

Senior Division Poetry

Seconds

Anthony Lambe, Paradise

Bride Parks almost died when her arm
got gnawed off. The men heard the hard
mourn of the machine which moaned
for an hour before they pried her loose
of its jaw. But, they only had seconds.
She went on compensation for a year
before she was cut off for missing a rehab
session that she called *a torture*.

Now she says she's a slave to sleeves:
with teeth and arm she turns with the best.¹
Her second cousin Rose died at her machine:
they found her face down and blue,
and string-knit linen dust over her like pollen.

But Myrna Wells worked handy on twenty years
at Quality-Glove from the age of sixteen
on Number 2 sewing machine and a Trimmer
and only dies a little every day, by seconds...
And her 'physic,' as she calls it, is now chronic:
after three hours stitches crawl up her arms –
threads of back muscle knit into knuckles,
and by noon she's hunched over the machine,
shoulders hooked, tightened, rounded.
By three she twists and turns
like a spindle and bobbin to unwind
the loaded spring needling her spinal column;
and by four throbs unravel down her legs

¹ Turning sleeves is a steady light-work task of turning a knit sleeve right-side out.

spooling in her swollen feet.
Every lockstitch in nine is oiled with tears.

And the only lull is to hum along in communion
with the muted OM of machines, the choir of them –
a mind-numbing drone to below zero in the bones.
But nothing stops the tick-tock of her hands:
calloused, askew, stiffened knobs –
yet graceful, sure, skilled, clever –
as natural as the First Law of Motion.
She threads and throttles and thrums
the steady rhythm of sewing seams
piecemeal until the work whistle blows.

Punch-clock. Coat. Car. Cameo. Home.
Feeling as useless as a sack of Seconds.²

² Seconds – discarded piles of gloves, usually given away, because of flaws in the sewing.