

Slaves to Fashion



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Poverty and Abuse in the New Sweatshops

Robert J. S. Ross



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Shirt

by Robert Pinsky

The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams,
The nearly invisible stitches along the collar
Turned in a sweatshop by Koreans or Malaysians

Gossiping over tea and noodles on their break
Or talking money or politics while one fitted
This armpiece with its overseam to the band

Of cuff I button at my wrist. The presser, the cutter,
The wringer, the mangle. The needle, the union,
The treadle, the bobbin. The code. The infamous blaze

At the Triangle Factory in nineteen-eleven.
One hundred and forty-six died in the flames
On the ninth floor, no hydrants, no fire escapes—

The witness in a building across the street
Who watched how a young man helped a girl to step
Up to the windowsill, then held her out

Away from the masonry wall and let her drop.
And then another. As if he were helping them up
To enter a streetcar, and not eternity.

A third before he dropped her put her arms
Around his neck and kissed him. Then he held
Her into space, and dropped her. Almost at once

He stepped up to the sill himself, his jacket flared
And fluttered up from his shirt as he came down,
Air filling up the legs of his gray trousers—

Like Hart Crane's Bedlamite, "shrill shirt ballooning."
Wonderful how the pattern matches perfectly
Across the placket and over the twin bar-tacked

Corners of both pockets, like a strict rhyme
Or a major chord. Prints, plaids, checks,
Houndstooth, Tattersall, Madras. The clan tartans

Invented by mill-owners inspired by the hoax of Ossian,
To control their savage Scottish workers, tamed
By a fabricated heraldry: MacGregor,

Bailey, MacMartin. The kilt, devised for workers
to wear among the dusty clattering looms.
Weavers, carders, spinners. The loader,

The docker, the navy. The planter, the picker, the sorter
Sweating at her machine in a litter of cotton
As slaves in calico headrags sweated in fields:

George Herbert, your descendant is a Black
Lady in South Carolina, her name is Irma
And she inspected my shirt. Its color and fit

And feel and its clean smell have satisfied
both her and me. We have culled its cost and quality
Down to the buttons of simulated bone,

The buttonholes, the sizing, the facing, the characters
Printed in black on neckband and tail. The shape,
The label, the labor, the color, the shade. The shirt.

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Acknowledgments

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The librarians are another matter. Mary Hartman, Ed McDermott, and Irene Walch of the Robert Goddard Library responded to every inquiry and tracked down each article or book—and did it with humor. Professors are often well served by librarians but have rare occasions to say so. This is mine. The small-town librarians in Southborough, Massachusetts, also have big hearts: to Judy Williams, Peggy Tuttle, Clare Curran-Ball, and Heidi Lindsey—hats off!

When I chose it during my first sabbatical, the topic of garment industry labor abuse arose from a series of speaking and conference engagements. This topic was the one that united heart and intellect. The heart part was an act of filial loyalty: my father, Irving Barrett, was a garment cutter, a member of Local 10 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and his father had been an early organizer of the union. After my father's death, my father-in-law, Ben Levenson, became a kind, wise,

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and loving father figure. It is to these two men who volunteered their care for me that I dedicate this book.

Numerous colleagues and informants ease the way of works like this. Those who I leave out will, I hope, forgive the protracted nature of the project. Prof. Altgracia Ortiz led me to her work and that of other Puerto Rican colleagues to help me in my first try at understanding the Puerto Rican role in New York's garment industry. Ellen McCormack, an undergraduate student at Clark and now a faculty member at Wellesley College, collaborated with me, as did Ellen Rosen, on our first sweatshop paper in 1995. Rich Appelbaum and Chris Chase-Dunn have given me opportunities to set my thoughts out in talks and on paper, as have Jim Russell, Richard Peet, Jerry Lembcke, Gary Gereffi, Arno Tausch, and Gernot Kohler.

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As I close this work, we come to the second year after the premature death of John O'Connor, organizer, environmentalist, former student, and philanthropist. Before it became a major public issue, John and his wife, Carolyn Mugar, understood the importance of the work I had begun on sweatshops in the apparel industry, and they helped me to get the research done. John was so happy about the work: he would playfully punch me on the arm and say, "Hey, we figured that one out, didn't we?" as news of the movement spread. Carolyn has my undying gratitude, and John's memory lives brightly in my heart.

It is well known that titles are more than titles. As the introduction to this book suggests, I lived with the title *Hearts Starve* for many years. Ellen McCarthy gently dissented, and Marion Ross did so more clearly. I thank them. When shove came to push I polled the troops and lost the vote. Then I picked up a voice mail message while white-water rafting in West Virginia: "Bob," said Suzanne Gordon, "Steve [Early] and I have been talking, and the title is *Slaves to Fashion*." She was right, and she wins my gratitude for caring and also a copy of the book.

There is a long line of women toilers behind this book. My father's mother, Molly, was the last sewing machine operator in our family; my mother, Marsha, taught small children how to read in school and taught her own children to stand up for themselves; her mother, Irene, took her own name, worked her whole life, and had a terrific sense of humor. My sister, Linda, has prevailed and has also brought me a lot of fun software. It is probable that somewhere in every family of American Jews there is someone whose life was touched by the rag trade. The era of sweatshops and immigration at the turn of the twentieth century is part of the lore of many other immigrant groups as well. It is a sadness that new groups of immigrant women—fighting for their families and struggling in their new lives—face conditions that have advanced so little since those days. They are our metaphorical grandparents, these strong women, and they deserve a whole world more than they get.