

DOMINION COTTON (KINGSTON), 1915

She sleeps on a calico daybed in the parlour,  
Dresses before dawn, walks quickly toward the river,  
Her footprints black against November snow,  
Converging with hundreds of others at the mill,  
The red brick textile factory before dawn,  
She's got to beat the clock or the foreman locks her out.

Big rows of pillars, thick plank floors,  
Regiments of windows to sweep the daylight in,  
The new electric lighting for safety against fire,  
She weaves towards her place in the labyrinth of machines,  
Past iron gears and rollers, past belt drives and looms;  
Mind your fingers and keep your hair covered at all times.

To save their shoes some girls work barefoot on the floor,  
But even through shoe leather, she feels the engines' turning  
In a register like a church organ growling against her skin,  
Or a freight train hurtling past, or a vibrating bell;  
The lint in her lungs feels like someone sawing wood;  
At shift's end the girls will share a laugh about their deafness.

The mill and most workers reside north of Princess,  
The spired stone cathedrals abide to the south,  
Along the river, the railways deliver bales of cotton  
To be carded, spun and woven into cloth for choir robes,

And other grades of fabric to be shipped a world away;  
But weaver girls must ask permission to use the loo.

A sixty hour work week, soon she'll be sixteen,  
She handles reed dents, drop wires and heddle eyes,  
Can draw in, piece up, clean and doff the bobbins,  
Whistle up the set-up man, the mechanic, the loom-fixer;  
But she'll never make a man's wages, no matter how long she stays.  
Enough of school her mother said; it's time to earn your way.

The streets were dark as a coal bin when she finished up,  
Walking, she longed for supper, some soup and some bread,  
A pat of butter, and then to rest her head upon the pillow,  
But her drowsy ears in shadows overheard her brother talking  
About leaving home, volunteering soon as he's old enough  
To ship out overseas and join the Great War in France.