

FLETCHER

WORK (THREE)

001: I assume by "work" you mean what do I do that I get paid for?

002: OK. Cause I'm in kind of a unique position, in that what I really think of as my "work" isn't really something that makes me any money.

003: Yep, alright, got it.

004: My name is Fletcher Klingman, and I work at scenic Du Sable University, as a graduate employee.

005: Yes. I earned my Master's there in 2000, and I'm currently working towards my Ph.D..

006: I generally teach two courses a semester. They usually have me teaching Composition—Comp One, Comp Two—or sometimes they let me teach a Poetry course, Intro to Poetry, Intro to the Writing of Poetry, those sorts of things.

007: Yeah, see, when you ask about my *work* that's what I think of, the poems. But, you know, poets need to earn a living somehow.

008: Oh, no. No no no. The *vast* majority of the places that publish poetry don't pay anything. I'm talking *nothing at all*. So if you look at the stack of submissions coming in to the average literary magazine, you're looking at a big pile of poets competing against one another for the right to give their work away *for free*.

009: There are some fellowships out there, and some prizes, I guess, but unless you're winning the MacArthur your're talking about maybe five hundred bucks per contest? Even if you had a really good year and won, say, a contest every two months—and the odds are *seriously* stacked against you—you'd still come away with only, what, three grand? I'm telling you, there's no money in it. There's no money in writing it, and that's because

there's no money in publishing it. How many people out there do you think are buying poetry books? Barely any. And barely any of *them* are buying books from poets that haven't yet made a name for themselves. You're talking, like, a percent of a percent.

010: Right. So you need to find cash elsewhere. And the only place out there that hires poets *as poets* is academia. And even that's arguable; they're really hiring you on to teach. So it puts you in this awkward position, where the thing you *do*—teaching—isn't the same as what you're hired on to *be*—a poet.

011: No. In fact they're at cross-purposes to one another. Because all the time you spend grading or, I don't know what, answering student e-mails, making lesson plans, all of that time is time which you could be spending on writing, sending out poems, reading the work of other poets, etcetera.

012: Yeah, yeah, we get the summers off. But trying to set up your year in such a way that you do all of your writing in a concentrated three-month burst kind of sucks. And, actually, because we're so horribly paid, I do extra work over the summer.

013: Oh, technical writing, for my dad's company. It's—forget it, I don't want to go into it.

014: See, this is why I think my true calling is the get-rich-quick scheme. I figure I get one great idea out there, rake in a load of cash, retire on the proceeds, and then get started on the poems in earnest.

015: Oh, the *idea* isn't the hard part. I have *tons* of ideas that could a million bucks. The hard part is getting them out there.

016: Like, I don't know... New Age music for dogs and cats.

017: No, seriously. Think about it. People love their pets, and they enjoy spending money on them. And the kind of people who like New Age music are *exactly* the kind of people who seem overly willing to project their own tastes onto their pets, you know?

018: Right, but that's just one idea.

019: I actually have a system for it.

020: I should make you turn off the recorder first. This system, I'm telling you, it's gold.

021: Alright, alright. I call it the Dollar Store System of Product Design. It's where you take qualities from any two existing products and combine them into a new product.

022: Haven't you ever been in a dollar store?

023: Maybe I can better illustrate it if I describe how I came up with it. I was visiting a dollar store, OK, as I am wont to do, and I saw a toy called the Bubble Sword. OK? Think about this for a second. Bubble Sword. It's a plastic sword that you dip into bubble solution and as you, I don't know, *parry* or whatever, the sword blows bubbles. I guess. Now, this product makes no logical sense. It addresses no known human need. But somebody sat down and said *kids like blowing bubbles* and *kids like weapons* and they combined these two truths into something that *made them money*.

024: Yeah, you see this all over the place in dollar stores. Kids use pencils; kids like stuff that glows in the dark—glow-in-the-dark pencils!

025: Just think of any two things that people like. People like freshening their breath with mints. People like whitening their teeth. So—bam!—teeth-whitening mints! Has someone already done teeth-whitening mints?

026: Right, right, it's great, but I can't get the idea out there, because I don't know anyone who knows how to make mints, or anyone who knows how to make something that can whiten teeth, or anyone in, I don't even know what you'd call it, the *mint distribution industry*.

027: In six months there will be a teeth-whitening mint on the market and I'll shout *fuck! Some prick stole my idea!*

028: Probably some other poet. [laughs]

029: So, no, I mean, I don't know about mint distribution. I know about poetry. And I've been trying to apply the Dollar Store System to poetry somehow. Because, you know, people like poems, or at least they like being perceived as the kind of people who like poems. So I keep thinking OK, combine poetry with something else, some other human desire...

030: Oh, well, sex. Or avoiding taxes.

031: Well, with sex you could do a thing where you rent yourself out to write love poems for somebody else, a sort of Cyrano thing. You could do it by mail or over the Internet. The person submits a list of traits of their

032: The tax thing would be like you work out a system by which big corporations hire on a poet as, like, the staff poet. Mostly they'd just let him work alone in an office. Every once in a while they'd call him out to write a poem for a special occasion, a stockholder's meeting or whatever. Sort of like the old system of patronage for composers.

033: Oh, you wouldn't need to pay him very much.

034: True, so that's why you'd need to work it out where they'd get some kind of tax break for supporting the arts or some horseshit like that. But then *that* gets you all tied up in like corporate tax legislation, and the snarls *there* I just don't want to even *think* about. Better to stick with New Age music for dogs.