

Junior scholar

by [Sydney Lea](#) in the [May 22, 2019](#) issue

*Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of
the least of these, you did for me.*

—Matt. 25:40–45

The assistant professor suspends his reading
of a hyper-theoretical screed. He stares, off-handed,
at the trash-strewn alley below. An undignified view.
It's among the galling wages, he knows,
of his modest station, but he trusts in this volume and others like it:

he'll be moving upward. The author's urgent concern
is his nation's unjust social arrangements.

Our professor also feels for the dispossessed. He's read
on the subject—widely. Fall gloom pervades the alley,
but he sees a reeling wino within it,

at the cul-de-sac's deepest recess, far from whatever light
there may be. Not much. In fact, it's so dim that a rat,
as if it were night, patrols the wall
the derelict leans against. The rodent is only an arm's length
from the mumbling bum, who swivels a screw-off cap,

then lifts the jug to his untoothed mouth.

The professor finds small intrigue in such a tawdry mess
as the one below him. He has greater issues in mind,
above all the work he'll have to do
in order to climb from his own degrading tawdriness.

His wife will comply: no children for now, if ever.

He must return to the difficult book.

Though its tumble of seeming runes is a labor at best to decipher,
if this is the argot he needs, he'll cultivate it.

He eyes a Waterford flask in a nook,

half-full of barely affordable sherry. He's halfway tempted,
but a man had better think about his future.

He envisions himself as a rocket streaking
up through the ranks: one day he'll be envied by colleagues. He dreams
of fellowships, even festschrifts, not mere tenure,

no condescension to *him* again!

He looks down on the wretched drunk, who's flopped unconscious under
a shivering heap of indescribable fabric,
bits of cloth he has somehow assembled.

By now the light in the alley has gotten even dimmer,

and his view therefore has become more than ever uncertain.

Is that the profile of the rat he detects?

Some creature anyhow; it sniffs the covers, then climbs.

Might the foul thing actually bite into human flesh?

Who'd know? Our scholar returns to the text.