



The E is for Essential Worker

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Abstract: This poem is a letter of recognition for all of the unpaid labor put forth by graduate students in the academic and scientific realms in recent history. As a soon-to-be doctoral graduate, it is disheartening to watch time pass by and watch the job market evolve for the worse, while you try to keep afloat in your studies and advocacy work. This is my message to fellow graduate students that I see you, and I appreciate you.

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and when it's all said and done
and the book clubs are over
and we all return to work
and our research and teaching begin again
and You act as if this didn't happen
Who will remember the little guy?
the meager graduate student
who had no tenure for protection
no health insurance to recover
still mangled and tangled
caught in the grasp of long covid
and struggling to heal the wounds
left from "racial reckoning"
that seem to be spreading like cancer

while we throw parades for the unanimous heroes
who will remember the volunteer firefighters
who sacrificed their reputations and careers
to keep their towns safe
You gave them masks
and asked them to brave the storm
covered in soot, scarred, and charred
and licked by stray flames and macroaggressions
as they came together
to quietly prescribe controlled burns
late in the midnight hour
in hopes of preventing future disasters
giving all their mental energy

so much so that they forgot
to unplug the space heaters
that keep them warm at night

and when You sit on Your hiring committees
and You read their resumes
remember
You told them the fellowship was enough
You told them to forgo the job and focus on the degree
You told them they weren't expected to be comfortable
You told them they could learn once they were hired
only for experience to be the sole valid tender of currency
...in essence, You told them to sacrifice themselves
to a war that does not consider them to be a casualty
but rather, a necessary loss
a business expense

yes, remember? the essential workers
You asked them to contain the fire
to give the shirt of their backs
in order to weaken the blaze
while You failed to cut the oxygen flow

so they weren't distracted,
they were disheartened,
disenfranchised,
depleted,
and any inkling of hope they might have left
stored in the heavy oxygen tanks they carry on their backs
day in and day out

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dissolving by the minute

what will You say to the ambitious graduate students
whose tenacity to follow their purpose and vision
left them ignorant to the fact
that they paid member dues
to a club which they were not eligible to join

and when they wielded their only weapons
their voice
their pen
their comradery
they placed a target on their backs
dead set between their shoulder blades
in a place only a marksman could see

so when Your world returns to your normal
or you begin Your next chapter
think of the graduate students
whose passions ran so deeply to make change in this ecosystem
they infused these bodies of knowledge
with their own life's work
until they became an undivorceable sum of one
and now they hold their breath
as they wait to find
what lies ahead for them
in this chaotic dark matter
still stuck in this tumultuous cycle
a cog in the wheel
keeping the machine running smoothly

almost hooded

(but not quite to the finish line)

almost hired

(but we appreciate your time)

almost happy

(if I could just make it to the other side)

almost whole

(because they say we've come too far to turn back now)

we will live to see another day

and keep running a race

for which the prize is invisible

I see You,

and I appreciate You all.

Author Biography

Akilah K. Alwan (she/they) is a multi-dimensional artist, scholar, and executive director of The All One Firm LLC. Trained in environmental science, critical educational theory, and program evaluation, Akilah carries deep commitments to justice, care, and cultural transformation in STEM. Her work—academic, evaluative, and creative—centers the lived experiences of those asked to carry too much and be too little. As a Black, queer, and disabled scholar, she believes in showing up as your full, complicated, radiant self—and in building communities where others can do the same.