

Track Boss

In blue work clothes, a Royal Crown decal stuck to his hardhat, he looks like a king, riding the tracks all over the mill on his pump cart among picks, shovels and spikes. His chosen one or two ride with him while we laborers train after, chasing down the bent and weak rails, changing rotted ties, watching ladle cars full of molten iron sag the rails and lift rusted spikes out of the wood. He's taught us to hammer in tandem: one strikes the spike-head as another wrist-pivots the peened sledge over his shoulders and clinks it down, two unbroken circles, until the spike-lip kisses the chink of rail flange. Once, he grabs a hammer in each hand, driving a spike home amid swirling steel heads. *That's when you get good*, Angel says. He lost two toes before steel-topped boots were law in the mill, but we didn't find that out from him. As we pass, men wave wistfully atop the cast house floor or lean from dark doors in corrugated warehouse walls. They call: *Hey, Happy Jack, lord of the tracks*, or *He's big, he's mean he's clean*. It always seemed that dust clung to our faces and clothes, not his. He nods, tips the point of this track gauge toward them, a speared scepter, yells, *Damn George, you're looking old*. Changing ties

he works his share, picking to my shovel, shoveling to Bob's pick: *You don't work your share, you don't work with me.* We all want the steady days. Just once he let Angel sleep one off an hour. We heard him stand off an angry foreman he didn't like who wanted to pull Angel to first helper on the furnace. *I need every man I have,* he yelled flourishing the pointed gauge, and they sparred over who out-ranked the other. *This gang's a team. You run the cast house like a prison.* The foreman turned, *Yeah,* he said to the sky, walking away, *and I'm the fucking warden.* That was something. Most days Jack waltzes out the gate at half-past the whistle after a long shower and friendly bull with other 20-year men. At five to, I enter the crowd each day in the tunnel and shove past the guard, who can hardly take our time cards from us, we give them up so fast. Maybe his girth, his rounded biceps and belly, coaxes time to orbit him as the moon circles the earth, even as the earth keeps its round, fair distance from the furnace of the sun. One morning, fixing a switch behind the Sinter Plant, he disappears on break, down into the riverbank's lush growth. Five, ten minutes, we wait, puzzled. *Taking a shit,* Angel says. Climbing from the brush, sweat-darkened underarms and chest, he rises, each hand clutching a bunch of thick greens, raises them, *I'm frying these up tonight and none of you is INVITED.* He binds them, lays them in spike box, clumps of black dirt clinging to the roots.