Spring 1981

From the Slimer

Caroline Patterson
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.