

The Mary Oliver of Trash

by [Hart Christopher Vetter](#) (June 2021)



Sulpher Miners, Renato Guttuso, 1949

I'm at the yard at 10 to 6. Nice chill in the air this early in the day. The foreman has just got there and is jiggling a large metal key in the door lock of the double-wide trailer office. "Nobody shows up early," he admonishes. "You the new guy?" His eyes scan me up and down for a second, unimpressed, and he turns back to open up. "They're right. You're a kid."

I will not let it deflate.

The door whines open. He flips the light, two neon tubes way brighter than comfortable; a bigger place than

expected. A stack of hardhats, I see, on a metal desk. Hope we won't need to wear those. Another metal desk stands shoved against the one window, upright on it a few binders, a thick pad of receipts, a thermos from the last century, a blue and a red ink pad, lids down, a couple of rubber stamps. A leaning pile of Pisa of folded, creased brown leaf bags sits on the floor all the way to shoulder-height, and two and a half towers of green and yellow and blue stackable recycling bins. A tall fridge is droning in the corner. A tool chest and work bench are further back. Stuff everywhere.

"You got a time card?"

"Oh yeah," it's in my pocket.

"Clock in," his head jerks to a pale green punch clock near the door. "Punch in your number first."

I'm 85, I remember. Was worth a chuckle when handed out. It chimes when I insert the card.

"Stash it in your wallet so you won't lose. I'm management, I don't need punching in," he volunteers.

I wear my oldest, most comfortable sneakers and the new overalls I got, well, not new, from the Goodwill Store, you know what I mean, and I feel I actually look pretty cool in them. I may get away with not wearing a shirt underneath when it's warmer out, or perhaps just a tank top.

"Where's your vest?" he asks, "They didn't give you a vest?"

"Uh-uh."

"Figures. Can't let you on one of my trucks without one."

"Oh."

“Town rules. Everybody’s got to wear a vest. For liability. Bright orange, makes it tougher not to notice and run you over.” He pulls the handle of a beat-up cabinet door which has shelves of logbooks, pads, more ink stamps of all sizes, some manila folders hanging cramped in a metal contraption; he rummages through a crate at the bottom.

“Here’s one,” he cheers. “You’re what? Extra extra or just extra large?”

“Medium.”

“Extra large it is.” It is definitely pre-worn and stained but the orange still looks loud. Don’t want to put my nose too close because an hour or so into it, none of this will matter.

“What is it I need to do to be the best at this job?”
I ask.

He stares at me, as if seriously probing my upstairs capacities.

“Don’t ask a load of fucked up questions.”

I hold the XL at a distance in my hand till the rest of the crew gets here and figure I’ll shut up.

“Got gloves?”

I nod. In my pockets

“Don’t bitch a lot,” he continues, “Don’t piss off the regulars. The last thing they wanna see is some kid on a summer job showing off for a few weeks while for them it’s a lifetime career.”

Never thought of it as a career choice for anyone—another thing I’ll have to rethink.

“Next time get yourself a sandwich, put it on the

bottom shelf," his face inching to the fridge. "Free discard."

A couple of minutes till, an older pick-up pulls in. An agile skinny, tall guy hops out, 40's, medium afro, lips edged up around the ends, he looks like a black smiley face with glasses, without having much of a sunny disposition, is my first take. He clocks in quickly. "Yo, I'm Kamar," he waves. Doesn't look burly as I expected. With him I'll keep pace, no problem.

"Steve," I say. Normally I go by Stephan but here probably not. "You got no vest," I point out.

"I drive. If Chesco ain't here the next couple minutes, you're on your own, dude. That's gonna fucking slow us."

"I need someone to show me the ropes."

"Nope, ain't gonna give you no ropes. You hang yourself – do it after."

Chesco shows. A bulky gorilla with a big toothy smile above a V-chin, a thick weeklong stubble like untrimmed woodlands on the lower half of his face, the top part glistening brown, with the biggest brown eyes. 50's I'd say, thick dark gray hair in a bun. Clean vest, massive upper body, no-flab solid, straight down, no waist.

The lot holds a bunch of large green dumpsters for lease at construction sites, I take it, an assortment of attachable snowplows for that time of year, and three different trucks, all in the same light green to denote love for the planet and the letters SAFE DISPOSE as an odd choice for a company name in a big font that looks a lot like dreaded comic sans, a web address and phone number underneath. Kamar cranks up the nearest of the trucks.

"Do what I do," says Chesco when I ask for pointers.

He likes the left side so I take the other. We climb on our riding steps, mine's a bit bent but certainly sturdy, there's a diagonal grab handle. "Tell ya when to hold on with both hands, Kamar's a maniac sometimes and some roads here are perverse." That's his favorite word, I learn. Perverse means crooked, mega buckles or potholes. "Two things," he says, "speed and full sweep! That's how ya do it." Meaning empty the damn cans fast, don't leave behind a mess, because that's perverse. "Some people got nothing better to do but bitch all day. If they find shit strewn all over, ya get nailed. If a can is flipped over or on its side or lid off—nobody says a thing."

The truck is noisy and grumbles and shakes up hills, and the exhaust hits you more on the right depending how the wind blows. I pick the houses on the right, Chesco the ones on left, and sometimes we mix it up if the split of houses isn't even. Like him I resort to pulling stuffed bags out one by one rather than dumping the content of the whole trash can in the loading hopper. It's easier on the shoulders. "Ya never know how much crap they cram into the damn cans. Good thing is, most of the puppies are plastic now and don't weigh a ton empty."

The problem is, some of the trash bags tear when stuff is too heavy and the people too cheap to double-bag. "Perverse, I'm telling ya. Especially when they mix doggie collectibles in there, ya know?"

There is a routine developing quickly. Jumping off and on with the truck moving is fun. Soaking in the breeze or sun as we rumble forward is fun. The smells are gross, the leaks atrocious. "Ya not getting shit for leaving their trickle-down piss. They're not to drain fluids into the bags. Period. Not our problem."

"Well, it's not good for soil or ground water," I say.

“Right. Kamar’s not gonna wait if ya want to go out and complain to them.”

“Can we give out tickets?”

“Ya kidding? Ya think we’re the garbage police?”

“What about recycling? What if they recycle wrong?”

“That we get into tomorrow. Tomorrow’s recycle day.”

It’s about to get unnerving when Chesco warns, “Hang on, ya better hang on now!” It’s a two-hander for sure as Kamar’s truck climbs an uneven potholy uphill drive to a trailer park with lots of on and off action to collect. “Brace yaself for the way down, it’s when he really floors it.”

“Is that how the other guy got on leave? Near broke his neck?”

“Jontray? No. Broke his ankle when his wife made him work the roof.”

Downhill was a rollercoaster, bouncing like mad, getting shaken up through and through, while gritting teeth and clinging to the handle was a thrill.

Cars stuck behind us around town center can be a drag. Middle fingers get hoisted, honking or crazed passing with little visibility. Getting run over is easier than you think, XL vest or not.

That night I feel dead tired at first. On your toes all day takes a toll. All-day agility leaves shoulders sore, forearms strained, biceps, lower back, legs, all whipped up and now there’s an odd, accomplished fatigue as the washer is running and a hot shower clears mind and soul.

For the second year in a row I goofed by looking too

late what to do for some cash during break, and this time none of my fallbacks came through. Runs for *Grubhub* or cashiering were not my thing. My dad was getting quite antsy, but it wasn't guilt-tripping or spite or glee that made me fall for this particular line, knowingly. Inhaling suburbia and the open road held an odd, inexplicable appeal. When I applied with this public works contractor to fill a temporary hole for someone on an unspecified medical leave, they first didn't want me. Figuring I'd quit after the first callus. "I want it to be a life-learning experience," I said, and the guy was at a loss, and if I'd considered that I was taken a hell of a chance away from a deserving needy candidate from a poorer neighborhood. "No, I haven't," I said, "not my choice, you pick whom you pick." I washed my hands, like Pilate, so to speak and got the job after passing their drug test, imagine that, and a two-minute orientation.

Me, a clean-cut white dude of twenty-one, is about as unexpected a sight as if it were a shapely woman in a pant suit hanging onto the rear of the truck for dear life and strategically diving to retrieve everyone else's refuse.

Recycling is easier if you don't let it drive you nuts. There are three bins, yellow for paper and cardboard, green for plastic, blue for glass. Residents get confused about the bins all the time even though they spell out in big fat white print on the side walls what goes where. Once a month metal, on top of the blue one.

The worst is when they put their recycle stuff in plastic shopping bags which we're not to take back. Nobody wants plastic bags. They hand them out everywhere like mad, sometimes charge you a whopping five cents apiece, and wrap every six-pack of toilet paper or paper towels in them, every head of lettuce, every couple pounds of apples or bag of nuts, and nobody wants them back. Not the merchants' problem, it's

yours now.

“What do you do? Leave them sitting by the curb, all filled up already with other plastic crap, to teach a lesson?”

“We used to plaster stickers on stuff that don’t belong. But people got so pissed, ya know, and we don’t want them to not send us cash for Christmas. One out of twenty still send us some. And that adds up. Two thousand last year, divided by eight.

Too bad I won’t be around for that, I can’t help thinking.

There’s plenty of other infractions we’re picking up. Fucking Amazon boxes, not flattened as they’re supposed to. “It’s perverse, the fuckers are supposed to collapse them,” shouts Chesco taking the words right out of my brain. Interesting what’s becoming of me. Hope nobody listens or we get a complaint. But hey, nobody listens to garbagemen.

It’s a different truck we’re using. Newer. Shiny stepper and handle, same brazen bravado behind the wheels. There are two compartments in the loading hopper. You do the math. Three, sometimes four types of recyclables, two chutes to go into. You think when we dump the stuff at the center somebody sits there to sort it all out, again? Think again. One side in the back of the truck has a pre-compressor with a compacter to crush the cardboard boxes that the lazy bums or arthritic pensioners left bulky as the day they got them, so the machine is crunching and compressing in an ongoing grind as fast as it can as we’re on the move. Sometimes me and Chesco hop on boxes to collapse them ourself to speed things along. A good outlet for aggression. He’s stronger and rougher than me but I’m holding my own, and we cackle and howl; it’s good for letting off steam.

The truck fills up faster and we have to go back to Central Recycling a few times.

A lot of the stuff there gets bunched up further and grouped and bundled as good as possible and then, they say, plastic items get shipped off to China and Indonesia or God knows where and who knows what they do. Set it all on fire? Nothing I can control in eight weeks or ever.

Dad makes some cracks that they didn't expect I'd ditch the college money straight into the dumpster. A colleague of his recognized me on one of our runs from a car right behind us. Overalls, no shirt, he reported, a vest with its arms precariously cut off, looking like some trash-tossing muscle punk in a bib. At one point we seemed to be horsing around, Chesco and me, sparring and dancing like the Frazier and Ali of trash, he says. I seemed to be having way too good a time.

Mom wants to know if there are degrees in garbology.

When it's rainy it's a whole different world at street level. Temps are balmy this time of year and getting drenched feels more like a welcome cool shower. I'm loving it. The roads are glistening, the air is full of new scents I'd not noticed before, reflections project wilder in the asphalt than the originals warrant. The job at hand is vital to keep things straight, I tell myself, the world is a gritty place and needs to function—just give it a nudge and a shove, as needed, or a little tap with a hammer here and there. The grime at ground level tastes alive. Somebody tell me what is it I plan to do with my one wild and precious life.

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Hart Christopher Vetter has recently retired from a life as an international business executive. He has been writing since he was 12. Recently he finished the novel *God Forbid* and is currently working on expanding one of his short stories into a screenplay.

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