

The Final Countdown

by Stephanie Johnson

Tick tock tick tock.
It's the final count down
T minus 11 months and 30 some odd days till
I am standing in the wake
Of the after math
Of a FIVE YEAR lifetime ration
Of public assistance

I can't even begin to quantify
The difference between welfare
And working poor
Either way,
Hunger's belly scraping madness
Around the corner
Either way its POVERTY
Filled with glass ceilings of empty promises
And deep, dark pits overwrought with
bottomless illusions
The clock keeps right on ticking
Pressure building like frozen pipes during winter
vacation
And what is becoming limitless
Is the length of our Bootstraps.

Meanwhile young mothers
Defer college dreams
To jump through hoops
To pay the rent and keep food on the table.
Instead they waitress,
Or care for the elderly,
Or clean bathrooms
Instead of entering classrooms
That could empower them
And catapult them out of their struggle.
The untold story is that WELFARE WORKS,
It has tipped the scales and fed the children
It has enabled thousands of survivors
Of domestic violence to say enough and walk
away.

It helps hundreds of middle-aged divorced
women
With financial constraints and
Overwhelming life transitions.
Welfare counterbalances the deficit
Created by Low Wage Labor
Welfare weeds families out of Poverty.
Yet if you come down to your local CSO
You feel the chinook of blame blustering by
A whirlwind of Personal Responsibility
And Illegitimacy
And work mandates
Transmuting these women, these mothers
These survivors into
SCAPEGOATS
For society's pathology.
Tick tock, tick tock
It's the final count down
The clock is still ticking
And one in five children
In the good old US of A
Is still Hungry.
Advocates are building their own ENGINES,
To revolutionize this airplane in flight
That is still under construction
Activists are organizing their platforms
Circling their wagons of solidarity
Demanding REAL SUPPORTS
THAT WORK FOR FAMILIES
And that those playing by the rules won't be
punished
But the real question is
Who will be exempt?
Who will be exceptional?
Who will be sanctioned?
Will it be me or will it be you-
Come August 22, 2002?

This poem originally appeared on the Web site of the Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition. Reprinted by permission of WROC, www.wroc.org.