

Bret Nye

nyeba@miamioh.edu

419-889-9440

Fiction - 1,502 Words

Factory

Imagine him there, his first few weeks on the job toiling at the cusp of adulthood, reckless and quick with the tires as he handles them, and then his later years, new bosses and new systems but old work, each day another notch in his skull. Under a film of smoke and a gray turret sky he walks steel toe to pavement through the lot and into the mouth of the building. He passes through the turnstile and shines a badge to put a name to his face. Crosses into the plant proper and immediately a flood of sick-smelling heat, a whirl of machinery. Metal terrorizing metal, sweaty bodies stationed among the clashing parts. He snakes through to the back of the plant, dodging forklifts as they whiz by. Supervisor carts trailing behind. The recognition of the same 12-hour-shift look on everyone's face, on his face.

Here they make tires. From people standing in place applying strips of cured rubber to revolving spools to the molders and shapers of product to the treaders and finishers and finally to the warehouse, where he puts in his time. He hops on his forklift and blurs through the hulking stacks, rowed to oblivion, chasing down competitor's tires locked away in the cage upstairs to take over to testing. The competitive edge, he's dangling right along it.

He drives up the beaten ramp and enters Warehouse 3. A profound silence greets him, emanating from musty rubber air and the near-dark created by dim overheads that haven't been re-bulbed in twenty years. The constant worry that the tall, winding stacks of skids will come crashing down on him, or any of the other warehousemen creeping among the rows like shades.

He flies through the black and finally reaches Warehouse 4, loose tires spilled across the floor, empty and forgotten skids bent all ways, whole cities of cobwebs on the ceiling. He drives through to the deepest part of the room, where it's pitch black at six thirty in the morning and almost impossible to navigate without light. He parks his forklift and turns off the engine and waits for the rotten smell of exhaust to die.

Most people hate being up there in Warehouse 4. It's hard to see and the place smells like must and rot. This is where all the broken tires go, the tires that were never made correctly to begin with. Anything that can't be sold. Most people hate being upstairs in Warehouse 4 because they swear they've seen ghosts roaming the stacks. They share tales of flashlights gone missing and cold air coming through in the middle of the summer when the rest of the factory is a hundred degrees. But he's not afraid of phantoms; he likes the silence up there too much to worry. He settles into his seat and closes his eyes and thinks of her, working in his mind until he conjures the softness of her scent, the sense of her body close. He gets up and walks around the tall dark columns, keeping his eyes closed and feeling the tires for the path. He thinks of a time when his oldest son was too young to know him and he would whisper whiskey breath into his ear. How easy it had once been, how impossible to hurt anyone. His eyes pulse in thought but soon he feels a rush of cold from somewhere even deeper in the stacks and his gut tenses. He peers into the corners of the room, stalks the source of the cold air in the dark until his supervisor comes trundling by on his cart to tell him to get back to task.

He wonders about the cold for a while but the thought is forced out of his mind by the work. Twelve hours in and out of an airless truck trailer tossing twenty pound tires, knotted and piled and stuffed inside until the doors barely close. Each trailer holds hundreds, and he fills four to the brim by shift's end. All the while a tinny radio bleating grunge, the lightheaded smell of

fresh rubber, the curses and dirty jokes of the other tire throwers. Poker with penny antes over break and the impossible slow crawl of a day.

He walks back through the turnstile and out to the thick air of the factory town when his shift is over, feeling like a captive loosed. When he gets home he still smells of the place, he's still breathing it. He says nothing as he passes her on the living room couch, says nothing to the boys playing video games in the basement. Later the whole family watches the same television show in different rooms. At night his throat gets dry and he gets something for the thirst and starts to feel woozy and sad and suddenly he is a whirl of machinery, metal terrorizing metal, sweat-soaked and screaming through the doorways of his house. They curl up in their familiar positions against him. He goes on like this for an hour, maybe more, eventually collapses into his bed for a few moments of sleep before the alarm rings him awake.

He drives to the plant in the still-dark. Comes up over the hill and sees the building's façade, violently chugging smoke even in the shortest hours of the morning. The factory has no need for sleep. In the doors, back through the turnstile and back to the warehouse. For a few hours he tosses tires into trailers, tire after tire until his head starts to hurt and needs clearing. He waits until his supervisor makes a round and sneaks up to the deepest part of Warehouse 4. He searches everywhere for the cold air he felt the day before, obsessed with it. He spreads his flashlight beam across the length of the room, jogs up and down the rows, first in patience and then in unbearable haste, impetuous, consumed by the day-old memory. He hides quietly among

the stacks if anyone comes whizzing by, careful not to give himself away. He has decided that no matter how long it takes he will stay there searching until he finds the cold feeling again.

Hours pass and there's no sense of the coldness. He starts to shake. Out of nowhere the lights go all the way out. He starts to wander around in the total dark. He can taste metal along the edges of his tongue and figures it must be blood. Realizes he's been chewing the insides of his mouth. He no longer has any sense of where he is in the warehouse, gropes senselessly at the air in front of him to feel for the walls of tires. The only sound his heartbeat, deafening on his eardrums. He is running out of ideas, out of time.

About to give up and search for his trailer he hears something, at last, a whisper, soft as a voice in a closed bottle. He continues in the direction of the voice, reaches the place where the tires should end and crosses through. To his surprise there is no longer any threshold, no cement where the warehouse wall was standing just hours ago. No longer any boundary. The voice louder every few steps he takes toward it. He notices how cold it is, and getting colder the further in he goes. His lips quivering, his fingers achy and numb. He thinks he can almost hear what the voice is saying. He reaches his hands out in front of him, no longer to try and feel his way but instead to find the source of the voice, to come upon this speaker by feel.

And soon a touch.

Contact.

It is so cold that he can barely feel it, struggles to will his hands to move but manages to force them along the surface of this thing he's found and realizes that it's a body, a person, dressed in what must be a cloth workshirt. He pleads for this body to speak again, to repeat what it has been whispering.

The body opens its mouth and claims him. *Son.*

It says nothing more and silence fills his ears. But he can smell the body, the department store musk, the Canadian whiskey. The desperation, the fear. He opens and shuts his eyes in disbelief and soon he can make out its silhouette, just perceptible as his eyes adjust to the dark. The cold air billows all around him, and soon he's crying, sobbing as he embraces the image before him.

Imagine that this man is your father, the man who never learned to take care of you and your brother when your mother died, who drank your grandfather's whiskey and wore your grandfather's cologne and spiraled downwards into hell along with him. Imagine your father haunts your memories, just as his father haunted his, just as his father haunts the factory and the town and so on forever. These fathers, they are each and every one the same.