Two Poems: ‘upward class (im)mobility’, ‘first gen hurt’

Sarah Traphagen

upward class (im)mobility

on the clock with exquisite specificity
name tag faded, fingernails unclean, uniformed
crushed earth hydrated scent of celery woven in.
three-thirty years in the grocery store
invisible like the 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. shift
wages in minutes
felt hard across the threshold of our 900 square foot home
embrace not always returned (too worn out)
Daddy
‘get your education’
8:30 p.m. upright asleep last ounce of strength
for the next day put away – again and again
I listened.
went up, up, up
to the made-it class
no nitty-gritty-have-to work (only want-to work).
I cut celery now in degrees
but wear my father’s tired like a faded name tag
inside
labeled blue collar kid.

first gen hurt

student loan arithmetic defies mental math
$86, 824.13 + $33, 778.07 + $10, 972.39*
private undergrad tuition by mistake
end of semester account hold ritual
college bitch
books cost money (nobody told me)
calculated precisely, $30 will purchase two weeks of groceries
expert in food from the cart back onto the shelf
she won’t get in
graduate school armed with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
one-handed drive from class to part-time shirt folding
Medicaid recipient: smile for your photograph
12% interest – this
or else.
vocabulary expansive / no longer understood
application fees add up to a better life
no test prep results in eight rejection letters
aren’t you being a little ambitious?
doctorate in cognitive dissonance
will you marry me and my debt?
unentitled to the rise
you’re the one with all the money
entitled to the guilt

still the answer.

*actual student loan amount accrued by author

Author Bio

Sarah Traphagen is a first-generation college student and graduate. She received her B.A. in English from Niagara University, M.A. in English from the University at Buffalo, and Ph.D. in English from the University of Florida. She has taught at the University of Florida and two college preparatory schools, The Hockaday School and The Mountain School of Milton Academy. An award-winning educator, she now advances non-profit college access and educational equity initiatives for underprivileged students, mentors young people, and writes about the working-class first-gen college experience.