

PIECE WORK

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The knot of women,
heat-shrivelled,
hunch over their machines
— piece work puppets
manipulating bits
of fabric, the whir
and hum of technology
stinging the air
like a giant wasp.

Steam iron in hand,
the girl from Barbados,
soaked in sweat,
dreams of the sea.
The hissing iron distorts
her crested vision
with a vaporous
river of sound.

Dialects in Greek,
Portuguese and Italian
are savory fruits
in the sweltering
factory heat.
Conversation rises
like yeast
in the industrious
oven of humanity.

Pockets, collars, sleeves,
in rainbow streams,
flow from each
punctuating needle.
Buffeting
buttonhole machines
bite sharply
into polyester tissue.
Precision speaks
with geologic force.

The factory is canopied with
plastic-swathed garments,
candy-cane copies
of haute-couture originals,
Operators, cutters,
pressers, shippers
scurry across
the room, hunch-backed,
ducking under 4 foot high
metal pipes
supporting parades
of dresses and slack suits,
labelled, tagged,
inspected,
ready to be shipped.

In the show room,
air-conditioners
articulate
a comforting chill.
Buyers
finger the goods,
and eye the models.
The designer
is all smiles.
The boss has
order forms
at the ready.
The season looks
promising.

In the factory,
the odor of sweat
mingles with the smell
of steaming garments
and dry-cleaning fluid,
but the women
are lucky to be working,
and live in fear
of seasonal
lay-offs.

The needle trade
marches on,
populated by
its human machines.
Immigrant women,
shapeless
in sleeveless smocks,
are mechanical tools,
over-exposed film

hemming, pressing, basting,
threading, cutting, stitching.

The fashion tread-mill
goes round and round
on the laws of
supply and demand.

Production
is an adrenalin flow,
a cover-up for
yesterday's copout,
today's emptiness,
the lost look of tomorrow.

Piece work is the
name of the game.

Pieces of soul.

Pieces of bone.

Pieces of sinew.

Pieces of gut.

Pieces of pride.

Pieces of pain.

Pieces of flesh.

Pieces of people.

Pieces of profit . . .

PIECE WORK.