

Robert Kendrick

after twelve weeks of working the broiler and grill
at lone star steaks and watching too many feeders
drown well done porterhouses and t bones
in standing pools of 57 and A1
before holding their forks like torque wrenches
and pounding it in one load at a time
I asked to be moved to the dishwasher
our regular guy darrell didn't show up
the same day bloomington pantagraph
had him in the blotter for felony theft
so it was an easy call for the manager
who could swing the grill until he found
a new cook and needed someone in back that shift
between the slaughterhouse and the grill station
it had been six months of blood and raw flesh
and what I needed was a steady stream
of hot water shooting from the sink hose
and the rubbery violet and cream smell of soap
in a room where no one would fuck with me
as long as I cleaned up everyone's mess
every night was a sequence of bus tubs

filled with the evidence of customers
grown fat on overgrown cattle and corn
leaving folded wads of potato skin mâché
wrapped around butter sodden lumps of starch
or crusts of bread left next to the bones
and bricks of dessert from the bar that burst
in streaks of flamingo pink and astro turf green
on the white ceramic plates or left roach sized
chunks of oil slick black resembling chocolate
between flattened ranges of industrially
whipped air water hydrogenated
vegetable oil high fructose corn syrup
polysorbate 60 also used
in condom safe sexual lubricants
and artificial vanilla flavoring
the cornucopia had been put in reverse
everything was coming back partially
disassembled and fully reconstituted
gasoline from gulf coast refineries
nitrogen fertilizer and feed grain
from the funks and archer daniels midland
laboratories down the road in urbana
tractors and combines from caterpillar
a few miles down 55 in morton
diesel fuel and peterbuilts and trailers
to haul the final product of angus
beef I may have slaughtered in peoria
all travelling down their inevitable path
to my spot at the narrow end of the horn

I took the stream of table service salvage bins
the waitresses dumped at the door and played
each one like a one minute puzzle
ordering dishes and plates and cups and bowls
in 10 line stanzas of 10 unit lines
then gave them a scalding before sending
them down the six foot conveyor
and through the fingers of the green plastic curtain
to vanish into the hiss hum and squeak
of past purging steam and industrial cleanser
and come out moist and glowing on the other side
I'd stand and watch the last rack of the night
emerge from the heart of the washer
each piece already starting to lose its shine
the traces of water turning to vapor
and the green pigment around the edges
one work day closer to vanishing
the bonds of kaolinite feldspar bone ash and clay
in the porcelain oxidizing
to bring the *keramos* back to burned earth
and everything kept moving off the company clock
atoms decaying of their own sweet will
to rearrange this corporate disorder
though I wouldn't be around to see the result
I pictured the pile of rubble and rust and smiled
then whistled while I worked like a good dwarf
as I mopped the floor before closing
and guided the grease and the dirt down the drain