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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

poem, work, left, slow, edgar, speaker, disappears, seamus heaney, box cutter, poet, roots, grieves, honest day's work, clotted, workers rights, revere, wet rag, ode, chomp, tap water



00:06

I'm us Poet Laureate, Tracy k Smith. And this is a slow down.



00:24

If there were one single poem that made me want to become a poet, it would have to be digging by Irish Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney. He wrote it as a young man. It's the first poem in his first book, and it describes a moment of decision making. What the speaker seems to be wrestling with, is how to go about playing a part in the cause for Northern Ireland's independence from England. Should he become a revolutionary, willing to submit to violence if violence is what it takes? Or is there another path his conscience might allow him to follow? As he pondered this question, the speaker finds his mind shifting course. The poem becomes an ode to the land his father and grandfather had worked and to the lives rooted there, that the speaker realizes his his calling, unearthing his nation's history of work, life, family struggle and loss and writing it into permanence. America also has a history of work that is tied up in struggle, hope, and pride. One of the things this country cleaves to, and grieves for as it slowly disappears, is the idea of an honest day's work. I think of those brought here against their will, who survived forced labor, I think of hardscrabble stories of humble folk making do making a life I think of the fight for workers rights, and the myth of the self made man rising up from nothing. More recently, I think of jobs and livelihoods just up and disappearing, leaving a generation of American workers to start again, from next to nothing. There is much riding on work, like where we live, and what our loved ones have access to what we revere, and what we see when we look in the mirror, but how we work in this country. And what we're working for, are in the midst of great change, which is why I find this poem by New England poet Edgar Coons so

powerfully moving my father at 49. working the night shift at B and R diesel, by Edgar Koontz. There's no one left to see his hands, lifting from the engine bay, dark and gnarled his roots dripping river mud. No one to see how his palms slabs of callus from scouring the long throats of chimneys, hauling mortar and brick move in the fabricated light. Thumb knuckle thick and white as a grub or the box cutter bit split nail grown back scalloped and crooked the stitch puckered skin and when they fold into and out of themselves by the steaming faucet. When they stripped clean the tap water running black, then copper, then clear into the grease clotted drain. There's no one to witness the slap of a wet rag tossed in the break room sink or the chomp of gravel in the empty lot. How the stars dim as morning comes on how a semi downshifts on the overpass, and the shop windows rattle as it goes.



04:15

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