



From The Same Cloth

for the mill girls, Lowell, Massachusetts, circa 1840

Helena Minton

The city fathers dreamed these girls
 the way they dreamed the town:
 to scale, pale colors on a map, dolls
 bending at looms by day, reading
 the classics by night. Now I imagine them
 as they rise to bells, break ice
 in washing bowls, file at dawn
 to the mills, their breath pouring before them.

All day they stand, each girl
 at a different task: to guide raw
 cotton through the spindle, blend dye
 for yellow calico, count each bolt
 for dish towels, sheets, their future husbands'
 shirts, their own petticoats.
 They hear machines roar the way the river
 roars, breast wheels turning.

Do they whisper sonnets to themselves
 or think of Cleopatra on the Nile,
 clay banks where men lie sleeping?
 Do they dream of being loved like that?

Each time a girl writes home, part of her
 follows the letter across the border
 to New Hampshire, growing damp
 as it passes the sea, then safe,
 unfolded by her mother's hands.

When she places her cheek on cold cotton
 she sees the years ahead
 like yards of undyed linen,
 and yearns to watch a warehouse full
 of dimity catch fire.
 She wants to walk past the row
 of beds, down to the river's most
 seductive bend, to lie on the grass,
 wet blades staining her nightgown,
 feeling the hush, the sound
 of nothing being made.

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