

# Chasing My Employment Tail

Rachel Leah Jablon

I can't remember the number of academic and academic-adjacent jobs I've partially applied for. I begin applications, but I rarely finish them. Sometimes, I forget to finish them; other times, I see "applications in progress" when I log in to apply for a different position. Most of the time, I regret not completing them. More than that, though, I regret the underlying reason why I don't. That I'm lazy is the easy answer; if that were all it is, I could overcome the challenge. The real reason is complicated, borne out of collapsed confidence and overwhelming odds.

I love reading a job announcement and envisioning myself in the position. I think of the ways my skills and expertise would contribute to the job, allowing myself to take pride in the PhD that seems irrelevant in my day-to-day work as a management analyst for a local government. I even allow myself to think that I bring qualifications to the table that other applicants couldn't possibly, for I have gained workplace skills in nonacademic settings that should make me more marketable. The balloon of optimism deflates when I consider my age, how long ago I graduated, what I've been doing with my time since then, and my competitors, a *mwah-mwah* echoing in my head. At this point, my goal is to be considered a viable candidate, and being selected for the position seems like a pipe dream.

I have no problem finishing the tedious parts of an application. Filling in text box after text box of personal, employment, educational, and demographic information is mind numbing but rote. I run into trouble when I get to the part where I need to upload documents, like a cover letter or writing sample: I freeze.

I stare at my monitor, willing my fingers to type something coherent, anything engaging, that contains a keyword that will pass the algorithm of the application tracking system. I reread the job announcement for inspiration, consider my options, and eventually click "save and continue later." By the time I muster the morale and

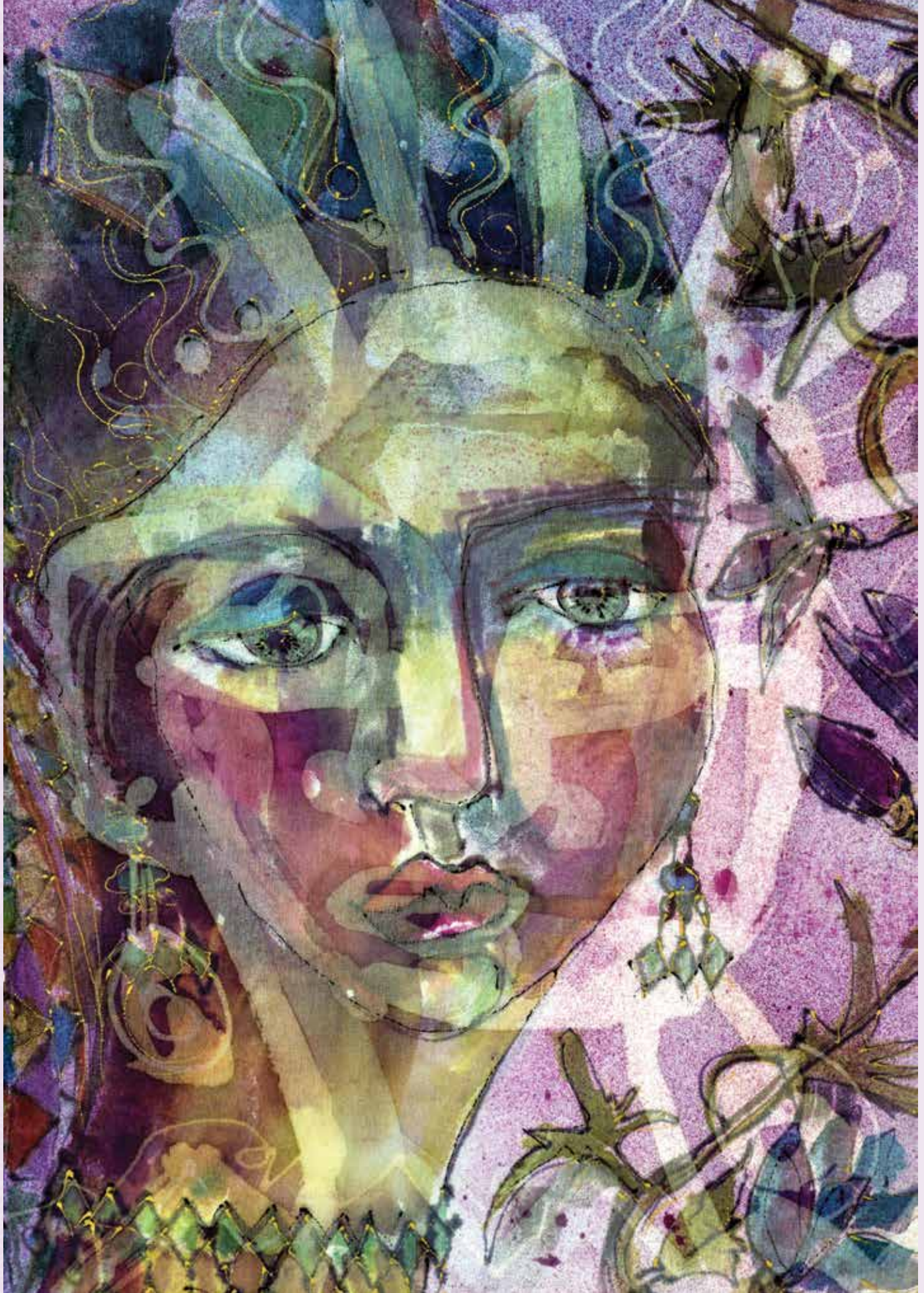
**I'm on the same market as applicants ten or more years younger than me, more recently graduated, and more willing to live like a grad student a little longer.**

energy I need to sit in front of a computer at the end of an exhausting day of sitting in front of a computer, sign back in to the application site, and work on the narrative portions of the application, I have little to no time until the job posting closes. Finishing the application feels like a losing battle.

It's the diminished returns. The amount of effort that goes into applying, let alone that went into my degrees, research, and teaching, doesn't pay off. I rarely get any feedback from prospective employers. Months can go by without any contact from the search committee: no "thank you for your application" and no "we regret to inform you." Most of the time, I find out I wasn't selected when I poke around an employer's website and see someone else's name next to the position. Discovering that I'm not even worth a rejection letter is further demoralizing.

There are some applications I've finished, of course, and I've gotten a few great interviews. My prospects seemed good! I've been screened by recruiters. I've had phone interviews, video interviews, and in-person interviews. I've flown across the country for the prized campus visit. My confidence boosts for a little while, and I think maybe I do have a shot at getting the job I want. This feeling of hope invigorates my job hunt, but only until reality sets in—or at least the reality of me applying and applying and getting a disproportionately low number of interviews. Theoretically, as someone recently reminded me, I suppose I do have as good a chance as any other applicant, but the lack of proof is disheartening.

I take advantage of as many mentoring and advising opportunities as I can. I want criticism of my application materials and interviewing skills to help me hone how



*Jan Janas. Beautiful Lady. Dyes on silk.  
Reproduced from The Fine Art of Painting on Silk (Schiffer Publishing, 2018). Courtesy of the artist*

## The Profession

I present myself on paper and in writing. In fact, I participated in the AJS Conference Mentorship Program at the 2019 conference: my mentor gave me good insight into the kind of positions I want, and I left San Diego feeling hopeful. Most of the feedback I get is positive, so I wonder where the disconnect is between my applications and my preparations.

I'm lucky that I have stability in my current job that affords me the time to get over my anxieties. I can take as long as I need without worrying about making ends meet. Although unrelated to my academic interests, the position is well paying, with good health care and retirement benefits. I don't know how I'll break the cycle of starting and not finishing applications, lamenting my chances, and questioning my qualifications, but at least I have a job to tide me over.

Maybe I would've been a better candidate years ago; now, I'm on the same market as applicants ten or more years younger than me, more recently graduated, and more willing to live like a grad student a little longer. However, I do want that job, and I *am* qualified for it. Besting my angst and working through the paralysis—or even pretending enough to finish the job applications I start—would at least get my foot in the door. Leaving applications unfinished reminds me of my insecurities; maybe finishing them will remind me that I am competitive, that my aspirations are reasonable.

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