

in soot i sleep.

Dinner's a thick stringy mess of grey steak that coughs its way into the cup like cat sick. My mug is thin, and tin. I always hit the sides with my rust-ended spoon, it tickles the lip and it tinkles clearly over the roaring rumbling crowd of chewing workers. But I stop paying attention when my tongue hits the heavy salty brown broth. It's wonderful. Then the bobbing potato bits squish gently under my hard palate, too hot so I have to frame them with my lips and blow wet lung-air past their steaming surface. I can't savour the sloppy dinner, because I'm eating too fast and my taste-buds have sizzled away, but I hold the idea of that first heady sip while I finish.

One of my co-workers is a warped brown man who looks like a dried apple-core. He told me that when I drink dinner I look like I'm tightening one of the massive screws on the machines he looks after because I tilt the cup into my mouth so regularly, and I only bend my wrist. Every week he asks me why I drink so fast, and where I go in the eleven or so minutes between the end of dinner and the start of my next shift. He asks me to g'un an' tel h'm. He tells me that I'm jus' a reyul mistrey ta evry'n. I don't say very much in reply; I'm too busy sipping.

When I finish my mouth has thickened and my tongue has that blunt feeling, like it's just another piece of meat for my molars to chew on. It flops around in my mouth while I pound through the kitchens to the garbage bins out the back. The bins have little rungs on the side so you can climb up to see how full they are, but I use them to get to the drain-pipes, and once my fingers tighten around them I can scale the walls and hoist myself onto the roof. The scummy corrugated iron doesn't grip the soles of my feet, so I have to slip across it like a newborn calf until I get to the air-conditioning box. This is the only white object in the factory, except for the dust trails leading into the four massive fans, and it hums all the way through my chest as I get closer. If I put my feet on the cross-bars carefully I can crawl past the gaping chopping blade-holes and onto the very top of the whole building, and I can lie down on the rough juddering concrete floor and breathe out.

Above me, the smoke is relaxing out of the deep round chimneys and stretching out until it fades into the gentle breathing of the clouds. Buildings butt up against each other with their blunt rough edges, pushing and huffing and sweating oil and sloughing dead flakes of carbon skin onto the ground. And half way in between, right next to my head, is a little cardboard box filled with tightly packed soil and dense bundles of bruise-purple irises and yolky daffodils.

The low rolling boom of the siren echoes through the sky; end of dinner. At some stage the rain has starting dripping, lethargic and fractured, salty water that feels hot against my skin. The soot starts making tracks down my cheeks and clogs my ears, turning the siren into a muffled yawning thump as I walk back to the hole. The empty black cave of the factory door has turned into a warm glowing pit, filled with wriggling oiled dirt-encrusted shapes. I can feel the muscles on my back twist like wet snakes, and they twine around each other when I pick up the coal shovel. There's a squashed blue iris in my pocket and my head is filled with the soft shadows of a dirty cardboard box.

harry mcnaughton
for richard orjis
2008