SMALL CHANGE—
The Poet in the World: Poems to Handmade Things

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Introduction

If You Had to

If you had to make the quill pen in the old way, stripping the feathers, cutting the well, splitting & shearing the tip

off clean; if you had to grind the ink, holding the cake straight against the stone, circling until your wrist ached

to get the proper tone of black;
would you wonder, as you sat before the paper
what sort of poem was worthy of your labor?

—Samuel Green, The Grace of Necessity

Samuel Green’s “If You Had to” asks poets to consider what if we had only feathers to shape our pens and cakes of charcoal to grind against a stone to make ink? What sort of poem is worthy of so much work? Taking his metaphor even further, I wonder does the value of a poem diminish in a world spinning farther and farther from the labor of human hands.

My critical paper begins with a personal essay, “Small Change,” that recounts my experience as a teacher in the 1970’s preparing students each Halloween to trick-or-treat for UNICEF. Using the trope of “small change,” collecting coins to help those less fortunate, I bring the reader to my present day volunteer work at the Fabric of Life fair trade boutique, where every handmade item makes a difference in sustaining the life of the person who crafted it.
My paper draws from the essays of Denise Levertov and Wendell Berry who take a stance for the responsibility of poets to engage their art in the world. From these arguments, combined with my love of handmade things, my paper focuses on the work of seven poets who have written poems to handmade things and the makers.

I explore how the vocabulary and metaphor inherent in handmade things not only tells us about the maker, but of his/her place in history. I show how when a poet chooses to feature a handmade thing, the world becomes tangible, and the reader is transported into the present making of a thing, and/or to past injustices, and by default, what is looming in our future. These are the sort of poems worthy of (our) labor.
Small Change

It’s been over thirty years since I kept a bowl of coins by the door to add to a trick-or-treater’s collection box, the small orange and black house-shaped container that gathered donations for United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF). This year not one of the children who knocked on my door shouted, “Trick-or-treat for UNICEF!”

It made me wonder what happened to this child-driven fundraising enterprise. As a post-World War II baby boomer, I grew up with UNICEF, and as a teacher in the 1970s I utilized the UNICEF curriculum to introduce my students to an ever-shrinking world in need. I taught them how, by collecting coins during Halloween, we could help those less fortunate.

UNICEF provided teachers with educational materials that outlined how the funds were spent: the cost of feeding one child per day; the price of powdered milk for a family; the price of paper and pencils for one child at a village school; the cost to build a village water purification system. After Halloween night, my students brought their coin-filled containers back to school and we tallied the totals. As a critical thinking problem, I asked each student to decide how s/he would spend the total amount, and why. I hoped this assignment would illustrate more clearly the collective value of our coins for the world, how what Americans call “spare change” can be transformative in the right hands.

Wondering what happened to those UNICEF boxes, I called my school district office and asked if they knew why kids weren’t fundraising for UNICEF at Halloween. They connected me to my neighborhood elementary school, which celebrates a “Harvest
Festival” on the Friday before Halloween, when children wear costumes and play games—the school doesn’t celebrate “Halloween” per se. The school secretary claimed she has trick-or-treaters collecting coins for UNICEF in her neighborhood, but she lives near a different school, and each school’s Association for the Student Body decides which fundraising projects they’ll do.

I returned to UNICEF’s website and found numerous ways for children to help those less fortunate, with age-appropriate downloadable materials for classroom use. For instance there were examples of ways to raise money by donating a quarter to guess the number of candy corn kernels in a jar, or holding UNICEF parties where money would be donated at the event. The website encourages visitors to donate online to specific worldwide emergencies, or to pledge monthly. Donations can be sent by text, Twitter and Facebook to UNICEF. Despite the disappearance of trick-or-treaters collecting coins for UNICEF in my neighborhood, UNICEF continues to raise millions of dollars in less door-to-door ways.

Not until I began to volunteer at the Fabric of Life store in Edmonds, Washington, did I become aware of two models of social intervention—the paternalistic and the agentive. For example, much of what UNICEF provides is emergency outreach, which is a paternalistic approach that focuses on helping those in need right now. As in the adage “give a person a fish, s/he eats for a day—teach a person to fish, s/he eats for a lifetime,” the agentive approach teaches people to fish. This approach takes more time and money at the start of the intervention but by the end is self-sustaining. The agentive approach perceives the recipients of its intervention as competent, resilient, autonomous, and
deserving of rights. People are seen as participants who can make informed decisions. They’re not victims.

In 2002, while at a market in Bamako, Mali, Carol Schillios was approached by a ragged girl, hands open, begging for coins. Schillios wanted to give to the girl, but her Malian friend advised her not to, saying coins are never enough to change the cycle of extreme poverty that this child and many others are born into. Schillios asked questions: What can I do to change these girls’ lives? What if I could build a training center to transform girls and young women who beg into healthy, well-fed, income-producing citizens? Employing her background in microfinance and her African business partner in Mali, Schillios set out to do just that. With her tax return of $1200, she leased a building outside of Bamako and opened the Héré jé (Happiness Group) Training Center in 2005.

The Fabric of Life Foundation supports three primary activities at Héré jé: providing micro-credit programs for micro-entrepreneurs, increasing access to education, and increasing access to affordable health care. The Fabric of Life store sells fair trade products from around the world, but exists primarily to sell products such as traditional hand-dyed batiks, purses made from those batiks, one-of-a-kind beaded jewelry, and spirit dolls made by the girls at Héré jé.

Because I believe in the work of the Fabric of Life Foundation and have more time than money, I volunteer one shift per week at the store: talking to customers, making sales, processing inventory, changing window displays, and occasionally purchasing items for myself and friends. According to the Fabric of Life Foundation brochure:

Each girl gets a stipend of $20.00 a week while in the program. This allows her to quit begging and focus on self-development without having
to worry about food. Because some students have no shelter, they also need funds to pay for access to water. The Center is 20 minutes from the city of Bamako, Mali and most students travel an hour to and from the center daily, taking two buses mornings and evenings. Students pay for breakfast and lunch at the center, where they learn healthy eating habits. With weekly savings, students practice budgeting, learn money management skills and the value of preparing for the future. Once they graduate they become full-time members of the Héré jé Producers Cooperative, creating products of their choice. Some graduates become trainers at the center to help other young women.

The same brochure itemizes how this stipend is spent: 6 days’ bus transport, $6.00; 6 days’ food, ($1.50 /day) $9.00; weekly expenses (bathing, shelter, clothing), $1.00; food for family, $3.00; and savings, $1.00. As I read and reread these numbers, I remember UNICEF educating its patrons about the power of small amounts of money in developing countries. UNICEF focuses on the needs affecting millions of children around the world; the Héré jé Training Center focuses on the training of twelve girls for eighteen months. Rather than offering the girls a residential dorm (which would be a paternalistic strategy), Héré jé Training Center provides each girl with a $20.00 stipend per week to support her time in the program as she learns how to make traditional Malian crafts, how to budget and how to sustain herself with the money she earns.

One of the items that the girls at Héré jé make is spirit dolls, approximately four to five inches high, built from wire and colorful ceramic and wooden beads. Each doll is as unique as the girl who made it—these sell for $8.00 at the store. Some of the spirit
dolls carry a baby wrapped tightly with a band of fabric around the mother’s back (as Malian mothers do to keep their hands free while working) and cost $15.00. Schillios explains that it wasn’t until the young women began to have babies that babies appeared on the dolls.

Héré jé purses are created from the traditional Malian batiks made at the center. Tucked inside a pocket of each purse, is a slip of paper with the handwritten name of the girl who made the purse. When girls run out of paper, they use paper tabs from used-up tea bags—nothing is wasted. Their names roll off the tongue: Fatoumata Kone, Assa Coulibaly. Schillios explains that it was at Héré jé that many of the girls learned how to write their names.

By the cash register at the store is a group photo of the first graduating class of ten girls and young women, smiling and clustered around their benefactor, Carol Schillios. All wear orange and white batiked, floor-length dresses with matching head scarves made from the cloth they’ve stamped with hot wax, dyed in vats, and sewed on Héré jé treadle sewing machines. Schillios explains how this graduating class decided to wear the same fabric, made by their hands, to show their sisterhood, their tribe unto themselves.

In a world of debit cards, credit cards, and loadable bus fare passes, one rarely needs to carry cash let alone change. Still, I carry coins in my wallet and keep a bowl of small change under the telephone in the kitchen, ready to receive pennies found on the floor and coins from the bottom of my purse. I ponder how slowly change happens in an ever shrinking world. I think about the word “change” and its multiple meanings. I imagine young women and girls at Héré jé busily learning new skills to create a future—a concept that had no meaning for them until now.
Because I value handmade things and poetry, I volunteer at the Fabric of Life store. Because I write poems that honor handmade things, I have begun to write poems that speak on behalf of the girls and young women who batik the fabrics, sew purses and bags, and create beaded necklaces and spirit dolls; I believe in the power of small things. When I get overwhelmed by this troubled world and its multiple layers of inequities, I go to my desk and take the sprit doll I bought a year ago and place it in my palm. I feel its light weight and trust in its heavy potential to bring happiness—one small purchase at a time.

The Poet in the World

Denise Levertov and Wendell Berry have written extensively about the responsibility of poets to engage their art in the world. They assert that it’s vital for writers to understand how their words can make a difference in the lives of individuals and communities and in the health of the planet. They charge poets to engage their words as active participants in the world rather than as passive observers. They ask poets to acknowledge that their work with words can have life-changing moral and ethical effects.

Denise Levertov, in her essay “The Poet in the World,” in *New and Selected Essays*, sees the poet in many manifestations: as a mother in labor, as a father, as an infant born blind. The poet develops senses, suffers, grows, and soon learns what is required to live responsibly in the world. Levertov paraphrases one of Rilke’s letters this way: “. . . though the work of art does not aim at effect but is a thing imbued with life, that lives that life for its own sake, it nevertheless has effect; and that that effect is ultimately moral” (135). Levertov extends this further by saying, “The obligation of the
writer is to take personal and active responsibility for his/her words, whatever they are, and to acknowledge their potential influence on the lives of others” (135-36). Levertov argues that poetry is not merely a matter of craft or one of aesthetics:

What is in question is the role of the poet as observer or as participant in the life of his time. And if history is invoked to prove that more poets have stood aside, have watched or ignored the events of the moment in history, than have spent time and energy in bodily participation in those events, I must answer that a sense of history must involve a sense of the present, a vivid awareness of change, a response to crisis, a realization that what was appropriate in this or that situation in the past is inadequate to the demands of the present, that we are living our whole lives in a state of emergency which is—for reasons I’m sure I don’t have to spell out for you. . . unparalleled in history. (137)

Levertov’s legacy includes political poetry, matched with activism both against war and for peace. For example, in her book *Making Peace*, the title poem begins with these two stanzas:

A voice from the dark called out,  
‘The poets must give us  
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar  
imagination of disaster. Peace, not only  
the absence of war.’

But peace, like a poem,  
is not there ahead of itself,  
can’t be imagined before it is made,  
can’t be known except  
in the words of its making,  
grammar of justice,  
syntax of mutual aid. (58)
She addresses these issues in her essay “Poetry, Prophecy, Survival,” in which she states that it is necessary to balance the poetry of joy, proclamation, and affirmation with the poetry of anguish, anger, and rage. Levertov reasons that “a passionate love of life must be quickened if we are to find the energy to stop the accelerating tumble (like a fallen man rolling over and over down a mountain) towards annihilation. To sing awe—to breathe out praise and celebration—is as fundamental an impulse as to lament” (*New and Selected Essays* 144).

Levertov looks to the Old Testament for help in defining poetry and prophecy and finds four types of prophetic utterance—Threat, Promise, Reproach, and Admonition. She clarifies, “Promise and admonition would include . . . both the ecstatic vision of a desirable future and the less reproachful, more pleading voice that urges the people toward virtue. Above all,” Levertov adds “the prophets provide words of witness” (147). She continues “Threat often takes the form of imprecation and bitter satire if directed toward a power structure, or if directed toward a people, of warning—while reproach also takes the form of lament (in fact lamentation is an additional prophetic mode of utterance). So it can be said that poets often share the prophets’ stance in these ways, although not all poets are prophets, and probably no poets, as poets, have occult knowledge of future events” (148).

Levertov concludes that “prophetic utterance, like poetic utterance transforms experience and moves the receiver to new attitudes. Poetry and the other arts (have) a potential for contributing to social change…by stimulating the imagination and thus making empathy and compassion more possible…” (149).
In Levertov’s essay, “Poetry and Peace: Some Broader Dimensions, she asserts that at this time in history “we are just entering the poetry of preparation for peace, a poetry of protest, of lament, of praise for the living earth; a poetry that demands justice, renounces violence, reveres mystery” (New and Selected Essays 170). She ends her essay with a prayer from the Hako, “Invoking the Powers” (Pawnee, Osage, Omaha tradition).—I share its last stanza:

. . . Remember, remember the sacredness of things
running streams and dwellings
the young within the nest
a hearth for sacred fire
the holy flame of fire (171)

What obligation do I have as a writer? I look for ways to use my work with words to focus on what humans have in common—hoping, like Levertov, to engage in the preparation for peace in the world, one that demands justice, renounces violence, and reveres mystery. And because of my history of working with children, and my love of handmade things, I find myself drawn to writing poems that celebrate handmade goods and the universal truths and lessons of those who make them.

Of Levertov’s four prophetic utterances from the Old Testament, I think the one that speaks best through handmade things is the poetry of promise. If one doesn’t believe in a future, it’s hard to imagine the making of a thing. Its very existence acknowledges a maker, along with his/her sustenance and connection to others by the sale of the item. In the best of circumstances, the maker/artisan and the thing being made are in harmony. Levertov’s small and mysterious poem, “The Stonecarver’s Poem” from O Taste and See, alludes to this promise:
Hand of man
hewed from
the mottled rock

almost touching
as Adam the hand of God

smallest inviolate
stone violet (58)

Wendell Berry addresses many of the same issues as Levertov in his collection of essays, *Standing by Words*. In the first essay, “The Specialization of Poetry,” Berry cautions against poetry becoming its own form of exclusive cultivation, by which the poet cuts himself or herself off from the world:

…the specialization of poetry is exactly analogous to the specialization of religion. Putting exclusive emphasis upon a world of words has the same result as putting exclusive emphasis upon heaven; it leads to, and allows, and abets the degradation of the world. . . Renunciation of the world may sustain religious or poetic fervor for a while, but sooner or later it becomes suicidal. (9)

Berry quotes Levertov calling these kinds of language-only poems “poems which tell of things said or done, but . . . do not impart a sense of the experiencing of seeing or doing, or of the value of such experience” (16). Berry speaks to the widening divide between art and life, particularly in the last century with the rise of the industrial mindset over agrarian fidelity to the land. He concludes his first essay saying, “The real values of art and life are perhaps best defined and felt in the tension between them” (22).
In the essay “Poetry and Place” Berry insists that the “ideal, as poets from Homer to Pound have instructed us, is harmony: the domestic must be placed within the wild—for the wild must always be larger—with such studied and elegant propriety as to preserve both . . . If human nature is double, then its two halves must meet and inform each other” (193-194).

Berry challenges the status quo with its disintegration of community, growing materialism and inherent loneliness. He yearns for people to keep fidelity to a place, to speak with sincerity and to cultivate community. Berry asks all of us to develop the concept of enough. Much of his possible scenarios for change involve that of a local culture. He ends his essay “People, Land and Community” this way:

It would begin in work and love. People at work in communities three generations old would know that their bodies renewed, time and again, the movements of other bodies, living and dead, known and loved, remembered and loved, in the same shops, houses, and fields. That, of course, is a description of a kind of community dance. And such a dance is perhaps the best way we have to describe harmony. (79)

In *The Wheel*, Wendell Berry explores the cycle of life and death and begs for our attentiveness to this *turning of the wheel* in the poem “From the Distance”:

1. We are others and the earth, the living and the dead. Remembering who we are, we live in eternity; any solitary act is work of community.
2. All times are one
if heart delight
in work, if hands
join the world right.

3. The wheel of eternity is turning
in time, its rhymes, austere,
at long intervals returning,
sing in the mind, not in the ear.

4. A man of faithful thought may feel
in light, among the beasts and fields,
the turning of the wheel.

5. Fall of the year:
at evening a frail mist
rose, glowing in the rain.
The dead and unborn drew near
the fire. A song, not mine,
stuttered in the flame. (28 - 29)

Poems to Handmade Things

All times are one / if heart delight
in work, if hands / join the world right.
Wendell Berry

Iris Graville’s book *Hands at Work* contains her interviews with people who work with their hands and essays about what they’ve learned about themselves and the world. Graville’s essays are accompanied by photographic portraits of the hands of each visual artist, baker, musician, farmer, welder, mechanic, fisherman, midwife and healer—by collaborator Summer Moon Scriver. Graville’s essays to each of these photographic portraits show us how these people’s hands at work are tantamount to their sustenance in
the world, both physical and spiritual. In Graville’s introduction she quotes from
Matthew Fox’s *The Reinvention of Work*:

> When work moved from farm to city, from land to concrete, from hands to machine—in short, when the industrial revolution redefined the meaning of work for us—much was lost. Perhaps the greatest loss was the sense of cosmic wonder of interrelationship with the universe, with nature, with the stars and breezes and plants and animals that was integral to workers on the land. No paycheck can make up for that loss. (4)

As I searched for poems to handmade things, I found poems that linked the craftsperson to places, people, and history. Poems that depict handmade things offer unique metaphors and palpable lessons about our human condition. I sought poems that transform the reader and offer the possibility of new attitudes. As Levertov says, poems of promise embody the potential for social change.

I’ve chosen seven poems by well-known poets who honor handmade things and the artisans who make them. The artisans featured in these poems include a potter thinking her circling thoughts as “Sarah,” from Margaret Gibson’s—*The Vigil: A Poem in Four Voices*; a garment worker telling her story in “Shirtwaist Tucker,” from Chris Llewellyn’s *Fragments from the Fire*; a broom maker being observed in “The Man Who Makes Brooms,” from Naomi Shihab Nye’s *19 Varieties of Gazelle*; and a whittler speaking his truths in “Whittling: The Last Lesson,” from John Stone’s *Music from Apartment 8: New and Selected Poems*. I examine two poems that pay homage to textiles
from antiquity with cautionary subtexts: Ted Kooser’s “A Jacquard Shawl,” from *Delights and Shadows*, and “The Dacca Gauzes,” from Agha Shahid Ali’s *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. Finally, I include a poem featuring a quilter observed from afar, the title poem from Lucille Clifton’s *quilting: poems 1987 - 1990*.

As I examined these poems, I asked several questions: What voice does the poet use to enter the poem and how does that make the reader feel? What stance does the poet take: observer (describing the thing being made) or participant (persona) making the thing, and how do these choices impact the reader? Most importantly, how does the poem take us from the making of the thing to something larger—something that imparts a sense of the experience of seeing or doing—the value of such an experience?

When poets use words to transform what artisans and craftspeople experience while working with their hands, using materials like clay, wool, and wood—what happens? How do these poems help readers value what the earth provides and the artisans who craft these things? How can they help us connect with one another?

“Sarah” is one of four personae within three generations of women in Margaret Gibson’s *The Vigil*. Gibson reveals their distinctive memories and emotional details through thoughts rather than talking (on the rare occasion when someone speaks aloud, his/her words are in italics). These poems create a story that takes place within twenty-four hours, and are as intense and fragile as clay pots being readied for their annual firing. Sarah, the oldest daughter, is the potter, the one who tries to keep her family from falling apart—a job foisted on her since the age of two.
In Gibson’s notes to this collection, she credits her mentorship with Jack Troy, a famous potter, who invited her to his studio to learn the technique of firing pots in an anagama kiln, an ancient wood-fired kiln dating back to medieval Japan. Her mentorship with Troy in his ceramics studio provided her with the language of throwing and firing pots. That evocative vocabulary added complexity to her poems and the women she portrayed.

Gibson brings the reader into the personae’s thoughts. As Sarah shapes bowls on her wheel, we see more than a bowl being shaped, we hear her speaking to herself—often with foreshadowing that Sarah may not be aware of: “. . . Trembling, the bowl deflects / light, slants it. / Into the dream, familiar hands appear, / pale hands, / almost transparent . . .” (9).

The Sarah poems are central to the story and make up half the collection. Sarah never rests as daughter, wife, sister, and artist. She is consumed by all things elemental: light, water, wind, flames, and earth. Her way of seeing the world is achingly beautiful, and her collusion in lies almost beautiful, too. *The Vigil* examines a family that keeps horrific secrets gracefully quiet—they almost accept them. Sarah’s thoughts as she feeds wood into the kiln are a steady backdrop, as in this section from the first “Sarah” poem:

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Cone 4. The kiln’s hung there.
I grab gloves and leather apron—flame throwers, time for that—and stack rough slabs of oak on the threshold . . .
. . . the atmosphere so hot
the wood, relumed, jets off onto the radiant moment of albedo, drawn thirty feet inside and surging.
I lift a bung—
fire billows where my face had been.
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What’s wrong—I don’t know what, but something, something’s wrong. . . (6)

The making of bowls and firing of them in a wood-fired kiln becomes Gibson’s metaphor for how a family living with lies requires hard work (and for Sarah, even artistry) to maintain. At the end of the poem Sarah explains, “. . . thinking only with my fingers, in a mime / transforming the briefest glimpse / into work I can feel / on my pulse, into presence I can / shape and turn and, God help me, hold” (11).

Through the four voices in these poems, we learn that on the day her four-year-old brother died, two-year-old Sarah did more than play the piano at her brother’s funeral. No one talks about the circumstances of her brother’s death, or her father’s alcoholism. Her father, architect and patriarch in a close-knit family, takes his usual drunken evening sail to visit his mistress, and when he returns in the early morning, discovers his son drowned by the dock. He carries the boy home. Sarah overhears her mother accuse her father of not locking the door, as if it was just an unlocked door that caused Bart’s death. Sarah is afraid to admit to her part in the series of events and say “I unlocked it . . .” (19).

In Gibson’s next “Sarah” poem, Sarah remembers the voice in her head that told her, “Tell no one.”

I was willing to let truth do its own work, without me. Willing to lie, to wait, doing nothing that would risk loss of their love. I turned away into my own life. But something to touch—I needed that. (21)

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Every violation of truth is not only a sort of suicide in the liar, but is a stab at the health of human society—” and so it was for this family in
The Vigil, as lies accrue with Sarah’s willing complicity, including adopting her teenage sister’s out-of-wedlock baby and keeping it a secret from her now adult, adopted daughter, Kate.

We listen to Sarah reason her way to erase guilt about the night of her brother’s death: the decades she spent creating beautiful bowls while raising and loving four children, including her sister’s daughter. Kate learns the truth that her real mother is “Aunt” Jennie from her dying grandfather and arrives at long last to the family gathering. It’s not long after Kate’s arrival that Sarah discovers all the newly fired bowls shattered—all but one. Sarah breaks the last bowl saying,

I break it open to the light.
What I feel is heartbeat,
heartbeat—here we are.
I hew to the moment,
trembling. And I wait. (110)

Gibson’s choice to write a long poem in four personae, with each voice an internal monologue, speaks volumes to what alcoholism, silence, and lies do to a family. Gibson’s choice to gather three generations of women around an annual twenty-four hour vigil of firing pots in a wood-fired kiln is as labor intensive as the kiln’s “cone 4” setting. The setting and structure for this four-voice poem takes the reader through fire—through lies and guilt, loss and anger, truth and forgiveness—and moves readers to recognize the importance of truth. The way it shows how generations are affected by the alcoholism of the father reveals character. In this collection of poems, four speakers think about what isn’t said—silences as carefully crafted as handmade bowls.
In Chris Llewellyn’s collection *Fragments from the Fire*, she gathers as many names and voices as she can to tell the story of a horrific New York City workplace fire that set the record for number of lives lost in a single fire, a record that stood until the Twin Towers burned and collapsed on September 11, 2001. From Llewellyn’s research of court documents and newspapers reporting on the fire, she provides the voices of immigrant girls and women working in a garment factory before unions. Llewellyn’s poems witness the grueling conditions of garment workers at the turn of the twentieth century and honor those who died in a historic workplace fire. The collection’s title, *Fragments from the Fire*, alludes to a biblical reference: “Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost—John 6:12” (118).

Most readers have no first-hand experience of being locked in a stifling, unventilated room bent over a sewing machine for fourteen-hour days. The word sweatshop has become abstract. But in 1911, it was a fact of life for many women. “Shirtwaist Tucker” is one of twenty-six poems that tell fragments of the stories from the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911. This poem has the epigraph “*After Sadie Hershy*” to alert the reader that this is a real woman with a name. Sadie Hershy survived the Triangle Fire that killed 146 garment workers, mostly immigrant women from Italy and Russia who burned alive or jumped from windows when they couldn’t reach the elevators or fire escapes in time. Those who did reach the exit doors found them locked by the factory owners who feared union organizers might infiltrate the workplace. Many women, some as young as fourteen, jumped out of windows on the eighth or ninth floors to escape the fast-moving fire. Sadie is credited as the one who saw the first flames in the cutter’s wastebasket and alerted the floor manager.
Llewellyn uses court documents and public records to add authenticity to the horrors witnessed by many New Yorkers on that Saturday just before quitting time. Sadie speaks to us about her job as a shirtwaist tucker in a clipped, no-nonsense voice:

Yes I was a garment girl
a tucker at Triangle.
We’d haul big bolts of cloth
feed em to pleating machines
that crimped the folds
at neck and wrists—
to take in fullness or
decorate the yoke.
Saturday was payday—
twelve dollars for sixty hours!
. . . Say that was a slave-driving place.
Couldn’t talk to your neighbors
and the bosses kept doors locked.
Looking out for organizers.
Agitators.
That afternoon I was close by
the cutting table
spied a little snake of smoke.
So I says to the manager
“Mr. Bernstein I see smoke.”
And when he tipped water from a little wooden bucket
such a flame shot up! (112)

Llewellyn writes in the voices of real people who witnessed a fire that changed labor laws and strengthened the enforcement of fire codes in America. Her poems chronicle the garment workers in the factory and in the courtroom trial in which no one was found guilty; her poems honor the lives lost on March 25, 1911.

In “Sear,” the final poem in this collection, Llewellyn speaks directly to the critics who ridiculed her work as her poems were being published:

July, 1982

Always adding. Revising this manuscript.
I plant direct quotations on the page
arrange line-breaks, versification.
Newspaper files: Frances Perkins speaks from the street, *I felt I must sear it not only on my mind but on my heart forever*. One mother, *When will it be safe to earn our bread?* Their words. Yet some call that schmaltz, soap-opera-

Sentiment, Victorian melodrama. Riding the subway, smoke fizzes in my ears and in my room, electric heater coils glow C’s and O’s in the box. To write about them yet not interfere, although I’m told a poet’s task is to create a little world.

A testimony: Two tried to stay together on the ledge, but suddenly one twisted and plunged, a burning bundle. The other looked ahead, arms straight out, speaking and shouting *as if addressing an invisible audience*. She gestured an embrace then

Jumped. Her name was Celia Weintraub. She lived on Henry Street. (123)

Llewellyn’s poems give a voice and a name to the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire, demanding justice. One hundred and forty-six immigrant workers died. Thanks to the painstaking research in journalist David Von Drehle’s book *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*, we know most of the names of those who perished. Drehle’s Appendix lists 140 documented victim’s names, figured-out from nicknames and cross-referenced from a variety of newspapers and hospital records (269). As people read the accounting of names and ages of those lost in the fire, finally there was a way to double-check if their family member had been included. It wasn’t until the hundredth anniversary of the fire on March 25, 2011, that the last six victims were identified.
Llewellyn’s poems lament the deaths of so many and caution us against repeating the same acts of greed and omission against any worker in any trade anywhere. Llewellyn engages us in the history of immigrants in the United States, their low wages and sub-standard working conditions in hope that we never repeat these abuses. Perhaps, as Levertov says, poetry of change is about what we have in common with all workers, industrial or otherwise. This poetry is one way we stay engaged in the preparation for justice in our workplace, be it non-industrialized fair trade products, industrialized factories where employees punch a time clock, or workers toiling solo on the streets.

Naomi Shihab Nye takes us with her to the Middle East to observe a man in his “stony corner” that makes brooms. His trade is unfamiliar to Americans who buy brooms made in factories. In Nye’s poem “The Man Who Makes Brooms,” she wonders how this man might help her “speak for her people” and build greater understanding between her St. Louis birthplace and her father’s Palestinian heritage.

Nye’s poem tells us about a visit to Jerusalem with a friend: “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” (18). Nye describes this maker of 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. (18)
The poet disagrees when her friend says that the broom maker is “like all the men, / the man who sells pistachios, / the man who rolls the rugs. . .” Nye argues for the broom maker’s significance: “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” (19).

As Nye observes the broom maker, she begins to understand her Palestinian roots. In her poem she addresses a friend as “you”—(though perhaps she is talking to us as well). In the poem she returns to her father’s village after watching the broom maker, and her Palestinian uncles mock her for her enthusiasm when she talks about the man who weaves brooms. Nye acknowledges it was more than watching a man make a broom, or maybe it was as simple as that:

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. (19)

This little song, this thumb over thumb making of a broom may be a little song, but it is a song that has meaning in his community—brooms sweep courtyards and the sale of his brooms is essential to his survival. Back at the village her uncles listen to her story and say, “No brooms in America?” (19). They are right: we all have brooms. This man who makes brooms doesn’t represent any nationality, or maybe he does. She tells us that “the pink seam he weaves / across the flat golden face of this broom / is its own shrine, and forget about the tears” (19). This is the sense that falls out from that day—a prophetic witnessing of promise, urging us towards this desirable future on which each man and woman’s work has meaning.
If Nye’s man who makes brooms has a necessary job with his own little song in his community, then so does the whittler in John Stone’s poem “Whittling: The Last Class.” He offers his three rules for whittling that sing their own little songs across many cultures: mindfulness, compassion, and understanding the word “enough.”

“Whittling: The Last Class” is a soft-spoken, humorous poem told by a man “who has been whittling / in spare minutes at the wood / of his life for forty years” (81). The teacher of the whittling class summarizes all he knows about whittling, and because it is the last class, he includes three rules. Like all lesson poems, there are universal applications to his rules.

*Make small cuts*

In this way

you may be able to stop before
what was to be an arm
has to be something else.

*Always whittle away from yourself*

*and toward something.*

For God’s sake
and your own

*know when to stop* (81-82)

Stone shifts his focus from whittling to mortality (being cardiologist as well as poet) when he continues,

*Whittling is the best example*

I know of what most
may happen when
least expected

bad or good
Hurry before
angina comes like a pair of pliers
over your left shoulder (82)

Stone extends his analogy of how one person’s life is similar to whittling a piece of wood, how the choices we make are like small cuts, how bit by bit each cut has an effect on the whole. His poem reassures us that there is plenty of wood for everyone. We need to make small cuts and to cut away from ourselves and towards something and trust what the wood has to offer. Stone’s last stanzas are his briefest, whittled-down short lines. They express the wish for his reader’s attitude to expand to something larger as s/he is whittling the waiting wood: “May you find / in the waiting wood / rough unspoken / what is true / or / nearly true / or / true enough /” (82). “Whittling: The Last Class” shows how whittling, the actual making of a thing, is analogous to being engaged in the world.

The next two poems honor specific textiles and two poets’ responses across miles, cultures, and hundreds of years.

Ted Kooser begins “A Jacquard Shawl” by describing the shawl’s “pattern of curly acanthus leaves” (61) and by the second line tells us what is woven in the corner in blue block letters half an inch tall: “MADE FROM WOOL FROM SHEEP / KILLED BY DOGS. 1778” (61). Immediately we are swept into the beauty of the object and the tragic circumstances that brought the wool to the weaver. More importantly, we recognize the assertion of the weaver writing the subtext of the wool into the shawl.

Kooser’s language plays like a jacquard weave, showing how “the design reverses to gray on blue / when you turn it over, / and the words run backward” (61). He uses this intricate weave as a metaphor:
into the past. The rest of the story
lies somewhere between one side
and the other, woven into
the plane where the colors reverse:
the circling dogs, the terrified sheep,
the meadow stippled with blood,
and the weaver by lamplight
feeding what wool she was able to save
into the faintly bleating, barking loom. (61)

“A Jacquard Shawl” is both a tribute to the weaver’s art and Kooser’s
imagination— juxtaposing the beauty of the shawl with the brutality that provided the
wool to the weaver. The weaver of this jacquard shawl comes alive even more to the
reader as Kooser imagines her “feeding what wool she was able to save / into the faintly
bleating, barking loom.” (61).

Decades ago I wove a simple woolen scarf on a floor loom. Kooser’s poem
evoked in my aural memory the sound made when my toes pressed down, right then left,
to alternate the floor pedals that raise and lower the warp threads and create a shed for the
shuttle—how eerily similar to his faintly bleating and barking loom. Kooser’s last line
ends like his shawl’s mysterious layers— “woven into a plane where the colors reverse.”
By the end of this short poem, we are stunned by his imaginative use of weaving
vocabulary and his tribute to the weaver’s explicative text woven into the corner of the
shawl. Kooser’s poem and this antique shawl: a collaboration that waited two hundred
and thirty years for Kooser’s eyes, heart, and imagination.

Kooser’s poem shows how one poet reaches across centuries and connects us to
an unsettling fact in our collective history via something as simple as a shawl— horrific
and beautiful. In our current century, does anyone know where the fibers in their clothing
come from? What country grew the cotton and spun the fibers to make that shirt? Textile
mills and factories are the norm in the twenty-first century. Brand names take precedence over geography and craftsperson.

At least the jacquard shawl still exists for Kooser to read its disturbing message, imagine its weaver, and marvel that the shawl remains intact. In Agha Shahid Ali’s poem “The Dacca Gauzes,” nothing is left but his grandmother’s memory of what it was like to touch and wear that cloth. Imagine a cloth so airy and light that only its legendary qualities survive.

In “The Dacca Gauzes” Agha Shahid Ali draws on a story his grandmother told him about an heirloom sari she once owned, given to her from her mother’s dowry. The sari was made by the now-lost weavers of Bengal who made a cloth famous for being the lightest of all cotton gauzes, now impossible to duplicate. Ali spells out in graphic fact how imperial officials cut off the weavers’ hands to stop the production of this fabric. Ali’s poem uses his grandmother’s voice to lament the loss of this fabric and those weavers. To his reader’s alarm, Ali discloses a little-known example of India’s brutal repression under British imperialism.

“The Dacca Gauzes” begins with an epigraph from Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, focusing our attention on a fabric admired by wealthy Englishmen in the nineteenth century: “. . . for a whole year he sought to accumulate the most exquisite Dacca gauzes” (15). Agha Shahid Ali writes, “Those transparent Dacca Gauzes / known as woven air, running / water, evening dew” (15) and makes this cotton gauze come alive by retelling his grandmother’s stories:

a dead art now, dead over
a hundred years. “No one
now knows,” my grandmother says,
“what it was to wear
or touch that cloth.” She wore
it once, an heirloom sari from

her mother’s dowry, proved
genuine when it was pulled, all
six yards, through a ring. (15)

Ali’s grandmother continues to share the worth and importance of this sari:

Years later when it tore,
many handkerchiefs embroidered
with gold-thread paisleys

were distributed among
the nieces and daughters-in-law,
Those too now lost. (15)

The voice changes from grandmother to the poet when he says:

In history we learned: the hands
of weavers were amputated,
the looms of Bengal silenced

and the cotton shipped raw
by the British to England.
History is of little use to her, (16)

Ali’s poem ends remembering his grandmother’s lament, her syntax dream-like,
as she tells us more about those now-extinct Dacca gauzes:

my grandmother just says
how the muslins of today
are so coarse and that only

in autumn, should one wake up
at dawn to pray, can one
feel that same texture again.

One morning, she says, the air
was dew-starched: she pulled
it absently through her ring. (16)
Ali’s poem focuses our imagination on his grandmother’s memories of what it was like to touch the now lost Dacca Gauzes. The poem addresses not only the ephemeral gauze fabric but the demise of the Bengal weavers who made this fabric, and by default, the hands that spun that lightest of cotton threads. Industrialization continues to displace the work of artisans. Ali’s poem allows us to experience the remembered beauty of the Dacca gauzes and mourn the loss of its famous Bengal weavers whose livelihood and art were one and the same.

“The Dacca Gauzes” provides an example of what Wendell Berry describes as the ever-widening divide between art and life. He asks us to consider how the value of anything is perhaps best defined and felt by the tension between life and art. Each time I read this poem, I ache for the weavers, for this fabric’s demise, and I wonder what other arts and the communities that sustain them are sacrificed in the name of industrialization and corporate greed?

In the title poem of Lucille Clifton’s book quilting: poems 1987 – 1990, we overhear a narrator describing a mother talking to her daughter. Clifton’s “yellow eyed woman” who quilts lives in a world so commonplace—it’s overlooked, unknown.

“quilting” is spoken by an omniscient narrator who informs us that “somewhere in the unknown world / a yellow eyed woman / sits with her daughter / quilting” (3). Clifton’s next stanza takes us to “some other where / alchemists mumble over pots. / their chemistry stirs / into science, their science / freezes into stone” (3).

In this quixotic poem, Clifton takes the reader to the unknown world where the woman “threading together her need / and her needle / nods toward the smiling girl /
[saying] *remember / this will keep us warm.*” (3). The narrator in the poem asks us to compare two worlds: one where a grandmother’s quilts with her daughter and some other world where alchemists mumble over pots. Are these worlds so different? An alchemist tries to turn base metal into gold, while a quilter takes what are “base” scraps of fabric and turns them into something warm and beautiful.

“quilting” challenges us to choose our version of transformation: what is handed-down from generation to generation, or what alchemy provides. Clifton plays with the word “need” and crafts this clever phrase: *threading together need and needle*. Her poem ends with questions not answers –

how does this poem end?  
do the daughters’ daughters quilt?  
do the alchemists practice their tables?  
do the worlds continue spinning  
away from each other forever? (3)

The poem asks the reader to decide what is more important: watching a woman show her daughter how to quilt, or watching alchemists mumble over pots? She wonders what will happen if we do nothing and let the “unknown world” (of women making quilts, for example) spin away from that “other world” forever? Clifton’s poem admonishes us to pay attention to the health of our world, particularly to the unknown world, to people like her yellow eyed mother who shows her daughter how to make a quilt.

Agha Shahid Ali’s grandmother cannot rely on history but spends her time finding the perfect dew-starched air in autumn to pull through her ringed memory. Clifton’s yellow eyed mother cannot rely on science but shows her daughter how to make something to keep her warm. Both poems create a tension between beautiful and useful
handmade textiles versus obliteration. Ali’s grandmother’s lament for the lost Dacca gauzes and Clifton’s “woman/ threading together her need/ and her needle” (3) show how a poem takes readers from history into mystery. Both poems advocate for a return to valuing handmade goods that link us to the unknown world.

My desire to connect handmade products by the girls at Héré jé to an audience beyond the Fabric of Life store, led me to examine the work of poets who use narrative, historical facts, and the persona of a craftsperson to help their readers connect more deeply to the world. These poems show how the vocabulary of handmade things helps the reader make connections and make that leap that Levertov alludes to—to increase the reader’s capacity for empathy and compassion.

In the end, it’s not so much who speaks or how s/he addresses the reader but what is conveyed—and how that image, that remembrance, that spark of awareness connects the reader to more than the handmade object. These seven poems connect me to artisans, crafts, histories, and injustices from the past and those looming in the future. These poems entwine history, craftsmanship, and imagination—and because of these crafted layers startle the reader into awareness of how we are connected to each other and the world. These poems offer eloquent examples for how a poet can be in the world and connect to others.

I end with one of my poems, born from my work at the Fabric of Life store, listening to Carol Schillios’ stories, and purchasing the beautiful products made by the girls and young women at the training center:
Imagine a dusty room in Mali with girls sitting at a wooden table stringing beads—

twenty-four seed bead strands woven into braids or cords, necklaces to sell to you or me, in black or red, green or yellow, blue or white.

Imagine a bowl of mixed-up beads—
and the youngest who sorts what’s spilled.

She doesn’t complain, but who doesn’t love to design rather than sort? Sighing, she asks permission: *Would it be okay to make a necklace out of mixed-up colors?*

Now, imagine me wearing this necklace—
watch how it spills its rainbow strands in speckled ripples, a topo map of dreams, in peaks and waterfalls of red & blue, yellow & green, beads with stripes on opaque white. Imagine wearing happiness from what is spilled. Imagine fingers pushing fishing line though beads the size of sesame—beads that anywhere else, once spilled, would be swept aside, fall into cracks, disappear.

* Happiness group
Works Cited

Print.


