

Randall Shinn

Surprising the Air

for Soprano and Piano

Poem by Veronica Patterson



Lewis W. Hine: Adolescent Girl, a Spinner, in a Carolina Cotton Mill, 1908
Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

Cotton Dust

In the voice of a young woman working
in a southern cotton mill, 1911.

We are not slaves, but we are
dust. When I came to the mill,
I was ten. I joined others like me.
When visitors came, the foreman
said we were just bringing our parents
their lunch.

At first I imagined the threads
on the loom becoming
sheets and curtains, shirts
and dresses in a city I might
one day see. I sang to the thump
of shuttles until the sound

drowned my voice. We are
not slaves, yet we are dust.
Church says so. When the workers
can't breathe, the doctor whispers
"cotton dust." But not to the ones
in charge. Church says

we're dust, but the young man
from the North, who spoke of unions,
said we were sky stuff too. Warm nights
he showed me stars that fell. We lay
down to count the others. He said
so much, then left, not knowing

he would have a daughter. He
wrote once, to say all workers
would rise up. But if I daydream
a better future at the mill, I'll lose
fingers. So I dream nights—*dark is mine*—
next to our sleeping child.

In the letter my fingers have worn soft,
he wrote that he saw too many tired
and hungry faces. I see him
in the small face we made.
He opened my eyes,
but our daughter has his.

We heard about the girls
in the Shirtwaist Factory fire.
No worker here dared speak
of it. How they were locked in,
their choice—to burn or jump.
From nine floors up

they jumped. Sidewalks
were lined with bodies. Only
then were there marches.
They jumped so far down
that others rose up. But how
can I protest when this child
needs food? I'm bound here.

Yet the girls who jumped
keep falling through my dreams,
skirts blooming. In the air
did their eyes open wider
or did they close them, those girls
who surprised the air?
Tell me if—for a moment—
they flew.

Veronica Patterson

Sample pages

Surprising the Air

In the voice of a young woman working
in a southern cotton mill, 1911.

VERONICA PATTERSON

RANDALL SHINN

Slow, but energetic ♩ = 56

Soprano

Piano

p

mp

Ah

4

S.

Ah

mf

8

S.

Ah

Ah

f

mf

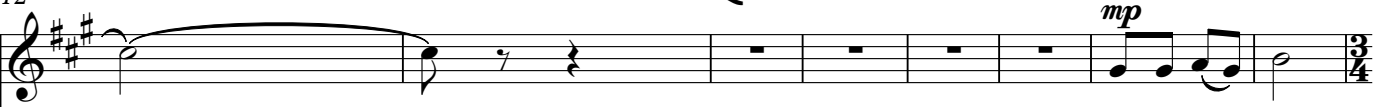
mp

Poem "Cotton Dust" © 2014 by Veronica Patterson. Used by Permission

Music © 2019 by Randall Shinn

All Rights Reserved

12 **molto rit.** **Quite slow** ♩ = 48 **mp**

S.  **We are not slaves,**

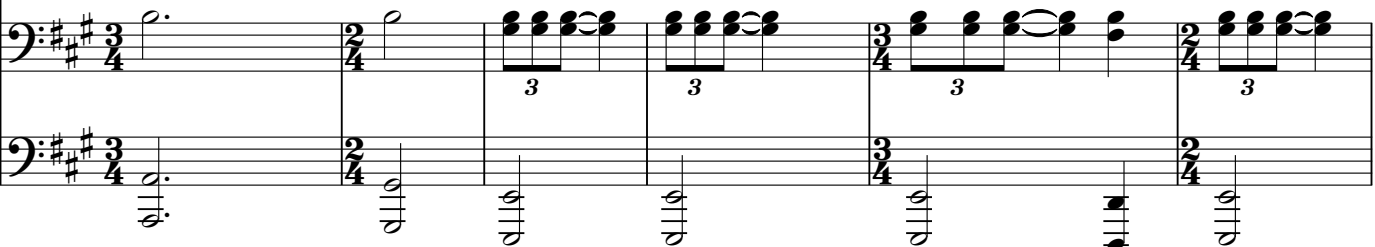
molto rit. **Quite slow** ♩ = 48 **p**



20 **Più mosso** ♩ = 52

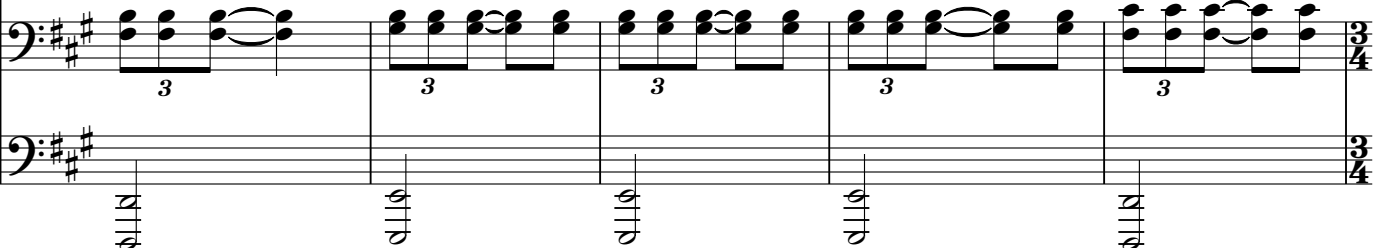
S.  **but we are dust. When I came to the mill, I was ten.**

Più mosso ♩ = 52



26

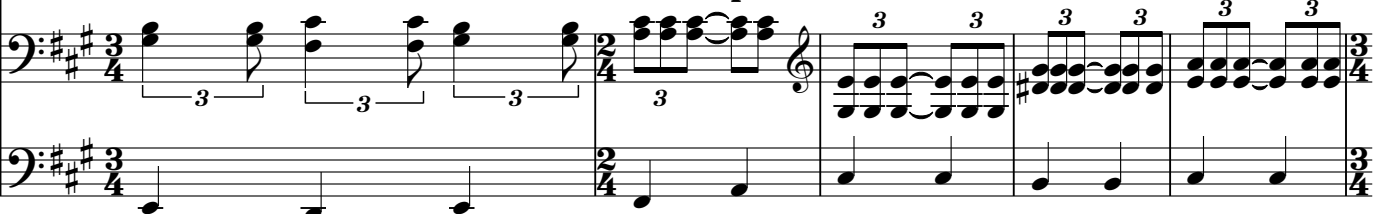
S.  **I joined others like me. When visitors came, the fore-man said**



31 **poco accel.** . . . **Più mosso** ♩ = 66 **f**

S.  **we were just bringing our parents their lunch. At first I i**

poco accel. . . . **Più mosso** ♩ = 66



36 *mf* *mp*

S. mag-ined_ I i - mag-ined the threads on the loom_ be-com-ing sheets and

40

S. cur - tains, shirts and dress - es_ in a

43 *rit.* *Meno mosso* ♩ = 56

S. cit - y I_ might some - day see.

rit. *Meno mosso* ♩ = 56

p

47 *mf*

S. I_ sang_ to the thump of shut - tles

51 *rall.*

S. *f*

un - til the sound drowned my voice.

rall.

54 *Quite slow* ♩ = 48

S. *mp*

We are not slaves, yet we are dust. Church says so.

Quite slow ♩ = 48

ff *mf* *p*

63 *p* *mp* 3

S. Church says so. When the work-ers can't breathe, the

pp *p* 3 3 3

68 *mf* 3

S. doc - tor whis-pers "cot - ton dust." "cot - ton dust." But not to the ones in

3 *pp* 3 *p* 3 3

72 **Più mosso** ♩ = 56

S. charge. Church says we're dust, **Più mosso** ♩ = 56

p *pp* *p*

3 3 3 6

Red.

77 *mf*

S. but the young man from the North, who spoke of

mp *mf*

3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6

81 *mp* *mf*

S. un - ions, said we were sky stuff too.

mp *mf*

3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6

85 **poco rit.**

S. Warm nights he showed me **poco rit.**

3 3 6 3 3 6 6 6

A tempo ♩ = 56 **poco rit.**

S. *f* 88 stars that fell.

A tempo ♩ = 56 **poco rit.**

f *mf* 6

91 **Poco meno mosso** ♩ = 52

S. *mf* We lay down to count the oth - ers.

Poco meno mosso ♩ = 52

mp 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6

95 **molto rit.** *mp*

S. *mp* He said so much, then left not

molto rit. *mf*

p 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6

100 **Quite slow** ♩ = 48 **Poco più mosso** ♩ = 52

S. know ing he would have a daugh-ter. He wrote once, to

Quite slow ♩ = 48 **Poco più mosso** ♩ = 52

p 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3