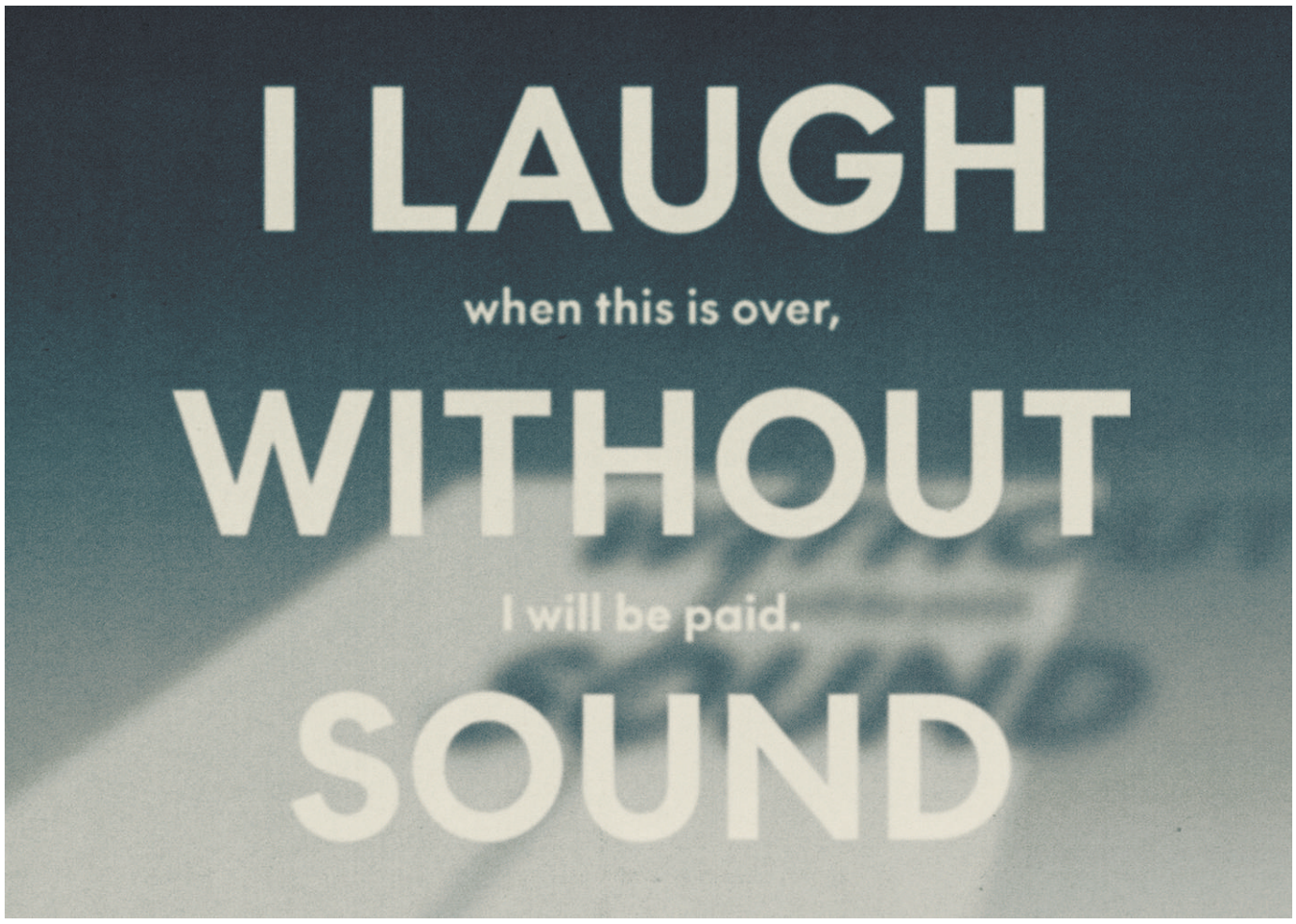
What Work Is

These poems demonstrate a hard familiarity with the gig economy.

By JEFF GORDINIER



SHIVA NALLAPERUMAL

IN LITERATURE AS in life, hating your job is an American tradition.

Could Herman Melville have known, when he introduced readers to Bartleby all the way back in 1853, that his noncompliant scrivener would become the avatar for generation after generation of slackers and quiet quitters? Bartleby's mantra, "I would prefer not to," represents the flip side of American boosterism, and you can hear it echoing through everything from Charles Bukowski's 1971 debut novel, "Post Office," to the printer-smashing scene in the 1999 film "Office Space." In these days of Hollywood labor strikes and gaping economic divides between tech billionaires and the rest of us, it's a mantra that sounds more relevant than ever.

FIXER
Poems
By Edgar Kunz
72 pp. Ecco. Paperback, $17.99.

You can pick up the echo in "Fixer," the haunting second collection of poems from Edgar Kunz. Many of the opening pages of "Fixer" feel like Bartlebian dispatches from the front lines of the gig economy. The narrator of these poems bounces from one side hustle to another, each more absurd than the last. In "Tester," he's paid to taste chip dips — and enlisted to describe the pros and cons of Artichoke, French Onion and Spicy Three Bean Queso:

I measure rent
in how many sessions I have to do

with the dips. I start testing
what I can get away with: notes

of bright espresso, mouthfeel
of a sun-ripe plum.

I write longer and longer.
I don't think they read a word.

In "Model," he's paid to pose in jeans at a gas station. In "Shoulder Season," he's paid to slice window panes out of massive sheets of glass. In "Real Money," he toys with the notion of becoming an air traffic controller:

I already found
a job, but I can't break the habit

of hunting. I dig around and learn
that though the suicide rates

are astronomical, shifts are one hour
on, one hour off, due to the extreme

concentration required. You get paid
both hours.

JEFF GORDINIER *is the author of "X Saves the World" and "Hungry."*

It should tell you something about the dark humor of "Fixer" that the speaker in these poems is thinking about staying solvent by looking for a job that might lead a person to end it all. Things are scary out there, and Kunz knows it. As I spent time with the book this summer, I realized it was unusual to come across so many poems about the pursuit of getting paid — as well as the gnawing anxiety of what happens when you're not. In "WillRobotsTakeMyJob.Com," our narrator anticipates, with a tone of deadpan dread, the A.I.-driven shift that awaits us all:

The About page tells us
half of all human
employment is susceptible:
forklift operators, retail clerks
and manicurists. I am not
any of those things, but I am
not comforted

No one will accuse Edgar Kunz of being out of step with the zeitgeist. Here in "Fixer," the stores have run out of comfort. Workers are hanging on by a thread, and they get through each day by doing something that the robots can't quite pull off yet: laughing at the futility of it all. Kunz captures this state of being with lines that don't require an advanced degree to decipher, and that's something to be thankful for. He recognizes the impact of simplicity. (Bartleby isn't the only literary spirit floating through these stanzas. Reading "Fixer," you can't help thinking of Raymond Carver and the way that his blue-collar, stripped-to-the-bone style served as a corrective in the 1980s.)

Not all of the poems in this book have to do with odd jobs. Some, including the long title poem that forms the middle third of "Fixer," revisit a thread that ran through Kunz's powerful debut, "Tap Out" (2019): the descent of an alcoholic father who lost a battle with his demons. In "Fixer," the narrator and his brother sneak into the decrepit apartment of their late dad — two detectives of the heart, trying to retrieve something that makes sense amid "the bucket of vomit" and "empty plastic vodka jugs." You can practically smell the reek of the room, but Kunz doesn't flinch. As the poem advances, the brothers voyage out. They try to retrieve some keepsakes that may have been abandoned in a donation bin. They speak with people who remember their father. They listen to a contrasting tale of what he managed to succeed at, and once again we hear the theme of working to pay the bills: " . . . he could fix/anything, he was amazing, leaky faucet,/done, sticky door, done, lawn mower/won't start, done."

But it's never done, of course, this work of the heart. If there's fixing going on in "Fixer" — advancement beyond the ache of loss and the drudgery of trying to stay afloat — we find it in the book's final third. Here, poems like "Tuning" and "Missing It" show the narrator crawling out of the emotional wreckage and doing the steady, patient labor of building the foundation of a life. ("I would prefer not to" gets you only so far.) Gardening helps. Falling in love helps. Creating a home helps. "Doors" is about just that: looking for junked doors, bringing them home, sprucing them up. (Is it a surprise that the son of the fixer has a knack for fixing things?)

In "Golden Gate," a ladder is employed not to break into an old apartment, but to climb up to the roof of a new one, in the Bay Area, which the narrator shares with a romantic partner who has just moved in. From the roof they spy the famous red bridge in the distance: " . . . and we were moved/to silence by it, gripped by a pure, clear idea/beyond experience, and stood a long time,/touching shoulders, touching knees." The two lovers will soon have to leave this apartment, too. (Ha. Welcome to the United States in the 21st century.) The landlord is about to raise their rent — "despite our pleading." But at least for one morning they get a moment to breathe. □