

The Triangle Factory Fire

March 25 1911

There are thousands whose fingers thread needles today
With long hours, bad conditions and not enough pay;
Young girls and young women, heads bent at machines
Sewing trousers and blouses and dresses and jeans;
Overworked, underpaid. But who cares? And who knows
Of the lives of the people who're sewing our clothes?

It was March 25, year of 1911
In the Triangle Factory in downtown Manhattan,
In the famous Asch building, floors ten, nine and eight
Where the seamstresses sewed clothes from early 'til late.
There were five hundred workers, some only thirteen,
In the immigrant workers' American dream.

The nightmare broke out in the late afternoon
When a fire in a scrap bin spread fast through the room.
The terrified workers jumped up and took flight
As from table to table the cloth caught alight.
In the smoke and the flames they were panicked and shocked
And they ran for the doors. But the doors were all locked.

Like prisoners! The workers were starting to choke
In the fumes and the flames and the heat and the smoke.
A girl ran to the firehose then started to shout
When she turned on the valve but no water came out.
Some women were screaming as flames licked their hair;
Others ran to the fire escape gasping for air.

The fire escape started to buckle and groan -
Then it broke from the wall and the people were thrown
Down into the street, splattered dead where they landed -
Whilst still up above them their colleagues were stranded -
To jump or to burn was their terrible choice
As they stared without help, without hope, without voice.

The firemen were quick, bold, courageous and tough
But they knew that their ladder was not long enough -
Women swayed at the windows with flames in their hair
And then like human torches they fell through the air -
The safety nets tore, bodies smashed in the street.
The paralyzed bystanders never forgot.

Sixty-two jumped or fell that day from the ninth floor
And the smoke and the flames swallowed up many more.
It was all so unnecessary - what was it for?
Why should sewing a shirt be as dangerous as war?
Next day in the paper the New Yorkers read
That one hundred and forty-six workers were dead.

Dead. Killed by neglect. Each young mother, wife, daughter.
By lack of extinguishers, hoses and water,
Inadequate fire escapes. By the locked doors
Which made workers prisoners on those three floors.
One hundred and forty-six families were wrecked
By men blinded by profit; inhuman neglect.

In 2011 it's not in Manhattan;
It's further away. Is it easier forgotten?
Disasters in clothes factories in Pakistan,
In China, in Bangladesh, in Vietnam.
People work dawn to dusk earning less than they need;
Desperate women and men with a family to feed.

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Annie Meharg, 2011