

Work

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Six days a week we jockeyed trays, pulling
them from a conveyor of metal shelves
that clattered before us like miniature boxcars.

Barehanded, we emptied the remains from bowls
and plates over a foot-wide trough, waist high,
that sloped into a disposal's gaping mouth.

When a fork or spoon slipped from a tray
and into the sludge, those of us on the line
would plunge in our hands, forearm deep,

fingers searching like tentacles. Sometimes
we snatched the piece before it reached
the gears. Sometimes not. In unison,

we'd brace for the sound—the grinding metal,
the tense whine when the blades caught,
the fuses popped and the entire apparatus

shuddered to a halt. Because I was the only one
who'd figured out how (or, in retrospect,
the one foolish enough to admit it) I'd gather

the tools, unclamp the chassis, and drag
the cast-iron disposal to the center of the room.
As the invisible diners on the other side

of the wall banged their fists on the unmoving
shelves, I'd dismantle that grinder, spacing
each piece on the cement floor. It never took less

than the better part of an hour, as my cohorts
went on extended break, and I worked the
ground-in metal with pliers, fighting each sliver
like a tooth.

Within the space of that summer (the last before
college), we'd be poisoned when ammonia found a
bucket of grease (for which we'd be given the
afternoon off)

and electrocuted, twice, by a frayed cord
on the kitchen's wet floor. Not once did
a boss ever check in, and the locals lent us only

the mildest concern. I remember us now on a
typical night, a group of boys, almost sick from the
odor of soured milk and melon rinds, heading back

to our rooms for the umpteenth time. Though
none of us would have said it then, as our conver-
sations turned on the more pedestrian themes of
girls and cars,

the truth of the matter implicit in our work
was that we were only voyeurs on the kingdom of
wage. Yet there is one more thing, so as not to
forget—

in the last week before I left for good, while dis-
mantling the disposal on the kitchen's hard floor, I
allowed my mind to begin to drift and one of the
hollow steel legs rocked

back on my hand. In the end the grinder had got-
ten its nip—
the digit of my left hand's middle finger, just below
the nail. Even now, over the threadbare miles

of distance and time, I will catch the nub on a
blackboard
or chair (usually mid-lecture to a dozing class),
and like the fictional captain, crocodile at his back,

ticking clock in its belly, I will lose my place
entirely, all knowledge at once gone from my head,
except the vision, uncoupling, of who I was and
am.