

Bill

I was there at lunch when they hired Bill
an old man with clothes too big
holding his hat by the brim
in timid hands a sign of respect
belonging to an era long lost.
He went straight to the foreman
eyes bright and proud and
in a soft spoken voice that wavered
he said "My boy come in here to work
doing odd jobs here and there, and quit
after one day. He say the work was hard,
dirty and no man should be needing
to do that kind of work."

Our foreman looked distant
trying to form a polite reply
but the old man said
"What I was wanting to know was
if that job then is still available?"

Bill worked the broom a soft swish
swish kicking up oil
and dirt in neat even piles
with ripped greasy gloves
that he'd splurge on every other paycheck
to protect his raw arthritic fingers.

Sometimes during assembly we'd
make a mess spilling oil across the floor

and with our young important hands
would dump 'sta dri' in wasteful
clumps to keep the oil off the bottom
of our shoes and Bill would come running
muttering in an intelligible murmur.
His thin hair frenzied grey tufts
poking out from his ears his nose
and chin stubbled and flecked with
bits of metal paint and dirt.
With his coffee can of 'sta dri'
flicking with gnarled hands
admonishing something like "y'gotta
feed like chickens boy, like y'feed chickens"

He was a 65 year old errand boy
carting scrap metal in bins
wheeling out to the dumpster or
dollying about his oil drums
full of that days waste for minimum an hour.

I was still there the winter years later
when times got rough and they hit us
with the layoffs. Bill was one
of the first to go
seems the people who need always
end up needing. And there's that
unspoken camaraderie and friendship
that we lose hunched over our work
having families of our own to fear for.
But we all felt the emptiness

when we lost the luxury of Bill.

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