

rituals of spring
(for the 78th anniversary of the shirtwaistfactory fire)

Safiya Henderson-Holmes

from bareness to fullness flowers do bloom
whenever, however spring enters a room
oh, whenever, however spring enters a room

march 25th, 1911

at the triangle shirtwaist factory
a fire claimed the lives of 146 people, mostly women,
mostly children in the plume of their lives,
in the room of their lives
begging for spring, toiling and begging for spring

and in my head

as i read the history, afraid to touch the pictures
i imagine the room, i imagine the women
dressed in pale blues and pinks,
some without heads or arms –sitting
some without legs or waist –hovering
hundreds of flowering girls tucking spring into sleeves,
tucking and tugging at spring to stay alive

and so a shirtwaist for spring

a dress with a mannish collar, blousing over breast,
blousing over sweat, tapering to fit a female waist,
tapering to fit a female breath
sheer silk, cotton, linen
hand done pleats, hands done in by pleats
hands done in by darts and lace

colors of spring

pale blues, pale pinks, yellows, magentas, lavender, peach,

secret thoughts of spring

falling in love under a full moon, forever young
with money enough to buy a flower or two,
time enough to smell it
yes, from bareness to fullness a flower will bloom
anytime, everytime spring enters a room
and here, near these machines, hundreds of flowering girls

shirtwaist factory room 1911

crowded, hard, fast, too fast, closed windows,
locked doors, smell of piss, of sweat,
of wishes being cut to bits,
needle stabs, electric shocks, miscarriages of over silk,
fading paisley, fading magenta,
falling in love will get you fired, forever old,
never fast enough, buying flowers is wasteful
so hurry, hurry, grind your teeth and soul
six dollars a week send to grandfather,
four dollars a week send to aunt ruth, sleep over the
machine and you're done for, way before you open your
eyes ma'm, madam, miss, mrs. mother, girlie
hundreds of flowering green spring girls in rows
waiting with needs in hands for spring to show

women workers

from ireland, poland, germany, france,
england, grenada, mississippi
thin clothes, thinner hopes, months full of why,
of how, of when
answers always less than their pay
but the sewing machines grew like weeds,
thick snake roots strangling the flowers everyday
strangling the roses, daisies, lilies everyday
hundreds of blooming girls
hundreds of blooming, spring girls

the shirtwaist building 1911

135 feet high, wooden, cold, three floors,
not enough stairs,
one fire escape ending in mid-air,
ending in the spring mid-air
a tender room of hundreds of blooming bright girls
hundreds of daisy bud girls who pray for spring
to enter their world,
who pray and sweat for spring to enter their world

the strike the year before

and they shouted; open the doors,
unwire the windows, more air,
more stairs, more quiet time, more fire escapes
and to the ground damn you,
and more toilets, more time to be sick,
more time to be well,
and remove the fear and slow it down,
for god's sake, slow it all time, it's spring

they shouted

hundreds of flowering girls,
hundreds of flowering girls shouted
for spring to hurry, hurry and enter their world

and

triangle won a half day,
but the doors remained locked,
windows remained wired, no extra air,
no extra quiet time, or sick time, the fear stayed,
nothing slowed
and god watched hundreds of flowering girls twirl
hundreds of flowering girls willow and twirl

march 25th 1911 at triangle

a worker is expendable
a sewing needle is not
a worker is bendable
a sewing needle is not
a worker can be sent straight to hell
a sewing needle is heaven sent
and must be protected well
a sewing needle is the finger of god
and must be protected well
over hundreds of flowering girls,
hundreds of flowering sweet dandelion girls

march 25th, smoke

smoke, stopping the machines
run to wired windows, run to locked doors,
run to the one and only fire escape,
everyone run to the air
hundreds of flowering girls

smoke

stopping eyes, stopping hearts, stopping worlds
elevator move faster, elevator you are a machine
managed by a human being move faster, c'mon faster
carry all the flowering girls, carry all the sweet,
sweet orchid girls

fire

catching bouquets of girls in a corner, tall, long
stemmed lilies on fire in a corner,
from bloom to ashes in a corner, smell
them in the rain hundreds of tulip girls

on a window ledge

peels for life, on a window ledge lovely, ribboned young
ladies on their tiptoes twirling, twirling
an arabesque for life
hundreds of flowering girls
smell them in the rain
hundreds of jasmine girls

the ladders were too short

the hoses were too short
the men holding the nets were not gods, only men
who were never trained to catch falling bodies, or
falling stars, or hundreds of flowering girls, hundreds
of carnation bud girls

and the girls

were girls not angels jumping,
not goddesses flying or hovering
they smashed, they broke into
large pieces, smell them in the rain

and the sidewalks

opened in shame to meet the flowering girls
the sidewalks opened in such horrible shame to cradle
the remains of violets
and the gutters
bled for hours, choking on bones, shoes, buttons,
ribbons, holy sewing needles
the gutters bled for hours all the colors of spring
the cool magenta of delicate spring

and the fire ate

the locked doors and the wired windows,
ate the fast machines
in their narrow rooms, ate the lace and hand done pleats,
the silk, the cotton, the linen,
the crisp six dollars a week, the
eternal buzz of someone else's dreams
nightmares and screams of quiet girls,
loud skull cracking noises from shy girls
smell them in the rain, the lilacs, daffodils
in the rain

spring, 78 years later

triangle is now part of a university, with offices
and polished intellect, arched unwired windows,
hydraulically controlled and unlocked doors,
air conditioning, swivel chairs, marble walls and fire
alarms

but oh, hundreds of flowering girls still roam
hundreds of blushing spring girls still roam
78 years later in the paint, in the chrome
in the swivel of the chairs
hundreds of blossoms twirling in the air
daring to descend if ever, oh ever the fire comes again

yes, like lead they will drop
if ever, oh ever the fire comes again
to hundreds of flowering girls
smell them in the rain, iris, peonies, magnolias
bending for the rain