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From the Slimer

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FROM THE SLIMER

After the factory clank shuts down to the hiss
of steam pipes, Sammy scrapes another salmon.
Knee-deep in the quicksilver curves of fish,
galoshes scale-flecked and shining, he is young
again, tramping the fields of Palawan
to the Sulu Sea. Salt of his bones, how that ocean
air lifted his head to the slash of sky
where later ships sliced their bulk through a harbor
charged with foreign colors.

Sammy bends over the slimer, pulls the chain
on the lightbulb. He scans the pale green machinery,
tiny brown man in a jungle of tin, and checks
for the round-faced foreman. He cuts the firm flesh
behind the tail, slips the knife to the glass-eyed
head. Hands flashing in the slow light from long
windows, he carries his bucket, heavy with dog salmon,
down under the dock, splays the meat on a trembling
string in the river's brackish rasp.

Walking carefully up the path to the bunkhouse
he sees the windows washed with the glaze of faces.
Roman flushes as he slams his cards on the table.
Rice steams. Joey sucks on dried fish.

Tonight as he winds into sleep, Sammy grows
smaller, churning through clouds over Naknek,
the mist of Seattle, over the grey chop
of ocean where thirty years ago he hunkered
in the bow of a creaking junk, back now,
floating over Palawan, a happy brown seed
warming in the low-slung sun.