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## Working Class Roots

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## Joanne DeTore

### **WORKING CLASS ROOTS**

I wear my working-class roots like Spanx under designer clothes

my grandparents couldn't afford, wouldn't even think of owning.

At posh events, my roots poke out at inopportune times,

trying to remember which fork to use,

how to butter my roll, which is my bread plate

before someone realizes—

I am just a pretender.

My working-class roots slip out of my mouth

trying to unremember the mispronunciations

ingrained in my brain

the Napoleon ice cream we enjoyed

in the carton labeled Neapolitan.

For all *intensive purposes*

I *gravel* to be forgiven for my mistakes

red-faced with embarrassment—

the nuns correct me.

My working class roots will not stay hidden

like a too-long slip rolled up at the waist,

they shimmy down

at my middle-class boyfriend's home with his university-educated parents

they talk about world events

listen to classical music at dinner

My family discusses Uncle Joe's gallbladder operation

the latest side-hustle of my cousin Frankie,

At the sink, I wash the Thanksgiving dinner dishes like hired help

They say loud enough for me to hear,

"She'll end up an unwed mother. That's what those Italians do."

I was 16.

My working-class roots are out of place

like Schlitz at the country club in an Updike short story,

the only first-gen college grad in the boardroom of wealthy trustees

my suit, not quite the right fabric or designer,

isn't up to the mark.

Back to the faculty after my divorce,

I became a single mother of two small children

like my great-grandmother whose husband died

leaving her with five children.

She couldn't read, but I had a good education.

My working-class roots are the anchor

my great, great Cornwall grandfather lowered as a mariner,

no matter how many degrees I earn,

languages I speak, or books I read or write,

I am a working-class girl,

always aware of my roots,

always wary of my roots

peeking out,

slipping out,

shimming out

without warning.

I am book smart and street smart,

working class and middle class,

both and neither,

I am ever conscious of climbing

of the connections and money I don't possess,

of the journey of my ancestors

sailing destitute, to America,

some from Calabria and Greece,

others from Cornwall and Wales,

with only a dream, a hope—

only one step away from stepping back  
into the precarious divide  
separating one class from another.  
  
I am the reason my great-grandparents  
worked in the holy hot furnace of the foundry,  
the scalding steam of the laundry,  
the dangerous whirl of the knitting mill  
all without complaint so that one day,  
the granddaughter of a custodian could walk  
into the classroom of a university  
as the professor of a language  
his mother never learned to speak.

**BIO:**

**Joanne L. DeTore**, Ph.D., is an associate professor and program coordinator for Interdisciplinary Studies at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, where she teaches Humanities & Communication courses. Her work has been published in various peer-reviewed journals, including *Reed Magazine*, where she was a finalist for their Edwin Markham Poetry Prize in 2016, and in *Beyond Words*, *VIA: Voices in Italian Americana*, and *Italian Americana*, among others.