

# 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.  
 thirty-three 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.