

David Hedges

Quality Control

Three weeks in quality control
at the Rogers Brothers Cannery in Athena,
where I separated peas by size,
redefined both *quality* and *control*.

Alone in the loft, I held sway
over every pea passing though on its way
from the fields of Umatilla County
to the dinner tables of America. I alone
made sure Ones, known in the trade
as petites, didn't mix with Fives and Sixes.

All went well until one fateful day
when all six troughs, like green rivers
in a freshet, jumped their banks. I buzzed
downstairs. My super's voice crackled:
See that big shovel, kid? Use it.
But how do I keep the sizes separate?
You don't, kid. Now get hopping!
Giddy and guilty, I scooped and dumped
and scraped and swept, then hosed down
the wood floor with superheated steam.
For weeks, months, years to come,
suckers would pry open cans of dandies
and discover bunches of lumpish brutes.

Back on top of the flow, I whirled
at a sudden *hisssssss*, caught the heavy
canvas hose uncoiling like a rattlesnake

before the ruptured valve, watched
superheated steam peel back my skin
in layers, white on white, while six rows
of sorters, sitting ducks, went right on
picking bugs, burrs, yellow peas
and weed seeds from green rubber belts,
oblivious to the high drama overhead.

The designated first aid practitioner
pried the padlock off the rusty medicine chest.
A frantic search turned up a crusty bottle
of calamine lotion. He shook it, poured it
on my forearm and waist, wrapped
gauze around, and rushed me to the doctor
down the street, who cussed a blue streak
for two solid hours while tweezing gauze,
dried calamine lotion, and dead skin.

The lessons are stamped in red letters:
Quality can be low as well as high.
Control is what you have until you don't.