I was poor, and it wasn't easy, but I had the handholds it can take to be upwardly mobile when you're marginalized and life is working against you in other ways. A childcare subsidy meant that when my ex didn't pay child support, my child was still able to attend the high-quality preschool on my college campus. I got a bachelor's degree in four years, went on to work full-time, and took a host of other perfectly boring but necessary steps that brought me to where I am today, with an advanced education, a wonderful family, and a career that I enjoy. If this were the usual heartwarming, feel-good tale about single parenting and poverty, you might come away thinking, "Well if she could do it, why can't everyone else?" And you might expect me to say, "It was hard, but I learned so much, and I remember that time fondly."

What I remember is hunger. And crying when I couldn't afford a Christmas tree. I remember being afraid that I couldn't make it. That I would lose my child because I couldn't provide. It's hard to take a rich woman's children; it is remarkably easy to take a poor woman's, though. As a society, we tend to treat hunger as a moral failing, as a sign that someone is lacking in a fundamental way. We remember to combat hunger around the holidays, but we judge the mothers who have to rely on food banks, free or reduced lunches at school, or food stamps for not being able to stand against a problem that baffles governments around the world. Indeed, we treat poverty itself like a crime, like the women experiencing it are making bad choices for them-

selves and their children on purpose. We ignore that they don't have a good choice available, that they're making decisions in the space where the handholds are tenuous or nonexistent.

The women in these circumstances may not have a grocer that sells fresh produce, or at least not one that sells produce they can afford. They may be working too many hours to be able to prepare food, or they might be dealing with food storage issues. The story behind that pack of chips and soda at a bus stop is often far more complicated than any ideas of a lack of nutritional knowledge, laziness, or even neglect. Sometimes the food you can access comes from gas stations, liquor stores, and fast food restaurants and not a fully stocked grocery store, much less a kitchen.

We know that food deserts exist, areas where groceries are scarce and what is available may be unfit for human consumption. But food insecurity is more complicated than simply the ability to access food. There's the question of what food costs versus what people can afford. If you live near a grocery store but you can't afford to shop there, then it doesn't matter that you're not in a food desert. You're still hungry. And hunger doesn't have an age limit; there are food-insecure children, food-insecure college students, and food-insecure elders. Some forty-two million Americans are struggling with hunger. Statistically at least half of that number are women, but given gender bias in wages, the real percentage is something like 66 percent of American households struggling with hunger are headed by single mothers.

Women and children account for over 70 percent of the nation's poor. Unfortunately, existing safety net programs have

failed to take into account the reality of poor women's lives. The money a household makes for many state and federal programs, like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), as well as childcare subsidies, leaves a wide gap between what is needed and what is available. Take Illinois, for example, where a single parent receiving TANF for one child is eligible for a maximum of $412 a month. Even the most ardent proponent of mandating independence should realize that that isn't enough money to cover the basic needs of two people. As a culture, we don't have sufficient provisions for helping women and families escape poverty. In fact, we often create artificial and unnecessary barriers, like limiting unemployment insurance to full-time workers, which leaves part-time workers with no assistance if they lose their jobs. We rely on charities to address acute hardships like hunger before the food stamps come in, and to respond to the homelessness crisis when HUD has a waiting list that can span decades in some areas.

We know that without a home, individual families suffer and fall further into poverty. Yet eviction rates and the price of food continue to rise all while wages remain stagnant, and the cycle gets even harder to navigate. Especially when work requirements are introduced, ones which ignore that childcare is a necessity for women with very young children. Is it possible to work a full-time job when you can't even afford part-time childcare? Or is this a policy guaranteed to create even higher hurdles? Paid maternity leave is a wonderful cause, but what happens after the baby is born and you weren't making enough money to support one person, much less navigate these new, higher expenses?