

1-1-2000

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### Recommended Citation

Nusbaumer, Kiki R. (2000) "Fish Plant," *Yalobusha Review*. Vol. 6 , Article 24.  
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol6/iss1/24>

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# Fish Plant

KIKI R. NUSBAUMER

The tundra absorbed the clomping of her heavy boots on the grey wood of the boardwalk so that the sound stopped dead. It had rained and the drops were tangled in the knot of weeds a few feet below her. The fish plant was slick and still, like a dead thing sprawled out along the beach.

At the end of the walkway she jumped onto the dark sand. The sun was bubbling orange on the horizon. It was nearly midnight. She thought night was terribly unenthusiastic about falling on King Salmon, Alaska.

The wet sand sucked at her boots as she moved slowly away from the hulking buildings and softly moaning generators of the small civilization the fish plant had become since the bush planes brought the workers here from the lower 48. Karen had ducked out of the toy airplane and watched the pilot turn around and fly away, her hands at her face, nervously clawing her own cheeks with her fingertips.

Then the fish had started coming. Boatloads of salmon. She felt she had touched every one of them with her gloved, frozen

hands. In bright yellow rain gear she had sliced their soft bellies, pulled out their internal organs and dipped a spoon inside to scrape the bloodline off their spines. Her fingers were too bloody to rub nervously against her face.

She squinted against the wind and pulled her black, hooded sweatshirt tightly around her. The abandoned plant was about a mile up the beach. She could see the pilings sticking out of the sand at different angles against the steel-grey sky. The remains of the dock were like a giant ribcage picked clean by crabs and seagulls.

The gutted fish were frozen in freezers the size of mausoleums. The boys had told her to go inside, spit, see if it freezes before it hits the ground. It had. They watched with their wool caps lying flaccid against their skulls as a crystallized drop of saliva bounced against the cement floor. They laughed with her, then looked at her dirty jeans and make-up-less face, down at her boots through the undulating vapor that wafted from the freezers, and turned away.

Half-eaten fish carcasses lay along the brown sand. The orange blaze was dwindling as she looked out over the dark waves. The giant ribcage drew nearer.

On the little plane the boy next to her told her she didn't talk much. She stared at the clouds while her stomach leapt from one side of her belly to the other, her always busy hands pushing on her jawbone just below her ear. She'd turned a brave face to him, his curly hair clinging tightly to his head, his cherubic mouth in a crooked smile. He would not have looked out of place in a Renaissance painting, diaphanous wings projecting from his back, a white sheet draped just so. She'd apologized and pointed out the clouds to him, self-consciously pushing her brown hair behind her ears, then forcing her hands into her lap.

She smelled the fish. It was a normal smell that no longer repelled her. The smell of a fish lying on the beach was familiar. Inside the plant, her spoon scraping the inner flesh of a salmon,

the smell was different. It must be the stench of blood, she thought. Death curled up her nostrils and wove itself into the wool sweaters her mother had bought her for the trip. Black, she'd told her mother, who'd compromised and gotten her a dark grey and a dark green one. She'd helped her daughter fill her backpack with warm clothes, emergency crackers, toiletries, a disposable camera, a John Knowles novel and paper so she could write home.

She had asked Karen over and over if she was sure she wanted to go. It would be hard work. She wouldn't know anybody . . .

A phone rang in the distance. The night shift picked up and only the crashing waves were left to give sound to the blossoming dark. The sun was nothing more than a smear above the sea now and her boots sunk deep into the sand. She had to yank her legs out with each step. The silhouette of the plant loomed close now as she sank to her knees in the muck.

The cherub-boy had invited her on this walk when they first arrived. He'd lured her with condescending wit and sarcasm, charmed her with his quick friendship and apparent interest. They'd run among the leaning pilings, filled their boots with mud and sat looking out at the ocean by daylight, their hands not yet acquainted with so much death.

They'd pushed each other into the sand, wrestled like children. Karen was buoyed by a confidence that rose out of the unknown. They'd been dropped onto the creaking docks of the plant and would remain for one month. There was nothing to do but cling to the innocence around you.

She was cold now, and felt mud inside her boots as she reached a hand out to touch the first black column that stuck out of the sand. It was rough and snagged her skin as she walked past it, struggling with the sucking morass. She let her eyes run up its length. He'd sat up there, she remembered, rocking back and forth, mud clinging to his jeans, his thin shirt flapping like a sail in the wind. She was sure the piling would pull out of the muddy

sand and fling him headfirst onto the beach, but his pedestal stood strong, balancing him high above her. She'd tried to climb one but the wood dug into her hands, the mud on her shoes made her feet slip. He teased her, called to her, knowing she couldn't climb it. She squinted up at him, her fingers pulling her cheeks; a defeated smile lingered for a moment until he jumped down from his perch, landing in a heap at the bottom.

She moved through the poles, the ruins, as the tide pulled out, leaving them all stranded, no water frothing around their bases, the barnacles closing to the thin night air. She didn't touch her face.

There was one more week left at the plant. She would return home with \$3,000 and a backpack full of muddy clothes that her mother would throw away. She would attend college in another town, she thought.

He had pretended to be hurt when she ran over to him, touching his back, her voice rising in panic. He'd grabbed her shoulders and burst out laughing, then jumped up and ran back along the beach, his feet slipping in and out of the sand like pistons, while she trudged as fast as she could, pushing herself to stay just behind him. When she'd stop to catch her breath he wouldn't wait, shouting over his shoulder at her, Come on! Come on!, laughing as he ran, his teeth catching the sun, all the light. He turned once to face her, opening his arms, his chest rising and falling with his breath. She stopped and looked at him, mud on her face, her lungs aching, her eyes red from the salty air. But he just turned away and bolted up the dirt hill to the walkway.

She'd felt lonely and missed her parents as coffee eased down her frozen throat. The cherub laughed deeply in the corner of the break room with two girls. When the boys invited them to spit in the freezer they'd said no. Their sweaters were tight and their hair stood atop their heads in shiny, cascading ponytails. She could smell the fish on her fingerless gloves as she held the cup tightly, blowing the steam with a gentle breath. This was the

twelfth hour on their shift and she'd decided that coffee was not a vice, but a medical necessity. When a woman on her crew offered her another cup she accepted with a grin.

She explored the deserted beach and circled around, winding her way back up to the base of the first piling, studying it as she approached. She wrapped her arms around it and pushed her thighs up and over the splintering, barnacle-encrusted wood, scooting slowly upwards, an inch at a time, the wind blowing against her back. She gripped the pole with her thighs, released her arms and hugged higher, extending her back, stretching her neck, and slid her thighs upwards again, hugging it like a bear. Splinters invaded her arms, sliding under the soft skin of her wrists, but her hands, callused from work, gripped the pole uninjured. Patiently she inched her body up the pole until she reached the top, where she pulled herself up and sat, feeling it sway underneath her.

Down the beach she saw the boats nearing the docks, circling like insects. She shimmed halfway down the pole and let herself drop with a wet smack.

In a space between the pilings a tidal pool had formed. The water was being absorbed into the sand. The pool grew shallow as she stood watching it. A salmon darted back and forth in panicked spurts in the shrinking puddle, silver flashes punctuating the near dark as she watched it struggle.

The water was cold as she ran her hands through it, trying to grab the big, slippery fish. It sloshed and wedged itself into the sand, but as she wrapped her fingers around, the thing shot off in the other direction. Her back was stiff from leaning over the puddle, so she waded in and crouched, feeling the icy water pouring into her boots. The pilings leaned like forgotten monuments, the wind whistling between them. They watched her chase the fish around the puddle. Its gills pulsed maniacally as she lunged for it and water splashed into her face.

Soon there was no more water where the puddle had been,

and the fish lay gasping on the sand. The last shards of sun had disappeared so that her white skin shone silver in the moonlight. She slid her hands under the fish. It struggled, slapping the wet sand with its tail, its fins rubbing against hands no longer so tender. She hugged the fish to her chest as she waddled out toward the edge of the water in wet pants and heavy boots. The silver scales glowed white in the light of the moon. She waded out a few feet, then dunked it gently into the surf. It hesitated between her hands for a moment and took off into the open water.

Around her the sea was black, lapping at the sand, pulling away from the land where the fish, stolen from the waters, were kept and killed. Down the beach the buildings of the fish plant were dark, featureless rectangles. In the big one, near the company store, the cherub used to sleep, shirtlessly answering the door, opening it just wide enough so she could see his friends inside, then shutting it on her, his smile still making promises. But he'd left a week ago. He paid for his own flight home, unable to finish out the season. He'd been embarrassed to say goodbye, but she'd watched from the stairway as he boarded the tiny plane, the mirth drained from his angelic lips and eyes, the tickets clutched shamefully in his right hand.

She turned and began running down the beach, back toward the fish plant, without stopping.