

Randall Shinn

Cotton Dust

for Soprano and Piano

Poem by Veronica Patterson



Lewis W. Hine: Adolescent Girl, a Spinner, in a Carolina Cotton Mill, 1908
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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

Cotton Dust

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

VERONICA PATTERSON

RANDALL SHINN

Largo ♩ = 44 *mp* **Più mosso** ♩ = 52

Soprano

We are not slaves, but we are dust. When I

Largo ♩ = 44 *p* **Più mosso** ♩ = 52

Piano

9

S. came to the mill, I was ten. I joined oth-ers like me. When vis-i-tors came, the

15

S. fore man said we were just bring-ing our par-ents their lunch. **poco accel.**

19 **Adagio** ♩ = 66

S. *f* *mf* *mp*

At first I i - mag ined I i - mag ined the threads on the loom be - com ing

24

S. sheets and cur - tains, shirts and

27 *rit.*

S. dress - es in a cit - y I might some - day

rit.

30 **Meno mosso** ♩ = 56

S. *mf*

sec. I sang to the thump of

Meno mosso ♩ = 56

p

35 *rall.*

S. shut - tles un - til the sound drowned my voice. *f*

mf *f* *rall.*

39 *Lento* ♩ = 48 *mp*

S. We are not slaves, yet we are dust. Church says so.

Lento ♩ = 48

ff *mf* *p*

48 *p* *mp*

S. Church says so. When the work-ers can't breathe, the

pp *p* 3 3 3

53 *mf*

S. doc - tor whis-pers "cot - ton dust." "cot - ton dust." But not to the ones in

3 *pp* 3 *p* 3 3

Più mosso ♩ = 56

57

S. charge. Church says we're dust,

p

Più mosso ♩ = 56

pp

p

Red.

62

S. but the young man from the North, who spoke of

mf

mp

mf

66

S. un - ions, said we were sky stuff too.

mp

mf

mp

mf

70

S. Warm nights he showed me

poco rit.

poco rit.

73 **A tempo** ♩ = 56 **f** **poco rit.**

S. stars that fell.

A tempo ♩ = 56 **f** **poco rit.**

mf

76 **Poco meno mosso** ♩ = 52 **mf**

S. We lay down to count the oth - ers.

Poco meno mosso ♩ = 52 **mp**

80 **mp** **molto rit.** **mp**

S. He said so much, then left not

molto rit. **p** **mf**

85 **Lento** ♩ = 48 **Poco più mosso** ♩ = 52

S. know ing he would have a daugh-ter. He wrote once, to

Lento ♩ = 48 **Poco più mosso** ♩ = 52

p **pp**

90 *mf*

S. say all work-ers would rise__ up. But if I__ day-dream

95 *mp*

S. day-dream a bet - ter fu - ture__ at the mill, I'll lose fin - gers.

99 **Larghetto** ♩ = 56 *mf* *f*

S. So I dream nights— dark__

103 *rit.* **Meno mosso** ♩ = 48 *p*

S. is mine— next to our sleep-ing__ child.