

The Toilers

by Philip F. Clark

In the black not dead of night,
she gathers them; slowly,
diligently placing the cans
and bottles into two large plastic
bags strung across a long piece of wood;
this is her money work.
She is small, but her body
has the choreography down:
sift, search, lift, drop.
Sometimes there is nothing to gather.
I hear the metallic sound at this
hour of beloved sleepers,
who do not hear her reach, reach, reach,
and move on. The bags are almost full,
of barter we can never know.
A spume of steam hides his face
as he rises up from the manhole;
urban Orpheus with a bright yellow vest.
His sweat is the least of it, but he runs
a dirty glove across his brow, and calls down
to someone below; some Frank or Fred --
a companion helping him put the lights
back on, so we don't go to bed in darkness.
He stops and listens as a car comes on,
that hiss of something he cannot see.
Lathered, filthy, he is beautiful
when he looks toward me and holds my eyes.
He crosses himself, to some god of his own,
descends again, back to his comfort
and hell.

