

Air

by David Ackley

The vo-Tech was in an old factory building given a newer look when the College took it over, sand blasting the exterior bricks to a raw pink with blond wood railings and classrooms of white fiberboard, filling the space inside where the machines had once rolled, making whatever they had made, back when. In the halls, students came to the city from the towns around, printers and papermakers; stitchers, pattern cutters, and cripple workers who could make shoes whole again from the parts of those ruined in the making, all the clever trades that had been shipped to far-off places. Out of work, but tied to where they'd lived all their lives by family, towns where they'd grown up, the harsh beauty of the tumbledown of hill and cut, pine, bramble and bared incisors of granite, they waited in the college halls in their sweatshirts and jeans. Armed with stacked books, they "went back" to school to "get ahead," wondering who they'd be when they finished. Who they'd been all their lives, or some unforeseeable stranger who could make a living from all this?

Gary arrived early for his class, and leaned against the wall facing into the room, where the class before his sat quietly in rows at computers, silent, fingers working, intent on their screens. He was just learning about computers, getting better at it quickly and liking it in a way, the patterns and fit of it all. But watching the immobile faces, he glimpsed himself in a few years' time, sitting again in such a row at such a screen, in his short-sleeve shirt and tie, with his paunch and waddling walk. It hadn't the hardness, the resistance of real work. What they did there, punching letters and numbers into lines called "Code" was this buzzing activity with nothing coming out the other end. Words at most. He thought of the knotty trees, cut to logs and stacked and trucked down from the north woods, the machines that chipped and pulped them and turned them into paper, the hard men who made the machines do their will. What were words without the paper the men made? Just air.

