

Cotton Dust

In the voice of a young woman working
in a southern cotton mill, 1911.

We are not slaves, but we are
dust. When I came to the mill,
I was ten. I joined others like me.
When visitors came, the foreman
said we were just bringing our parents
their lunch.

At first I imagined the threads
on the loom becoming
sheets and curtains, shirts
and dresses in a city I might
one day see. I sang to the thump
of shuttles until the sound

drowned my voice. We are
not slaves, yet we are dust.
Church says so. When the workers
can't breathe, the doctor whispers
"cotton dust." But not to the ones
in charge. Church says

we're dust, but the young man
from the North, who spoke of unions,
said we were sky stuff too. Warm nights
he showed me stars that fell. We lay
down to count the others. He said
so much, then left, not knowing

he would have a daughter. He
wrote once, to say all workers
would rise up. But if I daydream
a better future at the mill, I'll lose
fingers. So I dream nights—*dark is mine*—
next to our sleeping child.

In the letter my fingers have worn soft,
he wrote that he saw too many tired
and hungry faces. I see him
in the small face we made.
He opened my eyes,
but our daughter has his.

We heard about the girls
in the Shirtwaist Factory fire.
No worker here dared speak
of it. How they were locked in,
their choice—to burn or jump.
From nine floors up

they jumped. Sidewalks
were lined with bodies. Only
then were there marches.
They jumped so far down
that others rose up. But how
can I protest when this child
needs food? I'm bound here.

Yet the girls who jumped
keep falling through my dreams,
skirts blooming. In the air
did their eyes open wider
or did they close them, those girls
who surprised the air?
Tell me if—for a moment—
they flew.

Veronica Patterson