our society, the wardens who determine who is worthy of being accepted as having meaning or a place in the world, using whether or not you work as the basis for their decision. Society as a group has become one big panopticon, with even just the notion that someone somewhere out there is surveying and judging you enough to make most people fall into line. Especially so in the age of surveillance and widespread technology and social media usage, where the unknowing eyes that may be falling upon you could be thousands of kilometres away.

Explicitly, I choose to work because I want to be able to enjoy my existence. I reject the destitution that follows choosing not to work. I refuse to be alive yet unable to live because I do not have the capital required to unlock the features of the world around me that are hidden behind paywalls. I wish to be able to play the game of life, and for that, I must work. But implicitly, I am scared of the social panopticon. I find myself subject to the ridiculous worries of what people might think of me. If I choose not to work because I disagree with it, I run the risk of becoming ostracised from the working population around me. If I stop making money, then I will be put in a position where I can no longer provide for myself, and then from then on, I will become a financial burden to those around me when I reach the point where I have to depend on them in order to continue existing. If I choose not to engage with the working reality, I am openly displaying that I disagree with the rest of the world, as if they are all wrong and I am some sort of prophetic sage who understands that which others cannot (This is most definitely not the case).

You choose to work, you choose to play the game for the benefit of your status in society, fine. But now you are reckoned with the forever dependence on work. Especially in a modern Britain, where housing is forever spiralling upwards, inflation and cost-of-living crises, all paired with stagnant and mismatched wages, you cannot afford not to work unless you are lucky enough to be born into a family with the money to sustain a life. The rest of us are living in a subscription-based

economy. Subscription packages for your housing, phone contracts, car contracts, using Klarna to buy clothes or food at restaurants. We are never able to buy things, and instead are forced to pay our tithes towards the landowners, the business owners, the economy owners. We are now subject to a new type of ownership society, call it Technofeudalism. We have somehow managed to return to a society in which an ever-shrinking cabal of corporate conglomerate elites are the owners of all things considered assets and wealth, and anyone outside of that exclusive caste is the worker. The average worker in the UK experience nowadays is more akin to serfdom instead of being a meaningful and skilled independent labourer with rights. Workers in the UK should start identifying themselves as neo-serfs; maybe that way they would begin to understand the changes we need to make regarding what work should be and, more importantly, what it should mean.

Once you come to fully conceptualise and understand the infinity in front of you regarding the unfortunate necessity of work the seeds of an insurmountable dread have already been sowed in your soul without you realising, and if you're not careful it will grow into an all-consuming depression that will only serve to isolate yourself from society, despite the fact that you're only working a job to make sure that society has no grounds on which to exclude you. It's ironic that getting a job to stay active and valid in society twists you into isolating yourself from society.

So how do you stop yourself from this defeat? How can this Catch-22 of helplessness that working wants to impose be navigated? You have to acquiesce and learn how to compartmentalise and split the soul into two. Separate who you are when you are at work from who you are outside of work. I personally no longer allow myself to think of my time, brain or soul being wasted by being at work, because simply that is just not me, or at least not the me I recognise. I choose to only see myself outside of my work. And as I'm writing it here, it sounds so miserable. That I have to view myself as a separate individual in order to prevent myself from exclusively thinking of myself in a self-deprecating manner. But so far, it's the only way I have managed to make sense of where one can still maintain a sense of dignity within their heart.

The secret to maintaining this split identity is to always remind yourself that it is not your fault, and to hold on to the you that would exist if you did not have to work. If the whole world were rebuilt, and society no longer required us to work for ourselves, instead, there would be just people and only things done for the sake of doing them, not for making money. Picture who you would be in a world like that, and never forget them. Only you can know what it means to be you, and therefore only you can have the power to keep yourself grounded.

Even before you were born, you were unknowingly dependent on the results and gains of someone else's 'work.' Even as an unborn infant, there exists an impetus to make money in order to purchase things for your survival; you just do not know it yet because you have not even been born yet. How could you know? Remember this when you feel discouraged. Remember that it was not your choice nor your fault that you ended up here. •

*Leigh McTaggart is a young full-time employee trying to use his words to stay afloat.*

# THE BOSS MAKES A DOLLAR: WORKPLACE RESISTANCE

**Summer Jasmin**

For most of us, work isn't optional. Choosing not to work, being sacked, or having to leave work due to sickness can very easily end in homelessness. There aren't many ways to opt out of capitalism, however much we politically disagree with it. My own personal experiences of homelessness were nowhere near as bad as they could have been. I stayed with friends and, after about 6 months, somehow managed to find a cheap flat that accepted me while I was on universal credit. Through the generosity of the people around me, I never had to rough sleep, and I had someone who could be a guarantor, which is one of the biggest obstacles facing homeless people. The trauma from that period still remains, though, and despite the fact that I'm in a much more stable position now, I still live in fear of losing my job or becoming more disabled and not being able to work. The structures of capitalism remove any autonomy from our lives, so we turn to consumption to express our identities, which in turn leads to more misery when we think about losing our jobs. We are trapped in a cycle of selling our labour to survive, and this can chip away at our autonomy in increasingly insidious ways.

In my time involved in leftist organising, whether it be for Palestine, or anti-fascism, or trade unionism, I have come across a concept called "anarchist calisthenics" coined by James C. Scott, where he describes breaking little laws in the name of preparing yourself for a time when you will need to break a big law to change the world. The idea is you should question, challenge and eventually break small laws and societal norms to resist the structures that govern our lives and break up the monotony of existence under capitalism. You are mentally preparing yourself for a time when it may be needed to go against what is ingrained in to our everyday existence through rules and expectations. Examples of this include stealing from supermarkets, street art, or trespassing on "private property", but you can take it further and do these things at work as well.

"Time theft" is the idea that an employee has stolen wages from a company that they haven't earned, by

*'In multiple cleaning jobs, I have been known to sleep in the equipment room just to claw back some free time. You aren't stealing anything from an employer, considering they steal our whole lives to line their pockets. So, if you can, take an extra-long break, clock in or log on and go do something else.'*

doing something as small as taking longer breaks, not completing work on time, or going as far as falsifying time sheets to say they've worked longer than they have. It's a ridiculous concept when you consider Marx's idea of alienation and the fact that selling our labour enables capitalists to make profits they themselves haven't earned. In multiple cleaning jobs, I have been known to sleep in the equipment room just to claw back some free time. You aren't stealing anything from an employer, considering they steal our whole lives to line their pockets. So, if you can, take an extra-long break, clock in or log on and go do something else. Go for a smoke break and make yourself a cuppa. Go for a nap if you work from home and pretend your Wi-Fi is broken. Do this multiple times a day to claw back some of your precious time because life is short.

Some friends of mine have taken to stealing from their workplace, just small things like stationery or bathroom supplies, because why pay for pens when the company that punishes you for being human can pay for them for you. You don't have to be silly here. I wouldn't encourage everyone to risk their jobs to steal something like a computer. But if you're clever, you'll realise it's easy enough to get away with little acts of rebellion without seriously getting in the shit. Start small with some post-it notes if you want, and make sure you aren't watched by cameras. It is possible to fight back in small ways without totally putting yourself at risk. Are there ridiculous expectations at your job which aren't actually written rules? Dressing a certain way, or being expected to do work on your paid breaks or when you're finished for the day? Maybe you do things outside your job description because you want to be helpful or think it will benefit your career. This is an easy one – simply stop doing these things. Clock out at exactly 5pm. Stop taking on extra work that doesn't benefit you. Refuse to take jobs that your manager piles on you because they can't be arsed to do it themselves.

Read your job description and the rules laid out in your staff handbook carefully. If you're a woman and you spend an hour doing your makeup for work because it's expected that women look more presentable than men are ever expected to, go to work in your bare face and do whatever you want with that extra time.

This next idea may seem antithetical to the previous ones, as you won't get more time to spend on leisure, but it's something I think is just as important. Most of us don't want to stick our heads above the parapet at work because we think it risks our employment opportunities, but organising your workplace is something that bosses absolutely hate, and can empower you and your colleagues to improve your working conditions. Going beyond just questioning structures and committing small crimes to stick it to the man, union activity takes an extra step toward building a better world. You don't even need to break the law to do this, and actually, you will find that your role is better protected when you're a union rep in England because of the hard-won rights of people that came before you.

Over the last few years, I have been accused of breaking serious laws and less serious ones, and face prison time for these accusations. Breaking the law doesn't come easy to me, and I tend towards following the rule of law because I know how serious prison is. I've watched family members go in and out of prison from childhood, and like everyone who has experienced poverty, playing with your job prospects isn't a joke. When I learned about anarchist calisthenics I realised that I hadn't spent much time questioning the structures that govern our everyday lives. You may have heard the phrase "kill the cop inside your head" I think we need to go further and kill the boss inside our heads, too. •

*Summer Jasmin is a radgie mackem communist living in the North-East who is learning to write amidst surviving and resisting capitalism. Her work explores working class life and culture, anti-imperialist communist praxis and grief.*

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# WORK BETWEEN EXPLOITATION AND RECOGNITION

**M. Lautréamont**

For over fifteen years, I have been involved in radical left-wing, anarchist circles and in the squatter movement. In many of these contexts, the abolition of wage labour was—and still is—understood not as a collective class project, but as an individual decision. Particularly in anarchist and squatter milieus, terms such as “seizing the means of production,” “class movement,” or “grassroots planned economy” are considered by many as historically burdened and therefore avoided. On the one hand, they are haunted by the spectre of totalitarian regimes whose self-proclaimed communism resulted in violence, exploitation and repression far removed from any emancipatory horizon. On the other hand, the structural changes since the 1970s have also shaped the self-understanding of many scenes: a collective class project presupposes a collective subject which—according to a widespread narrative—disappeared from the social landscape with the decline of factory work in Western Europe and the United States.

If neither a collective subject is named nor a shared class perspective formulated, the question of work inevitably shifts to the level of the individual. Why the working class is often reduced to the figure of the industrial factory worker rather than understood as a structural social relation would go beyond the

scope of this text. Yet this background helps explain why, in some anarchist or squatter-related contexts, work is treated less as a structural issue and more as a personal choice.

A particularly striking example that comes to mind are various zines that circulated a few years ago—and perhaps still do, who knows. Despite my young age at the time, I found it unsettling how poverty was romanticised (you don’t need money anyway) and how a dropout lifestyle was propagated, framing work as an existential burden from which one could free oneself at any moment. Better to revolt, better to love, better to enjoy life instead of working; those who fail to understand this are to blame and part of the problem. I cannot say whether everyone who eagerly read these zines truly believed that wage labour could be overcome so easily. But the attitude went so far that revolution was increasingly understood as an individual project: turning one’s own life upside down in the here and now, practising small everyday acts of refusal and hoping that

these would eventually accumulate into emancipatory change.

While I do not wish to downplay the importance of reflecting on one's own behaviour, this way of understanding one's surroundings—and especially work—reveals, in my view, a broader problem within parts of the left: the taboo surrounding one's own social background. This includes family-based financial resources as well as property or future inheritances that provide material security.

From this suppression often emerges an implicit moral superiority: one's own activist or scene-related habitus is elevated to a counter-norm, while other ways of life are ridiculed or quietly devalued. What tends to be overlooked is that the time available for political activism is itself socially conditioned. Those who possess material security are more likely to afford reducing or rejecting work. "If I can do it, why can't others?"—this idea only makes sense if differing social conditions are completely ignored.

Of course, addressing one's own social background should not result in a hierarchy of social positions, as if a precarious upbringing automatically led to an emancipatory perspective. Yet this taboo also reflects a certain shame felt by many leftists who come from middle-class backgrounds. Does this not produce a psychosocial paradox? Parts of the middle-class left criticise a world from which they benefit—at least in some respects—while distancing

themselves from those biographical elements that connect them to it. The radical alternative then sometimes appears as an aestheticised, lifestyle-oriented radicalism: the belief that anyone can immediately transform their own living conditions. Those who lack this possibility, or who even take pride in having a job and identifying with it, are often ridiculed or viewed paternalistically.

Far from the justified observation that the working class has historically never been revolutionary per se, it seems crucial to ask about the reasons behind this relationship to work. I would like to outline one of these reasons below. It concerns the relationship between work and migration.

## Migration and Work

At this point, I would like to add a personal family reflection: my grandmother migrated from southern Italy to Switzerland in the 1960s, when the Swiss capital urgently needed labour. From what I gather from our conversations, her understanding of work differed significantly from that of the second generation of my family who grew up here.

For my grandmother, work was a necessary evil. She hoped for a better life, but not for social mobility in the sense of a career. It was about surviving with dignity. At the same time, she was aware that she would never be fully accepted into this society; she would always remain a "Tschingg"<sup>1</sup>. Yet this seemed to trouble her less than it did the second generation; at least it gave her the feeling of belonging to a collective, albeit excluded, group. She accepted whatever work she could find, mostly precarious jobs.

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<sup>1</sup> A derogatory Swiss German slur historically directed at Italian migrant workers, particularly during the postwar labour migration period.

The situation differed for my mother's generation, the so-called "secondos": children of Italian migrants who were born and raised in Switzerland and had greater access to educational capital. Here, a discrepancy emerged: on the one hand, the first generation, who spoke little or no German; on the other, those fully socialised in Switzerland, for whom social recognition played a central role. It was no longer enough to be regarded as "Italians" who should be grateful simply to be allowed to work. They wanted to be recognised as full members of society.

Work thus became not only a means of dignified survival but also a question of identity. Through work and achievement, the second generation sought to prove that they deserved to live here. Few would articulate it in these terms, and much is later downplayed: "It wasn't that bad." Yet this internalised meritocracy is not a matter of character but is structurally conditioned. For many people with a migrant background, it is one of the few ways to counter recurring stereotypes—the narratives of the "lazy foreigner" or the "welfare parasite."

Migrants have been exposed to such attributions for decades. They subtly produce the feeling—regardless of how many generations have already lived here—of never fully belonging. What remains is the attempt to legitimise oneself through performance: to give something back to the economy, to demonstrate one's usefulness. Work thus becomes a ticket to social recognition, not only for migrants, but particularly so.

In this context, being a social subject—in the sense of recognised membership in the social fabric—is not a given, but something that must first be achieved and continually stabilised. As a strategy against exclusion and a shield against stigmatisation, this understanding of work carries a social vulnerability that shapes one's horizon of experience.

Not wanting to belong to a society characterised by exploitation and contempt for life is not a flaw. But rejecting belonging is easier for those who already possess it, regardless of whether they subjectively perceive it that way. For people who are structurally denied belonging—not only those with a migrant background, but also those from precarious circumstances—there are few forms of recognition beyond performance. The risk of refusing work is therefore unevenly distributed, not only materially, but symbolically as well.

That these reflections appear to play little role in parts of the radical left, anarchist, or squatter scene points to an unexamined internalisation of one's own class position. This may sound harsh, but in my view it describes a real problem. And so the question remains: where is a universalist perspective in which liberation from wage labour is understood not as a personal lifestyle choice, but as the collective socialisation of the means of subsistence—so that not just a few have more time away from work, but everyone? •

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# WORK IS FRUSTRATING

Anonymous

## What I knew about work

Work is frustrating.

Not because I don't appreciate it, and I don't want to work. I love using my hands, I love challenges, I love fighting for learning, fighting for change. But still it's frustrating 1. because no one ever agrees on what work is, and 2. most of us don't have a choice but to 'go to work'. I single out this phrase 'go to work' because we all work (by continuing to be alive, having goals, committing, caring and persevering, we all work and expend energy) but the 'going' implies employment, it refers to a boss, a manager, a structure, a system. That is what is frustrating.

At home, my family are yet to recognise the wide scope that work has in my mind and in our collective lives. They are yet understand that I am up late, playing with fabrics and giggling with my friends because I'm being paid to complete this creative project. In this situation, it's hard for them to recognise that work can be

fun. There is an unfair belief that work has to be serious. And how can you teach the people you love that by having fun, you're trying your best not to take work seriously, to take work lightly? Work comes, and recently it has a habit of going, and it's hard to remember its instability when expectations keep crushing. The participatory creative projects I do engage with other people's voices, marginalised voices that need to be heard, and this is my way of reaching out. If the world were better and no one were marginalised, would I need to reach out with such urgency?

Because of their misunderstanding of my work, I am left with no support for my freelance and creative work. To provide that support for myself and future generations, this requires an education and an active commitment to change and learning. So whilst I am working to reframe what work means at home (which is a very slow, generational task), I also go to work part-time as an ESOL teacher.

I've had many people (with great intention) tell me that I should move out of my family home. Every time I'm asked that (by others or my own internal dialogue), I am reminded that living with my family is a form of protest against capitalist

*‘What these misunderstandings also reject is the fact that people on the margins, such as people of colour and working-class people, have been working with little choice and often from a very young age. This includes working in employment, being exploited, taking care of family members or having to complete domestic work. All of these were done as necessities for those young people. As a result, what looks like ‘work’ on paper disregards the years of work a young person might have completed before they are a legal adult.’*

ideas of work. The work we do at home includes but is not limited to: cleaning, cooking, tidying, handiwork/repair, laundry, and emotional labour for housemates/family/visitors. For me, that extends to homeschooling my nephew, caring for vulnerable and disabled adults, helping my mum and sister with administrative tasks that often require digital literacy and some bureaucratic experience (forms are endless fun!)

These are responsibilities and work that need to be done to allow ourselves and our loved ones to have access to a safe home, access to adequate services/education/training. If I chose to move out, all of these tasks would be mostly incomplete, and I would be forced to work more for a company that I do not love, nor does it love me back in the way my family does.

This leaves me to consider what my employer/boss understands as work. Oftentimes, there is an unfair

understanding that work only begins when you walk into the building/office or if you work from home, when you are ‘online’. This completely disregards the work that has been done from the moment you have been awake. What this means for me is that, when I am at work, what matters to me (my family) and the work that it entails, is unrecognised, and when I am at home, the creative work I am invested in is also misunderstood.

What these misunderstandings also reject is the fact that people on the margins, such as people of colour and working-class people, have been working with little choice and often from a very young age. This includes working in employment, being exploited, taking care of family members or having to complete domestic work. All of these

were done as necessities for those young people. As a result, what looks like 'work' on paper disregards the years of work a young person might have completed before they are a legal adult.

## **What happened**

One day at work, when the tests were done, I sat, sighed and rested my head on the desk with the door open to let some air in. I tried to breathe again. I heard my manager and another colleague talking about the stress of all these exams. Funding is getting tighter, time is getting shorter, the Christmas spirit we bought with a year's savings is running out, and everyone is pissed. He comments on students who come from everywhere but the UK (primarily Africa and the SWANA region), "At one point, I looked at them, and I understood why we once controlled a third of the world because you lot are useless."

I turned to my colleague sitting next to me, and we both held each other's gaze, jaws falling open. I couldn't believe my ears; though I can always believe a racist is amongst us. I can always believe that I will never be free of people wishing to control me as a person of colour, especially as the only person of colour in this situation. But I couldn't believe that my manager would laugh it off, and that when I brought this to the union's attention, I would be treated by management like a problem for speaking up.

The union held the case close, tried its best, and the representative reminded me that my concerns regarding the racist comment, the racist colleague

and the possibly incompetent manager were all accurate and carefully considered. However, the organisation didn't just let it go; it pushed it, brushing it further and further under the carpet. My manager ambushed me into a conversation I had not consented to, and I would ultimately have to request to leave three times.

During this conversation, I was asked numerous times what I wanted to do and was treated as if I were a victim who needed sympathetic support. This disregarded the comment made and the role the educational institution, teachers and managers should take in dealing with bigotry. What I realised quickly was that sympathetic support is used to mask actionable change, and that would be the extent of what I should expect from an intrinsically racist system. I couldn't believe how naive I was, that nothing would happen, and no one would try to learn from this incident.

## **What I learnt about work**

1. There is a lot of talk, backed up with paperwork (which is just talk you can hold and are told to sign) and very little action.
2. Work is as entrenched in the racist and capitalist system as much as I read and heard about (shock!)
3. Weak management looks at difficult situations as fires to put out.

I felt betrayed, particularly because this is a learning situation, at least the colleague required educating on the harmfulness of his comment. Looking back now, my white colleagues and management were expecting me to do the teaching, while I was relying on management to do the teaching.

What ultimately frustrated me the most was the lack of support from my employer, rather than the racism of a colleague. I've learnt about my job and the world I live in, and there is one thing I learnt about myself: what hurts me more than bigotry is

being faced with people attached to policy and process, and who fear an action that questions the process they are attached to at the cost of healthy development, learning and safety for those around them.

One of the ways we can make work less frustrating is by creating a culture of learning and unlearning. I've learnt that the people I truly trust are the ones who are willing to learn and curious to consider new, innovative ways to complete their role. If that culture were truly in existence in my workplace, this incident would not have felt so frustrating.

Through that willingness and curiosity, no matter what biases one might have, what mistakes one might make, I - and many others - would feel safe knowing that there is a commitment to moving and changing. Work is so frustrating because we're not safe in a place that isn't committed to learning and development. Yes, I know you've filled in your bloody development sheet, and your manager signed off on it because you came in for that extra training. But that's not the same as recognising a mistake, a flaw in the process and having the relevant infrastructure and support to adapt it. That's not the same as treating every situation as a place to learn rather than a fire to put out.

If you're in a position of authority, in management, make that commitment to learning. Make it openly. And if you're not in a position of authority, remember, it is easier not to be angry at something you can believe is in a constant state of change.

I fucking hate all of this; it's so ranty, and it's so shit, and no one wants to fucking read this. •

# WHATEVER, WHEREVER, WHENEVER

## No Nuance

*Work, work, work, work, work, work,* number five on the playlist. I actually love Rihanna and the entire *Anti* album, but ‘work’ was the shit one. That’s why it made it to the playlist. I tried to keep my work playlists limited to songs I didn’t really like but could tolerate. A lesson learnt too late in the game, after too many brilliant songs became intertwined with montages of predatory men doing feral shit at me.

RIP *I Will Survive*.

This is a lifetime ago, really. I was a consistent, full-time hooker from 19-25 years old. Now? I’m in my 30s, and I look like a full-blown man. The man thing happened after I tried testosterone on a whim, and I ended up hooked on it for many years. I am a transsexual by physicality, but I remain a woman if anyone asks.

Not that they do anymore.

Even at the gay sauna, naked, with my tits and my cunt on full display, the men I fuck for free have assumed I am the other kind of transsexual.

It feels a bit ridiculous to call myself a sex worker after so much time has passed. Who am I to claim the title? But ex-sex worker isn’t right either. Because despite what we tell you in our appeals to our families, partners or liberals for slightly better lives and working conditions, you can’t actually un-prostitute yourself.

Especially if you worked like I did, looked like I did. I was always working: in a brothel or at a bar, at the wig shop haggling for discounts or getting my nails done. Fuck I hated how long it took to do nails. I was never good at looking like a woman – the type that gets paid to have sex. On some days, the ‘beauty’ prep was more draining than the fucking.

Having sex with people for a lot of money did give me skills in basic hygiene though. And I scrub my entire body with skill to this day. It is seared into who I am. It just isn’t like the other jobs.

We are lying: to you, to ourselves, to each other.

You get paid for the impact it has. You can’t work as often as I did without serious occupational hazards. The time spent out of the industry has obscured the memories of the worst of it, but I remember how hard it felt to stay alive.

Once I transsexualised myself beyond the point of return, I couldn't do the only work I was ever consistently able to pull off. I have done so many forms of work now that I doubt there's a broad category of minimum wage work I haven't at least attempted.

One of my first jobs after sex work was as a labourer, through a friend, cash, etc. I remember carrying these massive metal fences and thinking to myself: 'Wow, this is like the man version of sex work.' After one shift late in the week, I went straight to bed without showering - too much agony from the bruising and pretending I could carry the weight.

I was lying there, unable to do much at all, and started googling. Had someone already written about this? Did everyone already know about the man version of sex work? It was such a familiar feeling. Bruised. Dirty. Broken.

And then I found the slogan: *Dirty, dangerous and demeaning*. It's good pay for hard work, 'the 3Ds.' Nothing about sex work though, just the man version. Labouring is fucked. If you are like me, you'll look it up. An interesting history.

Anyway, the pay for white western hookers working in the UK or Australia is fucking insane. Beats labouring by a long shot. A question to you, non-hooker: what would you do for 300 quid an hour? Be for real.

I did whatever, wherever, whenever I could.

I didn't last at labouring. I'm too intense and sporadically depressed to maintain that kind of work. I'm a social hazard. It also became clear that my ongoing relationship to alcohol was a physical hazard for the other workers. At the brothel? It mostly kept us safe that I was often drunk and

fearless. A dropped glass on a client's head smashed differently than a pole on a friend's knee.

The only other work I've been able to do long-term has been unpaid. I got sucked into the exploitation of unpaid care work after my Dad got sick. It made sense at the time, to drop my life and help my Dad deal with his terminal cancer. He was my only parent, and by my own matrices of good parenting, an awesome one.

But then something happened after he died. I became competent at complex care. I had accidentally developed a fuckload of skills in being there for people who were left alone to suffer, to be sick, to die.

Suddenly, and without much reflection on my part, I was becoming the perfect exploited, poor cunt carer. The type I had seen in my friend's mums and aunties growing up. The women that saved my life as a kid, over and over.

But I was a weird radical leftist so it looked different. I think that's why it took so long for me to realise that I had become A Carer. I looked like a man, and I was a known psycho. I've never been particularly kind, or empathetic. I'm a judgy bitch. And still now people who don't know me don't believe my competency at care. They don't believe my history. It's probably why I've written about it. It is fucking hard to be made nil by the left, by the world.

*‘One of my first jobs after sex work was as a labourer, through a friend, cash, etc. I remember carrying these massive metal fences and thinking to myself: “Wow, this is like the man version of sex work.” After one shift late in the week, I went straight to bed without showering - too much agony from the bruising and pretending I could carry the weight.’*

I know that unpaid carers largely have this experience of invisibility. It’s part of capitalist economics to disappear (almost exclusively) women’s labour. The jobs that give everything and take nothing. The work that is there for you in the hardest times of your life.

I had: 1) care skills that many go their whole lives without (especially men), 2) a life that was never considered important by western societal standards – no career, no partner, no kids, and 3) a deeply embedded politics of mutual aid that came from growing up poor. Not from reading, not from discussion, not from ‘doing the right thing.’ It has always seemed an obvious way to respond to the world.

It didn’t come from the ‘saviour complex’ that is now being popularised on Instagram as the reason for people

dedicating their lives to others suffering. I gave (and give) a shit about people because I know we will die without each other. It is maths, really. Not naive empathy.

And so my politics were naturally developing into disability justice.

Be warned fellow leftist poor people. This is how they get you.

No amount of reading *Care Work* will stop them when they get their houses and their careers and quests for ‘joy’ and expensive therapies. The middle-classes will abandon you.

When it’s your turn for illness, suffering or a tenuous relationship to life, they will tell you about their boundaries and preach the solution: Have More Resources.

And so it began, alongside Covid-19, I went from job to job, friend to friend, illness to illness. Emergencies, mostly. And then more long-term gigs: an ongoing psychosis, a severe workplace accident, a suicidal crackhead, an illness the healthcare system couldn't name, post-partum depression and a newborn, another suicide. Some shit is too private.

My political world became centred on disability justice and in turn, so did my social life. Much like testosterone, it snuck up on me.

Soon enough, my entire life was about illness, suffering and death.

I'm in Australia by now, and it's the end of 2022. I am studying one subject a week, just enough to receive student welfare payments, and I'm in paid employment seven hours a week at an NGO peak body best described as Completely Pointless and Bad. Luckily for my conscience, I was doing a terrible job at the NGO. Partly because I'm not qualified to work in media and communications (I lied my way in after guiltig a rich friend with identity politics to get me the job, we do what we can) and partly because I was too busy. Busy in the real job: looking after my friend.

This is the job that broke me.

I relocated (again) and got my own place 10 minutes walk from my friend who had developed a very severe form of long-covid, walking there and back most days. Some days I was there for breakfast until they were asleep. I can't remember.

I didn't really exist as a person with memories.

My brain was a mind map of worst case scenarios. I was an overactive member of the severe ME carers Facebook group. I had a list of tasks to be done. I

maintained a polite exterior to cover my innate social hostility, lest I pissed off my friends' housemates.

My memories from this time aren't in my own house: they're in my friend's room. I don't remember what I ate. But I could still make her smoothie perfectly.

That's what it feels like to be responsible for someone's basic survival, by the way. It's not an opt-in, opt-out situation. To do the job of a primary carer, you are required to merge, to attune, to lose yourself to the nervous system of the sick.

You can't do what I did without an element of identity disturbance. I have never seen anyone successfully maintain a self and do primary care. Not in the hospice as my Dad died two years earlier, or in the ambulance emergency rooms of various London hospitals, where sick people lay in stretchers on diagonals as the waiting bays get fuller and fuller.

Many very sick people don't have people.

Those of us who are in it, already auxiliary to another, help the uncared for. At the hospice there was a crew of us, The Carers. But of course, it was transient. People died. Every week. And so I lost their carers to the basement level where the morgue was, where I can only assume they said their goodbyes like I would in a month or two.

I didn't know who these people really were. Instead, I knew their loved ones, and they knew my Dad.

But now we're back with my dear friend who isn't getting better. Who has become part of the growing population of people with a severe form of long-covid. Not yet understood. Not yet really named, not medically. Treatment is? Choose your own adventure. A couple of years passed by looking after her, and I hit the bottom. Not 'burnout' in the sense that I couldn't find pleasure in my hobbies. Burnout like I couldn't feel myself piss anymore.

I would go to the toilet and feel nothing. I had to check the bowl to see if I'd gone.

I felt virtually nothing, except if I was drunk. I (mostly) only got too drunk after she slept. I would lay on the beach near her house all night drinking and watching the ships, or the stars if it was a clear night.

I would arrive at the shore and immediately start building with sand. It started with sandcastles, and later turned into something more like a bedroom. My mattress at home was shit so I used the sand to build bespoke, memory-foam furniture. The beach at night, especially in the colder months, was usually empty. I would spend hours, laying in my temporary habitat, ruminating on all of the small things I got from my day with her. Like the new lamp by the bedside.

Where did she get it? It's beautiful, does she love it? Who got it for her? Has she named it yet?

She loved to name her stuff.

I spent time away from her trying to fill in the gaps that conversations couldn't do for us. That her illness could not offer us.

My dear friend who never winced when I said something insane. Who shared her deepest thoughts with me: the only way I feel truly loved.

We did talk, but only about what mattered most. Whether it was time to change the sheets, what dinner she could stomach, or the improved system for bagging up the small camping toilet next to the bed. Very occasionally, as we held hands by the bed, we'd cry together. Or she'd tell me about one of her meditations that often involved an imagination I could only dream of having: she was transporting herself to a far-away friend's room, she was visiting a fantasy world from one of her audiobooks, she was in a dialogue with her room, with her stuff, with a skeleton on her desk - it feels blasphemous to share the name of.

I am still holding onto her hand, even if I can't physically hold it now.

Eventually, I fractured my foot, my brain and my relationship with my friend. I relocated again. At the height of my full-time suicidality, my politics broke into an absurd rebellion, and I defiantly spent my time reading the views of all the angry, american white men I had long since marked as Definitely Shit.

If living and caring was this meaningless, if looking after each other and trying to build a better world was a lie, why not give the Unabomber a shot?

It didn't matter that I had dedicated over ten years to showing up politically, socially, collectively: I was still the crazy, drunk, poor cunt. And the rest of my type had already left, through cancellation and social death, or actual death, or because they weren't as stupid as me.

To wait for as long as I did. To give as much as I did.

Luckily for society, I was too sick to get up. Because now it was me who could barely get to the toilet for a shit. Where were you?

My recovery took a long time and mostly focused on bizarre, off-centre obsessions that I don't list here with any pride. I knew then, just as I know now, that I was going insane. It started with Luigi Mangione who had just shot the CEO, which fell into endless consumption about AI and the creepy little men running it, and eventually culminated in re-reading Ted K's manifesto with new, conspiratorial eyes. A bunch of the shit in his writing critiques the Left as he knew it, and it is an unfortunately accurate portrayal in too many moments.

I also started going back to catholic church, got briefly addicted to gambling, and started showing up at Narcotics Anonymous meetings off my face. There was a lot going on. That's what wanting to die does to some of us - it sets us free.

You can't employ someone this crazy, even unpaid. I was doing whatever, whenever, wherever.

For the first time in over ten years, I couldn't stay contained in the social and political reality of a leftism that had left me more alone, more deeply suffering and poorer than when I started.

Our little leftist world protected me from what was really going on for too long. I was living in an individualist society. Unlike most of my friends, who are still in The World, I am not getting a house. I am unemployable. I am poor. And I'm fucking crazy.

I have no idea why I didn't kill myself during that year, except that it felt too serious an act for how I felt. Maybe it's time to resuscitate *I Will Survive*.

*Did you think I'd crumble?*

*Did you think I'd lay down and die?*

*No, not I, I will survive*

I have the body of a (bad) physical labourer, the heart of a (bad) hooker and the brain of an (unfortunately, exceptionally good) social worker.

I also have the will of a cockroach. Wanna employ me? I'm looking. •

*No Nuance is a deranged lunatic who is too bitter to keep lying.*

*Get in touch or read more resentments at [nonuance9.wordpress.com](https://nonuance9.wordpress.com)*

# WORK: PAPER

Paul Weaver White

I stared down at the two coins in the palm of my hand, at a loss for words. She was serious.

“Come and see me again if you want any more work.” And the door closed. I stood on the doorstep, anger and humiliation fighting for supremacy. What was I going to tell the others? My brother and cousin were waiting downstairs for me to return with our just reward for a job well done. I had galvanised them into action with the tale of the woman who pays two pounds a street for delivering leaflets. This was good money. I already worked as a paperboy, and my boss only paid a pound a street. Of course, not every house got a paper, but leaflets were much smaller and lighter, and you didn’t need to get up at 6am to deliver them.

She’d collared me as I delivered a newspaper to her neighbour, and asked me if I’d deliver some leaflets for her. She’d pay me two pounds to deliver her leaflets to all the houses on Gants Hill

Crescent. This wasn’t much of a challenge for an experienced media facilitation hub, and I accepted happily. The work was done swiftly and efficiently later that day, and payment received gratefully. Our family was not wealthy, and my pocket money was not enough to keep me in books or records. And better, she’d told me she wanted to deliver to lots more roads as well - next weekend I’d return, and then I would really coin it in.

Of course, no one ever got rich without co-opting the labour of others, and I persuaded my younger brother Dave and my cousin Matt to accept fifty pence each per road for helping me out. Manpower organised, the job was on. Returning to my employer’s shabby maisonette, we loaded up on leaflets, agreed to do a number of nearby roads and set to work. After a number of hours, we’d delivered to four or five roads and returned to our benefactor. I knocked, and proudly reeled off the list of streets that had received leaflets.

“I gave you two pounds last time, didn’t I?” she said. I realise now that it wasn’t really a question. I nodded. “Here you go then.” And into my hand were pressed, not the handful of coins I was expecting, but two-pound coins. It was a throat-stopping shock. I had been raised to be honest and to expect honesty from adults. I was a shy child,

fundamentally unable to raise a fuss. I could no more have argued with an adult than I could have flapped my arms and flown. It was the first time that I knew that an adult had taken advantage of me. I had let someone take advantage of my trusting nature and now my plan had unravelled.

I can't remember how I resolved it with the boys. I wonder if either of them even remembers the occasion, let alone let it fester for years like I did, let this tiny event become a significant moment in their lives? For me, it was the moment when I learned the relationship between employer and employee was not the benevolent one depicted in children's books or the Bible, but one of exploitation and dishonesty. This was an important lesson, one that has marked every relationship I have had with an employer since that point.

So yeah, a paper round was my true introduction to the world of work. It seemed like a good deal at first. I ride around on my bike and push newspapers through letterboxes every morning before school, and in return I make about a pound a day, perhaps one-fifty. I was alright at it, at first. There wasn't much to get wrong. It was basically a doddle.

The shop was run by an elderly-seeming South Asian man whose real name I don't think I ever learnt. He was Mister Reid, and his shop was Reid's News. He was a nice enough bloke, I suppose. If you were looking peaky in winter, he'd give you a Fisherman's Friend (the mere threat of which was enough to make you feel a lot more like delivering papers in subzero temperatures). He let you have stuff on tick against your wages (which seemed like real generosity for some reason), and he smoked a stinking pipe. Now and again, he'd clean out an ear by inserting his little finger into it and swivelling it at speed, causing a loud squeaking noise. I have tried to replicate this on numerous occasions, including just now, and the closest I have come is causing myself a minor laceration with the sharp edge of my fingernail. His short,

round wife had a kindly face and, in all weathers, wore a sari that showed her plump belly and luminous brown skin. They seemed terrifically exotic to me, an unworldly 12-year-old white boy growing up in 80s North East London.

Paper round was a doss and I was rapidly promoted through the ranks. In the first instance, it meant being trusted to mark up rounds, for which you earned an extra 20p per mark-up but had to be there an hour earlier. You had a list of addresses with their newspaper orders - some people had magazines some days, or a different order at the weekend. Wednesday, for example, was Jewish Chronicle day and, this being Gants Hill, doubled the size of the round. So you'd work backwards through this list, starting at the last house on the round, grab the desired paper, mark the house number in the top-right corner, and move on. Reading the wrong column could result in sending Thursday's order on Wednesday, or another such calamity.

Other ways you got promoted were by being trusted with a bigger, better-paid round. The lowest-paid round was for Roll Gardens, where I lived, which was a short round, no complications. The best paid round was one that took in all the houses that couldn't be easily attached to another round, where there were only one or two houses on a street that took their papers from Mister Reid. This one required a paperboy who was fast, cos the route was a couple of miles in total, and could work out that after 23 Hdly came 36 Est and that these were two different streets. It was on this round, delivering to a maisonette above the

golden frontage of Ritz Video and the mysterious Chabad Lubavitch Centre, that I met that woman who taught me that hard work wasn't always rewarded.

Different rounds had different issues. Gants Hill had the Woods Estate, a set of roads laid out together with woody names, Glenwood, Wychwood, Longwood etc. The gradations of class were clear here, as the further you went from the shop (and my home), the posher you got. The posher people had bigger and more papers to go with their bigger houses. They had the Telegraph and the Times. Some weekends, it was a two-bag job. For reasons unclear, the big houses often seemed to have small letterboxes. They also tended to complain if the paper was ripped. One Saturday morning, as I was posting a Times section by section, the door opened, and an angry man started berating me for taking the paper apart. 'Why are you doing that? Why can't you post it like a normal person? Look at all this paper everywhere!' I could only hopelessly apologise. It wasn't just him; there were regular complaints about damaged papers or papers that were wet from the rain or papers that had been taken apart to get them through the door. I was becoming aware that adults were stupid and petty, but a basic inability to understand relative sizes was surprising.

Poorer streets had smaller rounds, bigger letterboxes, more and nicer dogs, and less complaints. Wealthier streets had bigger, heavier rounds, tiny letterboxes, angry dogs, and moaning customers. One customer was always complaining about the time it took to post his paper through the door. This is

because his dog liked nothing better than grabbing the paper as it was posted and tearing it to shreds whilst making terrifying growls. Once the paper hit the floor, the dog wasn't interested. That this was in any way our problem seems insane now.

There were a few scary dogs across the rounds, dogs that would throw themselves at the door, that would snatch the paper, or try to bite your fingers as you posted. Occasionally, I would be tasked to go and deliver a paper when another paperboy had cried off a dog house. I was a dog person, dogs were a family shibboleth, and I wasn't afraid of being growled at or bitten.

The final way in which you could be 'promoted' was to become, as I did for a while, Mister Reid's general help for a few hours a day on Saturday morning. Mostly this involved dusting, putting out magazines, and moving around junk in the tiny, cramped back of his shop. You don't see shops like his any more in London. It was basically a newsagent, but sold all sorts of other crap too. When you went into the shop, on your left was a drinks fridge, bottles, rows of cans, big bottles of fizzy drinks, and milk at the bottom. You got an extra 20p for filling the milk fridge, because each glass milk bottle had to be wiped before it was put into the fridge. Mister Reid received a crate of milk every day, and the bottles were often wet with splashed milk. If these weren't wiped people dropped them, or milk built up at the bottom of the fridge and went rancid and the fridge needed to be cleaned.

Looking from the till to the door, on your left were the boxed and bagged chocolates, and below it an extensive buffet of penny sweets. Keep on walking, and then there were the magazines and newspapers. Newspapers, flat on a shelf at ankle level, and then the wall racks. Comics at the bottom, women's magazines above, then general interest magazines, then porn at the top. A large shelving unit in the centre of the floor divided the

*'Poorer streets had smaller rounds, bigger letterboxes, more and nicer dogs, and less complaints. Wealthier streets had bigger, heavier rounds, tiny letterboxes, angry dogs, and moaning customers. One customer was always complaining about the time it took to post his paper through the door. This is because his dog liked nothing better than grabbing the paper as it was posted and tearing it to shreds whilst making terrifying growls.'*

room into two aisles, and this held boxes of crisps on one side, and more toys, stationery, light bulbs, dated paperback books, and generally useful things on the other.

Behind the counter were racks of cigarettes and stickers. Under the counter was a cricket bat. In the room at the back of the shop were piled high boxes of cigarettes and crisps, bundles of old magazines tied up with twine, a sticky kettle on a kitchen stool, and rubbish ankle deep. There was a squalid toilet too, behind a ragged and sticky fly curtain - I am unclear as to whether it was to keep the flies in or out of the toilet, though. I cannot remember ever using the horrible thing; it put the fear of god into me. I was a child who needed a locked door between him and the world when pissing. Unlike Mister Reid's house, which was immaculate, this was a practical and unloved space. Reflecting now, I think this is evidence of the busyness and work necessary to run a newsagents', no time for deep cleaning.

Mostly the job was dusting, putting out magazines, and keeping an eye on the counter whilst Mister Reid potted about in the back. My favourite bit of the job was when he sent me round to people's houses with his bill. He only did this as a last resort, he normally sent reminder notices to people in with the papers, but he must have figured that debtors would be more likely to stump up the readies to a funny-looking kid on the doorstep. One day, a man was angry with me and asked if this was how I wanted to live my life. I didn't understand what he meant. Another man told me to "tell that old P\*ki to fuck off", a message I didn't pass on.

Most strangely, one time, a woman answered the door wearing just knickers and a see-through negligee. I suspect she wasn't expecting me. I don't remember her batting an eyelid at all or making any effort to cover up. Paper

bill, I explained, averting my eyes primly. "I don't have my purse on me", she said, which strikes me now as possibly the most perfect thing she could have said, "Do you want to come in while I find it?" At this point, I fled.

Delivering papers wasn't a bad job for me. I could do it in a daydream, imagining myself travelling through a dungeon fighting monsters, or lost in music, listening and re-listening to Appetite For Destruction until I knew every word. At Christmas, Mr Reid gave each paper boy (and it always was boys) a box of the cheapest possible Christmas cards, robins and snow scenes printed on card so flimsy that you couldn't stand them. You'd write in each one "to all at number 12 from your paperboy", and you'd ride around one Saturday morning knocking on the door and introducing yourself. Most households got the hint, and a few quid was dropped in your greasy palm, maybe the odd fiver if you were lucky. At the end of even a smaller round, your pockets would be overflowing with gold. So it seemed like this whole 'world of work' thing was a pretty good deal.

I'd been doing my paper round long enough that two Christmases had gone by, but I 'decided' to give it up. There were intersecting and overlapping reasons for this. At the Easter holidays, I'd started working with my mum, teaching cycling proficiency in school playgrounds across the borough. This was a proper grown-up job, and paid a proper grown-up wage. Well, it wasn't at all, but it was better. More importantly, I'd started to struggle with the regime. Getting up in the morning

was increasingly harder for me. I started sleeping through my alarm. I found that I couldn't motivate myself to get out of bed anymore.

It became a regular occurrence that Mister Reid would telephone my house sometime around seven AM, and I'd have to race down the stairs to grab the phone and stop the noise. Sometimes my mum was angry with me because it woke her up. Sometimes I wouldn't wake up even with the phone ringing, until my mum was shouting at me, standing at my bedroom door in her dressing gown, looking dishevelled. For a couple of weeks, I tried going to bed in my school clothes, hoping to make mornings more bearable, but it didn't work, and my teachers commented more than usual on my dishevelled appearance.

No longer the golden boy at Mister Reid's, my well-paid round was given to someone more reliable, and I dallied longer about the deliveries, often stopping somewhere to flick through the newspapers and read interesting stories. It couldn't last, and after one of the customers complained about seeing me sitting on a bench reading a newspaper, Mister Reid and I parted ways. I was 13, and had just lost my job for the first time... •

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# MOTHER-WORKERS: WHOSE MOTHERHOOD 'COUNTS'

Veronica Deutsch

In the past five years, conversations about care and motherhood have been everywhere. As the pandemic laid bare the tireless labour faced by women juggling both family and professional responsibilities, media coverage from the likes of books like *Matrescence* by Lucy Jones and columns from writers like Rose Stokes<sup>1</sup> and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett<sup>2</sup> have helped make visible of the issues facing mothers around work, health, and beyond. Campaign organisations like *Pregnant then Screwed* have been instrumental in radically recentring mothers in policy discourse, reenergising feminist campaigns around the need for free, plentiful, and flexible childcare in the process. But while these changes can be considered a net positive for parents, it's undeniable that mothers and childcare workers are often constructed in these conversations as two separate categories—even when we know that many childcare workers are parents themselves. Approximately 93% of the childcare workforce is women, and nearly 2/3rds of childcare professionals in the UK have dependents under the age of 19 living in the home<sup>3</sup>. These workers receive some of the lowest wages for any industry nationally, and often work long hours in roles where they are treated as disposable. I struggle to think of another industry where such a

high concentration of mothers makes up the workforce, yet central campaigns around maternity and care are silent on the experiences of the working-class women who often work in the childcare industry, instead reliant on the framing of women in 'professional roles' scrambling for childcare 'solutions'. This in turn has consequences for whose motherhood is 'counted' in policy and media discourse and how we theorise the position of childcare workers within a broader worker movement. So the question is—whose motherhood counts, and what happens to the mothers who are relegated to the margins?

Childcare workers' pregnancy and motherhood experiences themselves can often be seen as an unwelcome interruption or intrusion on the paid caregiving relationship. I nannied all the way through my pregnancy with my son, and while I was very lucky to have understanding employers throughout that process, I often wonder if things would have been different with another

*‘Childcare workers’ pregnancy and motherhood experiences themselves can often be seen as an unwelcome interruption or intrusion on the paid caregiving relationship. I nannied all the way through my pregnancy with my son, and while I was very lucky to have understanding employers throughout that process, I often wonder if things would have been different with another family—especially as I suffered with severe morning sickness that often meant I could not get out of bed, let alone look after young children.’*

family—especially as I suffered with severe morning sickness that often meant I could not get out of bed, let alone look after young children. It seems that workers experiences of managing their pregnancies around care work are highly varied, and often come down to the luck of landing a ‘good family’. Agencies that facilitate childcare matches between nannies and families have certainly improved in the recent past in terms of offering guidance to employers on their responsibilities to workers who are pregnant, but this change is relatively recent: During the pandemic, one agency that will remain nameless infamously advertised that parents might wish to ask nannies to bring charges along to their ultrasounds in lieu of taking their legally protected time off as a ‘learning experience’ for the children. One Mumsnet poster, in discussing her nanny struggling with morning sickness, highlights ‘We can’t really deal with uncertainty of her [their nanny] falling ill every now and again’.

The government’s recent roll-out of the so-called ‘free childcare hours’, which cover 30 hours of subsidised childcare in term times for children aged 9 months to 4 years, has been a broadly popular among families. And while the rollout of subsidised childcare to start at the end of Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) is a huge boon for many, childminders—who are self-employed—may find themselves under pressure to return to work as little as two weeks after childbirth to keep their businesses running. One Mumsnet post from a parent who is looking for advice around how to plug the gaps during her childminder’s 8 weeks of planned maternity leave received responses including<sup>4</sup> ‘I would give her notice and find someone else if she isn’t going to be providing enough cover for you after her maternity leave anyway.’, ‘If you want to continue working, change childminder.’ Some may view this as an unavoidable cost of being a small business owner, but what it is particularly notable that understanding and empathy around how difficult maternity leave can be to navigate for new others often dries up when it comes to childcare workers—because they are the women to whom care is meant to be outsourced. Despite an expectation

of flexibility around their client's childcare needs, childcare workers aren't necessarily offered the same level of understanding in their own experiences of matrescence.

Post-maternity leave, evidence shows that the government's underfunding of the scheme has forced providers to engage in a variety of different strategies to balance the books: either not offer the scheme at all, add on 'consumables fees' for nappies and food, or else cross-subsidise by increasing fees for younger children, leaving providers to take the blame when parents fail to access the free childcare they were promised. For providers juggling their own caring responsibilities, these changes are pushing them to their limits, as they struggle to keep their businesses profitable amidst ever increasing pressures, and bear the wrath of their clients in the process:

*What gets my goat is when the gov preach about how gov reforms to childcare and funding has helped so many women keep their careers (as let's face it childcare still often falls as the mother's responsibility). I think this is really great however they never consider that the vast majority of early years workforce are also women and therefore we need to also have our careers respected and be allowed to charge as we wish to make a living. In recent press articles nurseries and childminders have been seen as the bad guys with our 'sneaky' consumable charges. The gov does little to suppress this woman v woman conflict as in the end it benefits them.*

While many groups have drawn attention to the fact that the government's rollout is not adequately funded<sup>5</sup>, to the general public, it is easy to understand why families might look at nurseries and childminders not offering these hours and think that it's they who are liable. And this assumption places the onus of the scheme's unaffordability squarely on

the shoulders of providers. Childminders are a highly experienced workforce, with one study showing that over half of the UK workforce have more than a decade's worth of experience in the sector<sup>6</sup>. Yet many of those stretching themselves to make the new funded hours work for families themselves feel undervalued:

*I feel I'm far less seen as a professional as a childminder than when I was when I was a teacher [...] anyone working in early years should be recognised for their important role in child development.*

It is no wonder then that the UK is facing a recruitment and retention crisis<sup>7</sup>, and it's not that increased subsidy is a net negative for *all* childcare worker/mothers—rather, it's important to highlight that these wins aren't experienced equally across the board, and when we frame these landmark changes as unequivocal wins for women, we implicitly exclude countless working-class whose caring labour props up the entire system, and who may not be able to access the very subsidy they make possible for others.

Beyond the financial constraints of being a childcare worker and mother—what are the *everyday experiences* of these workers? For in-home childcare workers like nannies and childminders, shared care—that is, bringing your child/ren to work alongside care of other people's children—can be a popular arrangement, throwing up many benefits as well as complexities. While it can offer a useful and flexible way to manage parenting responsibilities around childcare work, it can also present difficulties—for

instance, if you are contracted and your child is sick, you may still be expected to go into work for your charge, or be forced to adapt your own parenting styles to better match your employer's wishes. Many nannies and childminders returning to work with their own children (known as 'shared care') face pressure to reduce their fees to account for them having their own child present. Care.com advises workers pursuing shared care arrangements to 'sweeten the deal' for employers by 'noting that you're willing to jump through a few extra hoops to accommodate the family employer's needs'<sup>8</sup>, putting the onus on new mothers to vie to keep their jobs. And while in nursery settings, workers will likely fall under normal SML/SMP arrangements, with bank staff and maternity cover more readily available, workers still face limitations. One nursery worker friend of mine once shared how they felt pressure to return to work when their baby was 6 months despite being entitled to a full year of maternity leave, because her manager had highlighted that her child could go in the baby room full-time.

These pressures combined are undoubtedly playing a huge role in the exodus of many caring, experienced professionals from the sector. As one childminder notes:

*The system approaches childminders and allied early years workforce as though we are very disposable and replaceable with little regard for respecting our profession while also ignoring that we have chosen this route. I'm not locked into being a childminder. I have had a previous career and can make a new one if I choose.*

Caring all day long and then coming home to yet more care are often hard to sustain—no matter how much workers enjoy their jobs. Women are expected to manage the outsourcing and delegation of most household labours, even when participating in the paid labour market the same as male partners. We know all about the 'second shift'—where working women come home and are expected to carry out another 'working day' of childcare and household tasks. And the concept of the 'mental load' has gained huge traction<sup>9</sup>. But while elsewhere—aided by the pandemic remote working boom—industries are adapting to offer flexible working as the standard, childcare workers, whose days are often longer to accommodate the start and end times of a 'normal' full-time working week, cannot usually access these benefits. Flexible working has reached the mainstream, and things are—slowly, and unevenly—improving for parents who work. But who gets to be flexible? And when widespread campaigns calling for flexible working from day one gain traction, who do they think they're speaking on behalf of? It seems that feminist progression for women often actually covers a very specific subset of women, with working-class women facing the same challenges not only excluded—but left to pick up the slack. We see this in recent trends towards '24 hour nurseries'<sup>10</sup>, while this kind of flexible care is no doubt vital for parents working shifts, such as doctors or professional hire drivers, its very existence demands childcare workers' endless flexibility as the necessary feminist solution. The labour of working-class women is often instrumentalised in the pursuit of achieving feminist aims without a sufficiently critical analysis of this in our movement-building efforts. Class, as so many have argued, is a lens that has been lost in our feminist efforts.

Despite a growing number of campaigns calling for childcare workers to be valued as early years professionals, in many conversations around

the need to flexible childcare, workers are still framed as plugging gaps and their experiences of their own motherhoods are left out of the picture. While it's valuable that public conversation around the pressures faced by mothers is increasing, it's vital that we keep a critical eye fixed on whose motherhood gets counted in these conversations, and how we might build supportive infrastructure around women in all kinds of professions beyond the 'white collar workforce'. •

*Veronica Deutsch is a writer and researcher who previously worked as a nanny for almost a decade. Veronica's work centres around the experiences of informal childcare workers in the UK, and she is particularly interested in understanding how workers' identities are impacted by migration status, ethnicity, and class, and how this influences workers' ability to build collective power. She was formerly a coordinator with the Nanny Solidarity Network (NSN)—a grassroots mutual aid organisation that provides support, emergency aid, and space for collective action to nannies & au pairs in the UK and, during her time at the NSN, helped to establish the Childcare Workers' Solidarity Fund and the Independent Workers of Great Britain's Nannies & Au pairs branch—the first trade union branch for nannies & au pairs in the UK. She is currently completing a PhD at the University of Bristol.*

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