

Machines

craft talk by Eric Roe

A meat packing plant: my wilderness.

From my first foray into the plant, I held a healthy respect for the machines. Or more accurately: a mild terror. For years I was plagued with a nightmare: I would slip or stumble into the slicer in the room where I cleaned, the blade would cleave into my chin, and I would be stuck there for hours before someone found me. We were the third-shift sanitation crew so being alone in a room for hours would not have been an anomaly. I had close calls. I smashed my ankle between a pallet truck and a brick wall once and so I learned about the fallibility of brakes. Another time, I opened the housing on a slice line and came face-to-face with an exposed, spinning blade, startling me so much that I almost dropped my high-pressure water hose. If I had dropped it, the hose would likely have whipped me right into the spinning blade. I learned that switching a machine off did not necessarily bring every moving part to a sudden halt.

It took longer to grasp the danger of the plant's intangible machines: politics, economics, and security. The way they could suck you in and hold you. The way they could crush ambition, outlook, spirit. After enough time, most everything begins to rust and rot and sink into itself.

Each summer a new batch of students came to spend the season at the plant to earn money for college. We called them Summer Hires. Each summer, I found myself training one of these kids—smooth-faced, twitchy and nervous, or cocksure and cool. They inevitably asked

how long I'd worked there. Each summer, I had to adjust the answer: three years, five, eight, nine. The Summer Hires began to seem younger and younger. To them, I looked more and more like someone they did not want to end up being.

Some of the kids got cocky after a few weeks and extrapolated from their minimal training that they now knew every angle, shortcut, and trick available. Like industrial prodigies, they would be the ones to immediately gain a knack for skills it had taken others years to develop. They would be smarter and quicker than the machines. One night a Summer Hire named Derris reached into moving machinery to flick loose a piece of bacon. His glove got caught on a rotating claw. He repositioned to pull loose, but then metal fingers reached down and grabbed his forearm. When he saw that he was being dragged toward a protective housing through which not all of him would fit, he yanked free. His room partner, Chuck, hustled him down two floors to the nurse's office. I happened onto that scene on my way to break, following a zigzag trail like a bright red seam down the stairs. I found Derris sitting in his own pool of blood outside the nurse's office, his face twisted in pain as Chuck applied compression above a wide bracelet-shaped strip where the flesh had been torn from the forearm. Derris moaned, "Let go of my arm, you're squeezing too tight!" Chuck growled, "Shutup, I gotta do this." Back then, the nurse's office was locked and unoccupied on third shift. Somebody had already called 911. There was nothing to do but wait and a bunch of us collected at the end of the hall so we wouldn't be in the way when the EMTs arrived. We paced and gawked, jumping out of our skin with

useless anxiety.

Derris was back the next summer, more arrogant than ever, standing on tables to hose equipment down, applying soap without safety glasses, cleaning machinery while it was still running. It was as if his jagged bracelet scar elevated him to some untouchable place of safety above even the old-timers.

When I started at the plant, I was given a mission by my high school writing teacher. I'd sent him a letter and mentioned my new job. He wrote back with a poem. "See the unseeable," his poem instructed. "Feel life with the poet's touch. / See with the poet's eye, / And, especially, mold that blue, twisted steel of reality, / (so cold, so hard) / With your own bare hands, / ... into words." I keep the poem in a packet with my diploma, my birth certificate, and my marriage license.

I had a mission but I didn't have the tools. I had come to the plant straight out of high school, skipping the whole idea of college. By the time I was nineteen, I'd already written two full-length novels, and like Derris with his scar, I thought these achievements would elevate me to some untouchable place of success above the plant's lifers and losers.

It was a lifer who disabused me of that notion. He was Jim Nichols, the resident locker-room intellectual, a college graduate who had somehow allowed himself to be trapped in the plant, now weary and gray and cynical. Jim heard me spout off my ambition and threw a skeptical eye on the cheap thrillers I was reading. He gave me books written by Jim Harrison and James Salter, and he told me these were craftsmen, not hucksters, and that there was something to be learned and experienced through them. He gave me Annie Dillard's book *The Writing Life*, and I started to learn: This is how you

build the house of words; this is how you sometimes have to take it down.

Why write? Why mold that blue, twisted steel of reality into a house of words? It never occurred to me to ask those questions while I worked at the plant. Writing was just what I did and once I learned my job well, I was able to steal away to a hideout and devote chunks of each night to writing. My only existential struggles were how to write and how to do it well enough that I could escape the plant. It took ten years for the hard truth to sink in: I wasn't going to write my way out. This was underscored when I proudly gave Jim Nichols a copy of the *Great American Packing Plant Novel* I'd finished writing and Jim later gave it back, unimpressed. "You can do better," he said. He told me to come back to it when I had more distance.

When I quit the plant, it was so I could attend community college full-time and earn a paralegal certificate. My goal then was to get a day job where I would still have time to write, but after a few years in a law office, I went back to school for a BA in English and creative writing. That was where I first came across questions like why write? In an essay for one of my classes, I said my time at the plant had taught me "something about the importance of stories in all their various forms, from all their colorful sources, whether from the black-and-white of the dignified page or from the cafeteria janitor who kept his whiskey bottle hidden in a trash receptacle." But how to articulate that importance? I don't know that I can. All I can say is what a story does: It brings to life those moments, those details that otherwise fall through the gaps. The point of a story, to echo Flannery O'Connor, is to cast light on something that cannot be illuminated by

anything other than a story. Through stories, the intangible machines are revealed, and we see the unseeable.

I've been out of the plant for almost twenty years now. I'm still writing about it. When I was there, my writing was a way of dealing with the experience as I lived it. I turned it into a comedy and that's why Jim shrugged my novel off so unceremoniously. It didn't capture the reality he'd come to know. Distance has shown me a different reality, contextualized by broader experience. Writing about the plant now brings it back to life and helps me begin to better understand the extent to which this place formed my attitudes about work, my ways of relating to other people and seeing the world. Even after I've written all the stories about it that I can, that place will still be part of the foundation of who I am now. Last summer, the plant closed down, leaving a brick-and-mortar husk and a lot of people looking for work. But those machines will never stop turning through my mind and taking me right back as if I've never left.

My writing hole in the bowels of the plant is a dark, caged-in storage area that holds a big, seaworthy desk. Each night, I carry a small desk lamp to the spot, stealing through a labyrinth of back halls and stairways. I spread my papers out, hide myself behind crates and boxes, and write. My view when I look up is a red brick wall, and once in awhile, I snap my hand out to smash a bug. Around the corner is a freight elevator and a door to the freezers. Now and then, the elevator bangs, the freezer door opens with a hiss of air, and a forklift rumbles back and forth, loading and unloading pallets. The bursts of cold air keep me awake. It's the graveyard shift and I'm working, my pen on paper, wearing earplugs to block out the grumblings of the ancient pipes.

Rickety swivel chair. Cement floor. Dark corners.

Out of rust and rot, I build. ♦