

Poems

Shirt

By Robert Pinsky

Listen
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 navvy. 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.

The Termite Confessions
By Max Garland

It wasn't the worst job I'd had, wasn't
sweeping parking lots or sponging toilets,
wasn't digging graves in packed clay.
But it was crawling in the dark
beneath houses, through generations
of cobwebs, cast-off snake skins,
brick shards, with my flashlight
and termite hammer, tapping for rot,
for the crumble of wood that meant
they were there, legions of them—
insatiable nymphs, blind white workers;
while above me the house sagged,
the duct-work flexed, the worried owner
scraped a kitchen chair across linoleum
as I inched my way along, belly-up
in the realm of the tiny beasts
tunneling themselves into the galleries
of the floorboards, mining the wood
for cellulose, sucking it out like honey
until even the oak grew papery,
dry as puffball,

and eventually drew the house down,
though it could take a century or two.
Time is on the side of appetite,
I found myself deciding; and maybe
it was the damp, the must, the mold,
the torn scarves of spiderwebs I wore,
but I felt in strange cahoots,
noticed a pull as I crawled
under the nail heads and grouted pipes.
Sometimes even switched off the light
and just lay beneath a riddled beam
and felt myself crossing over,
the way secret agents must feel
in the arms of their informants,
or even the best executioners
eventually come to feel—that shift
in perspective, allegiance,
as if some small dark love
were gnawing its way inside,
and the last thing I wanted
was light.

The Postal Confessions

By Max Garland

The sorting machine whirs like the blades of a fan.
You could fall asleep if it weren't for the money,
if it weren't for the fact that the work
is already much deeper than sleep,
and what could you fall into lower than life
you never intended, yet inhabit
like the rumble in the conveyor's constant moan.
The strange thing is, hardly anyone writes anymore,
yet the tonnage builds and builds. Hardly anyone
spills even a grain of his life in a letter,
yet the machines whir and jam, the bundles
threaten to topple, the mail cases bulge
with billing and the inky brightness of sales pitch.
You could fall asleep if it weren't for the third cup
of vending machine coffee, which resembles in color,
texture, and taste, the silted waters of the Ohio in spring,
which is why they built the town in the first place,
to drink the waters of the river, to burden
the long twisted back of the river with barges
and bridges, to sit in the slump of afternoon
watching the sun float down from white to yellow
to red to maroon, the last few gulls raking the far
shore, as if even the shadows were richer there.

Axe Handles

By Gary Snyder

One afternoon the last week in
April
Showing Kai how to throw a
hatchet
One-half turn and it sticks in a
stump.
He recalls the hatchet-head
Without a handle, in the shop
And go gets it, and wants it for his
own.
A broken-off axe handle behind
the door
Is long enough for a hatchet,
We cut it to length and take it
With the hatchet head
And working hatchet, to the wood
block.
There I begin to shape the old
handle
With the hatchet, and the phrase
First learned from Ezra Pound
Rings in my ears!
"When making an axe handle
the pattern is not far off."
And I say this to Kai
"Look: We'll shape the handle
By checking the handle
Of the axe we cut with-"
And he sees. And I hear it again:

It's in Lu Ji's Wen Fu, fourth
century
A.D. "Essay on Literature"-in the
Preface: "In making the handle Of
an axe
By cutting wood with an axe
The model is indeed near at hand.-
My teacher Shih-hsiang Chen
Translated that and taught it
years ago
And I see: Pound was an axe,

Chen was an axe, I am an axe
And my son a handle, soon
To be shaping again, model
And tool, craft of culture,
How we go on.

Hay for Horses

By Gary Snyder

He had driven half the night
From far down San Joaquin
Through Mariposa, up the
Dangerous mountain roads,
And pulled in at eight a.m.
With his big truckload of hay
behind the barn.
With winch and ropes and hooks
We stacked the bales up clean
To splintery redwood rafters
High in the dark, flecks of alfalfa
Whirling through shingle-cracks
of light,
Itch of haydust in the
sweaty shirt and shoes.
At lunchtime under Black oak
Out in the hot corral,
- The old mare nosing lunchpails,
Grasshoppers crackling in the
weeds -
"I'm sixty-eight" he said,
"I first bucked hay when I was
seventeen.
I thought, that day I started,
I sure would hate to do this all my
life.
And dammit, that's just what
I've gone and done."

I Stop Writing the Poem

to fold the clothes. No matter who lives
or who dies, I'm still a woman.
I'll always have plenty to do.
I bring the arms of his shirt
together. Nothing can stop
our tenderness. I'll get back
to the poem. I'll get back to being
a woman. But for now
there's a shirt, a giant shirt
in my hands, and somewhere a small girl
standing next to her mother
watching to see how it's done.

by Tess Gallagher

Elevator Man, 1949

by Rita Dove

Not a cage but an organ:
if he thought about it, he'd go insane.
Yes, if he thought about it
philosophically,
he was a bubble of bad air
in a closed system.

He sleeps on his feet
until the bosses enter from the paths
of Research and Administration-
the same white classmates
he had helped through Organic Chemistry.

A year ago they got him a transfer
from assembly line to Corporate Headquarters,
a "kindness" he repaid

by letting out all the stops,
jostling them up and down
the scale of his bitterness
until they emerge, queasy, rubbing
the backs of their necks,
feeling absolved and somehow
in need of a drink. The secret

he thinks to himself, is not
in the pipe but
the slender breath of the piper.

You Can Have It

by Philip Levine

My brother comes home from work
and climbs the stairs to our room.
I can hear the bed groan and his shoes drop
one by one. You can have it, he says.

The moonlight streams in the window
and his unshaven face is whitened
like the face of the moon. He will sleep
long after noon and waken to find me gone.

Thirty years will pass before I remember
that moment when suddenly I knew each man
has one brother who dies when he sleeps
and sleeps when he rises to face this life,

and that together they are only one man
sharing a heart that always labors, hands
yellowed and cracked, a mouth that gasps
for breath and asks, Am I gonna make it?

All night at the ice plant he had fed
the chute its silvery blocks, and then I
stacked cases of orange soda for the children
of Kentucky, one gray boxcar at a time

with always two more waiting. We were twenty
for such a short time and always in
the wrong clothes, crusted with dirt
and sweat. I think now we were never twenty.

In 1948 the city of Detroit, founded
by de la Mothe Cadillac for the distant purposes
of Henry Ford, no one wakened or died,
no one walked the streets or stoked a furnace,

for there was no such year, and now
that year has fallen off all the old newspapers,
calenders, doctors' appointments, bonds
wedding certificates, drivers licenses.

The city slept. The snow turned to ice.
The ice to standing pools or rivers

racing in the gutters. Then the bright grass rose
between the thousands of cracked squares,

and that grass died. I give you back 1948.
I give you all the years from then
to the coming one. Give me back the moon
with its frail light falling across a face.

Give me back my young brother, hard
and furious, with wide shoulders and a curse
for God and burning eyes that look upon
all creation and say, You can have it.

The Man Who Makes Brooms

By Naomi Shihab Nye

So you come with these maps in your head
and I come with voices chiding me to
“Speak for my people”
and we march around like guardians of memory
till we find the man on the short stool
who makes brooms.

Thumb over thumb, straw over straw,
he will not look at us.
In his stony corner there is barely room
For baskets and thread,
much less the weight of our faces
staring at him from the street.
What he has lost or not lost is his secret.

You say he is like all the men,
The man who sells pistachios,
The man who rolls the rugs.
Older now, you find holiness in anything
that continues, dream after dream.
I say he is like nobody,
the pink seam he weaves
across the flat golden face of this broom
is its own shrine, and forget about the tears.

In the village the uncles will raise their *kefiyahs*
from dominoes to say, no brooms in America?
And the girls who stop to sweep the courtyard
will stop for moment and cock their heads.
It is a little song, this thumb over thumb,
But sometimes when you wait years
for the air to break open
and sense to fall out,
it may be the only one.

Jerusalem

In a Classroom

By Adrienne Rich

Talking of poetry, hauling the books
arm-full to the table where the heads
bend or gaze upward, listening, reading aloud,
talking of consonants, elision,
caught in the how, oblivious of why:
I look in your face, Jude,
neither frowning nor nodding,
opaque in the slant of dust-motes over the table:
a presence like a stone, if a stone were thinking
What I cannot say, is me. For that I came.

On Firing a Salesman

By James Autry

It's like a little murder,
taking is life,
his reason for getting on the train,
his lunches at Christ Cella,
and his meetings in warm and sunny places
where they all gather,
these smiling men,
in sherbet slacks and blue blazers,
and talk about business
but never about prices,
never breaking that law
about the prices they charge.

But what about the prices they pay?
What about the gray evenings in the bar car
and smoke-filled clothes and hair
and children already asleep
and wives who say
"You stink"
when they come to bed?
What about the promotions they don't get,
the good accounts they lose
to some kid MBA
because somebody thinks their energy is gone?

What about those times they see in a mirror
or the corner of their eye
some guy at the club shake his head
when they walk through the locker room
the way they shook their heads years ago
at an old duffer
whose handicap had grown along with his age?

And what about this morning,
the summons,
the closed door,
and somebody shaved and barbered and shined
fifteen years their junior
trying to put on a sad face
and saying he understands?

A murder with no funeral,
nothing but those quick steps outside the door,
those set jaws,
those confident smiles,
that young disregard for even the thought
of a salesman's mortality.