

# Shirt

*by Robert Pinsky, U.S. Poet Laureate 1997-2000*

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 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.

*Listen to it, read by the poet, here:* <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/177167>

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