

ROBERT FINK

What Forgiveness?

*“ . . .with what darkness
has the Lord enveloped the daughter of Zion!
He has flung the beauty of Israel
from heaven to the ground.”*
Lamentations 2:1

I am haunted by the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. The 148 victims, mostly young women, jumped or burned to death over ninety years ago. There is nothing to be done, no survivors left to be interviewed, no new shocking facts. Anything more would be redundant or theft or poetry, and even that has already been done. I seem to be addicted to this horror and beauty. I cannot get over these women. I know I am going to write about them, even though they do not require anything further. The facts are history; the poetry is William Shepherd's. I am going to write about these women. I am ashamed. So far removed, a writer who happened upon the scene, I may appear to be grateful for their deaths.

You know the story—William G. Shepherd's March 25, 1911 eyewitness account dispatched throughout the country by United Press International.¹ It is writing that would make a career. Did Shepherd later feel fortunate to have been walking through Washington Square, New York City, Saturday, March 25th, 4:45 p.m.? I don't believe he did. I have read his story; it reads like a confession. It is Shepherd who, seeing “every feature of the tragedy visible from outside the building,” heard the onomatopoeic word for “the thud of a speeding, living body on a stone sidewalk”: *thud-dead*. Was he given this sound, this new word, at the cost of sleep? Am I envious? There are those who strut and fret upon life's stage; there are those who write about it. There are those who jump, maintaining their balance, keeping upright as they fall nine stories. There are those who tumble burning, screaming all the way to the sidewalk, to the “silent, unmoving pile of clothing and twisted, broken limbs” (Shepherd). There are those standing in the street, whole, dressed for a stroll, for

window-shopping, who have to watch, horrified and elated, hearing words already forming on a page, already undergoing revision.

The first account needs only to relate the facts that say, I was there; you weren't. What I tell you is true as I saw it, and exclusive. I have not had time to embellish. I do not yet understand what I was given. It is not yet the story that will be true to the young garment workers, some incinerated into "skeletons bending over sewing machines" ("New York Fire"), others given time to step off eighth and ninth floor ledges or plunge down the elevator shaft, a few permitted to escape and remember.

SELECTED FACTS²

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire occurred a year before the sinking of the *Titanic* on which 1,523 people perished. Only 148 died in the Triangle fire. Most were dead in less than fifteen minutes. The action was over in thirty. The factory was located in New York City's Lower East Side at the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place, adjacent to the NYU law school building. The dead were mostly girls between the ages of thirteen and twenty-three. Most were immigrants; most were Jewish, many barely speaking English. Many lived in Brooklyn. Many were engaged to be married. They made shirtwaists. They were required to bring their own sewing machines. The cost of thread and electricity came out of their wages. They had to ask permission to go to the bathroom. All the exit doors but one were locked to prevent shirtwaists from being stolen through unwatched doors. The doors only opened inward. Should employees ever panic and rush to escape, the press of bodies would prevent the doors' being opened. The owners did not anticipate this. The factory and the fire were confined to the top three floors of the ten-story building. There were many windows. They were large enough for a woman, for two or three women, to stand upright and step out on the narrow ledge. The fire started on the eighth floor and spread upward. A dropped cigar ash may have ignited the conflagration. There was one fire escape for the building, a narrow, interior one that would collapse when overloaded. There were twenty-seven buckets of water. Four alarms were rung in fifteen minutes. The fire trucks were hindered by the bodies of girls who had jumped from windows one hundred feet above the street. The streams of water from the fire hoses could only reach the sev-

enth floor. The fire truck ladders went no higher than halfway between floors six and seven. The fire nets ripped with the force of girls landing. The bodies, those that could be identified, were numbered and laid out in temporary coffins for parents, siblings, and sweethearts to claim.

Of course there is more here than setting, more than window dressing. Looking closely at these facts, a writer could find something new. Facts become windows bursting upon new vistas, doors forced open to an interior stairwell, smoke thick as the smells of an immigrant kitchen. I have, after all, *selected* these facts. I do not believe Shepherd saw it all. There is something here I need to see. God, don't let it be me picking over a carcass.

OBVIOUS IRONIES

Who would be so arrogant, so confident, so indifferent to the demons of the insubstantial air, of fire, to list on the city register a skyscraper designated the Asch Building, then flick from a cigar a common ash on the polished wingtip of the recording angel and pronounce, for all New York, the building *fireproof*? Who would test young women by keeping them at their machines on a Saturday afternoon “nearly five hours after the employees in the rest of the building had gone home” (“141 Men and Girls”)? What force of darkness would permit the girls to check the clock in expectation of the signal to cease work and leave for the day, readying themselves by gathering their purses and slipping on wraps for the street? “In five minutes more, if the fire had not started then, probably not a life would have been lost” (“141 Men and Girls”).

Who would choose to be a writer, to shape the word, touch the garment of God, dare mix water with dust and ashes, breathe over bones burned clean, broken? “Yahweh your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4:24). I am more than ashamed. I am afraid, but I have felt that which sometimes comes with stealing the gods' fire, offering it as if it were really mine to give, to bless, be praised. No wonder the Greeks invoked the Muse.

FASHION

Is it important to know what the girls were making? It was a job. They needed the money. There was always someone at home to feed and clothe, someone still in Europe waiting for a ticket to the

land of promise. Any day now, there would be a husband to save them. In the heaps on the sidewalk, the piled clothing at the bottom of the elevator shaft, the charred residue of the eighth and ninth floors, there were many small diamonds, each having already passed through the furnace, already transformed, harder than fire, than pavement.

Check the dictionary, an encyclopedia. A shirtwaist was just a dress popular in the early 1900s. It was tailored like a shirt with a collar and buttons down the front. Apparently many were made of a fabric called *grass linen*. Inflammable. Imagine a pasture in a drought-stricken land baked yellow and crisp, a dry wind blowing. “What burned so quickly and disastrously for the victims were shirtwaists, hanging on lines above tiers of workers, sewing machines placed so closely together that there was hardly aisle room for the girls between them, and shirtwaist trimmings and cuttings which littered the floors” (“141 Men and Girls”). The cause of the fire being ash dropped from a cigar was speculation. The inspectors had to provide a cause, a regulation not followed. “All that those escaped seemed to remember was that there was a flash of flames, leaping first among the girls in the southeast corner of the eighth floor and then suddenly over the entire room, spreading through the linens and cottons with which the girls were working” (“141 Men and Girls”).

You can find in catalogues drawings³ of housewives and fashionable young women in shirtwaists. Looking at these demure, suggestive illustrations, you will understand why the term *hourglass figure* was more than a metaphor, more than wishful thinking. I doubt a woman drew these figures. And the hair is pinned up so thick you would think it a bundle of laundry balanced above the tiniest faces, the thinnest necks. This is the hair from which heroines of popular novels, at the close of a chapter, removed a long pin and let down.

There is no need now to show just cause for better working conditions, child labor laws, fire safety standards and inspections. No need for yellow journalism. This is the twenty-first century. What the young women made in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory is of little consequence other than fuel for the fire.

SELECTED, ARRANGED, POETRY OF WILLIAM G. SHEPHERD

I cannot leave it alone. If you have not done so already, you must stop and read Shepherd's syndicated article.⁴ Then, you can skip the following poem I lifted, shaped into lines and stanzas, from Shepherd's prose which is poetry. And I have edited it some, an unnecessary word or two omitted. And I have selected which passages to include in his, in my, poem. That's it, isn't it? *My poem*. But I wasn't there. I wouldn't be born for thirty-five years. Surely I, as a writer, a parent, a man who has loved, and loves, women, am entitled to more than voyeurism, vicarious grief. I am compelled to do something, even though it has already been done.

A New Sound

W. G. Shepherd

"The first 10 shocked me."

Thud-dead, thud-dead, thud-dead, thud-dead.
The sound and the thought of death came to me
each time, at the same instant. There was plenty
of chance to watch them as they came down.

There were scores of girls at the windows.
The flames from the floor below were beating
in their faces. I knew that they, too,
must come down. Something within me,
something I didn't know was there, steeled me.

I looked up to the seventh floor, a living picture
in each window—four screaming girls, waving
their arms. Scores of others, screaming.
They were all as alive and whole and sound
as were we who stood on the sidewalk.

One girl climbed onto the window sash.
Those behind her tried to hold her back.
Then she dropped into space. I didn't notice
whether those above watched her drop.
I turned away.

I looked up. Another girl was climbing onto the window sill. Others were crowding behind her. She dropped. I watched her fall, and again the sound. Two windows away two girls were climbing onto the sill. They were fighting and crowding each other for air. Behind them, many screaming heads. They fell, almost together. But I heard two thuds.

Firemen began to raise a ladder. Others took out a life net. Two more girls shot down. The firemen held the net under the bodies. The two bodies broke it—grotesque simile, a dog jumping through a paper hoop. Before they could move the net, another girl's body flashed through it.

The thuds were just as loud as if there had been no net. It seemed to me the thuds might have been heard all over the city, like dull explosions.

I noticed things it had not occurred to me before to notice, little details the first shock had blinded me to. I looked up to see whether those above watched those who fell. I noticed that they did, watched them every inch of the way down and probably heard the roaring thuds, unless the roaring flames were too loud.

The firemen raised the longest ladder. It reached only to the sixth floor. I saw the last girl jump at it and miss. And then the faces disappeared from the window.

I heard screams around the corner and hurried there. What I had seen before was not so terrible as what followed. Girls were burning to death before our eyes. They were jammed in the windows.

No one was lucky enough to jump. Then, one by one,
the jams broke. Down came bodies in a shower,
burning, smoking, lighted bodies,
the disheveled hair of the girls trailing upward.

There were thirty-three in that shower. The flesh
of some was cooked. The clothes of most were burned away.
The whole, sound, unharmed girls who jumped on the other side
of the street had done their best to fall feet down, but these
fire-tortured, suffering ones fell inertly, as if they didn't care
how they fell, just so that death came to them on the sidewalk
instead of the fiery furnace.

On the sidewalk lay heaps of broken bodies. I saw
a policeman later going about with tags which he fastened
with a wire to the wrists of the dead girls, numbering
each with a lead pencil.

SELECTED SURVIVORS: THREE ROSES⁵

*“The fire of God . . . has fallen from heaven
and burnt the sheep and shepherds to ashes:
I alone have escaped to tell you.”*
Job 1:16-17

There were more survivors than you would think. Some jammed into the available elevator. It only made one, possibly two, runs. Others made it down the fire escape before it crumpled under the weight of too many girls. Some ran down the stairs, sometimes through flame. A few slid down the elevator cable until the flesh tore from their palms or falling bodies struck them. Most who escaped went up. The tenth floor led to the roof, the roof to the adjacent NYU law school building.

Rose Glantz said, “We didn't have a chance” (“Ninth”). She was on the ninth floor. She saw no hope to board the elevator, so she wrapped her scarf around her head and ran down the stairs. “The fire was in the hall on the eighth floor. I pulled my scarf tighter around my head and ran right through it. It caught fire. I have a scar on my neck” (“Ninth”). When she reached the street, she stood in

the doorway of a store across from the Asch Building. She saw “one woman jump and get caught on a hook on the sixth floor. I watched a fireman try to save her. I wasn’t hysterical any more; I was just numb” (“Ninth”).

Rose Cohen escaped and walked home sobbing: “I couldn’t stop crying for hours, for days” (“Nightmare of Survival”). “Afterwards, I used to dream I was falling from a window, screaming. I remember I would holler to my mother in the dark, waking everybody up, “Mama! I just jumped out of a window!” Then I would start crying and I couldn’t stop” (“Nightmare of Survival”).

Rose Freedman lived to be 107. She was the last survivor of the Triangle Factory fire. She was a teenager in 1911. She realized that since the factory executives had their offices on the tenth floor, they would have their own means of escape. She lifted her dress over her head and ran up to the tenth floor, and then to the roof where, she said, firemen helped her across to the roof of the adjacent building. Descending to the street, she sat down on each stair landing to weep (“Remembering Rose Freedman”).

“By the rivers of Babylon / we sat and wept,” Psalm 137:1. Am I using these women? The individual who tells or writes about or interprets a tragedy is also one of the survivors, one of the victims. This essay is about me, about you, how we thought we were finally through for the day, eager for home or maybe for Saturday night; how we saw the spark and were puzzled, amazed that flame could flash past overhead and down the aisles; how we found ourselves pressed into the glass of tall windows and then through the glass; how we dove into an elevator; how we found ourselves in the space of flames on a stairway, found ourselves on a ladder connecting rooftop to rooftop, on a fire escape twisted like a ribbon; how we are always falling like fireworks shot from a cannon on the 4th of July, timed to burst in clusters. We are all writers. We are all guilty.

BEAUTY

If we escape the sensational, can we also avoid sentimentality? What beauty amidst horror? One girl, before she jumped, “waved a handkerchief at the crowd” (“141 Men and Girls”); another, first “took off her hat and laid it on the ledge” (“New York Fire”). What heroics? Believe there is always beauty, there are always heroes.

William Shepherd discovered a small scene he chose to think of as “love amid the flames.”⁶

A Terrible Chivalry
W. G. Shepherd

I looked up. A young man at a window
helped a girl to the window sill. Then he held her
out, deliberately, away from the building
and let her drop. He seemed cool and calculating.
He held out a second girl in the same way
and let her drop. Then he held out a third girl.
They didn't resist. They were as unresisting
as if he were helping them onto a street car.

He brought another girl to the window.
Those of us who were looking saw her
put her arms about him and kiss him.
He held her out into space and dropped her.
Then he leaped with energy as if he believed
he could cheat gravity and arrive at eternity,
only a second distant, to receive her.
His coat flattened upward. The air filled
his trouser legs; he wore tan shoes and hose.
His hat remained on his head.

Thud-dead! Thud-dead!
They went into eternity together.
I saw his face before they covered it.
You could see he was a real man.
He had done his best.

The March 26, 1911 *Chicago Sunday Tribune* included another scene of love and *terrible beauty*.⁷ The article reports that just when it seemed the ninth floor ledge overlooking the Greene street side of the building was clear, “two girls clambered out upon it. One of them seemed self-poised; at least her movements were slow and deliberate. With her was a younger girl shrieking and twisting with fright” (“New York Fire”). The crowd below shouted to the girls not to

jump. “The older girl placed both arms around the younger and pulled her back on the ledge toward the brick wall and tried to press her close to the wall. But the younger girl twisted her head and shoulders loose from the protecting embrace, took a step or two to the right and jumped” (“New York Fire”). The remaining girl “stood back against the wall motionless” (“New York Fire”). She

held her hands rigid against her thighs, her head tilted upward and looking toward the sky. Smoke began to trickle out of the broken window a few inches to her left. She began to raise her arms then and make slow gestures as if she were addressing a crowd above her. A tongue of flame licked up along the window sill and singed her hair and then out of the smoke which was beginning to hide her from view she jumped, feet foremost, falling, without turning, to the street. (“New York Fire”)

When students and faculty at the NYU law school building located just across the small court at the back of the Asch Building saw the tragedy taking place next door, class was dismissed, and a hundred students rushed to the roof to assist in rescuing those who had made it to the roof of the burning building. Specifically, two of the law students, Charles T. Kremer and Elias Kanter, “led a party of students to the roof of the law school building” where Kanter and other students made a “sort of extension ladder” from two short ladders (“New York Fire”). This ladder was placed across the space between the roofs. Charles Kremer then “got down on to the roof of the burning building and tried to get the girls into orderly line and send them up the ladder to where his school fellows were waiting to grab them to safety” (“New York Fire”). In this manner, the “students got 150 women, girls, and men away from the burning building” (“New York Fire”). The March 26, 1911 *Chicago Sunday Tribune* article is the only one I have seen that mentioned these students and their rescue efforts. I don’t know if Kanter and especially Kremer were singled out for their heroism. I’d like to believe that the girls they saved never forgot their saviors. I’m certain Kremer and Kanter never forgot the girls’ faces.

The reporter who wrote the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* article surely had in mind the following statement as a medal citation for Charles Kremer:

Kremer, when the last of the group nearest the law school had been saved, climbed down the ladder to the roof of the burning building and went down the roof scuttle to the top floor. He could see only one girl, who ran shrieking toward him with her hair burning. She had come up from the floor beneath and as she came to Kremer she fainted in his arms. He smothered the sparks in her hair with his hands and then tried to carry her up the narrow ladder to the roof. But because she was unconscious he had to wrap long strands of her hair around his hand and drag her to fresh air in this way. His friend Kanter helped him to get the girl up the ladder to the law school roof and safety. ("New York Fire")

If this seems sentimental, then so be it. Whether it's true or not, I am going to believe that it is beauty, not horror, that haunted me into writing this unnecessary essay. You're a writer; make what you want of it. In particular I give you this word picture from William Shepherd:

As I reached the scene of the fire a mushroom of smoke hung over the 10-story building. I glanced up and on the edge of the roof saw a young man walking along with his overcoat over his arm. He appeared to be waiting for the fire engines. But none was there. There was none even in sight or within hearing. I noticed that the man was well dressed and had a jaunty air. His hands were in his trousers pockets. Five minutes later I saw him jump out into space. His overcoat parachuted in the air beside him. A moment later he was lifeless on the sidewalk.

Of course this young man's suicide makes no sense. You do what you want, but I have decided to add to this man's burdens my shame and my guilt and my inadequacies as a writer. I think he may have jumped for me. I can't speak for you.

REQUIEM

*"Eternal rest grant them, O Lord,
and let perpetual light shine upon them."
Giuseppe Verdi⁸*

After all, facts are never enough. At least not for a writer who, having heard on public radio Rose Freedman's story, having seen what William Shepherd saw, is having trouble facing the high school girl taking orders at McDonald's; the young woman working the convenience store midnight to dawn shift; the college freshmen coeds excited and orderly, writing a short essay explaining who they are and what they expect, all so young and lovely at their desks in rows in this third-floor classroom in a brick building with two stairways, one elevator, and no external fire escape. I can imagine the young women climbing onto the window sills. I am certain they would jump rather than burn. I can see them falling, but I will not permit them to reach the pavement. I also fashion. It's the least I can do. Forgive me, it's all I can do.

NOTES

1. Shepherd's account, "Eyewitness at the Triangle," was first published in the *Milwaukee Journal*, March 27, 1911, the Monday following the Saturday fire. The article was dispatched to the nation's newspapers. At least two web sites offer versions of Shepherd's article. I prefer the version printed in the *Cleveland Press* on March 27: "UP's Coverage of 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire": www.auburn.edu/%7Elowrygr/fire.html. Quotes from Shepherd's UPI dispatch are taken from the article as it appears on this web site. The article (with significant differences) may also be read in the "Documents" section of the web site entitled "The Triangle Factory Fire" prepared by the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Web site address: www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/texts/stein_oots/oots_wgs.html.

2. Facts about this scene are taken from the following articles and radio interview available at the listed web site addresses: (1) "UP's Coverage of 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire"—W. G.

Shepherd's article as printed in the *Cleveland Press*, March 27, 1911: www.auburn.edu/%7Elowrygr/fire.html. (2) "141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire; Trapped High Up in Washington Place Building; Street Strewn with Bodies; Piles of Dead Inside." *New York Times* 26 March 1911:1 in the "Documents" section of the web site entitled "The Triangle Factory Fire" prepared by the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations: www.ilr.cornell.edu/tr...newspaper/nyt_032611_5.html?location=Fire! (3) "New York Fire Kills 148: Girl Victims Leap to Death from Factory." *Chicago Sunday Tribune* 26 March 1911:1 in the "Documents" section of the web site entitled "The Triangle Factory Fire" prepared by the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations: www.ilr.cornell.edu/tr...ts/newspaper/cst_32611.html?location=Fire! (4) "Remembering Rose Freedman, Last Survivor of the Triangle Factory Fire: Broadcast February 25, 2001." CBC Sunday Edition. "This Morning." radio.cbc.ca/programs/thismorning/sites/people/triangle_010225.html. (5) "Leap For Life, Leap Of Death." The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911: www.csun.edu/%7Eghy7463/mw2.html. (6) "Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." *The Encyclopedia of New York City*. Ed. Kenneth T. Jackson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995: www.yale.edu/yup/ENYC/triangle_shirtwaist.html.

3. One web site ("20th Century Western Costume: 1910-1920." Timeline of Costume History) providing illustrations of these dress styles may be found at www.costumes.org/pages/timelinepages/1910sl.htm.

4. For the most part, I have selected Shepherd's "poetry" from the version of his article printed in the *Cleveland Press*, March 27: www.auburn.edu/%7Elowrygr/fire.html. In a few instances, I have substituted the diction and syntax of the article as it appears on the web site of the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations: www.ilr.cornel.edu/trianglefire/texts/stein_oots/oots_wgs.html.

5. The selected comments from Rose Glantz ("Ninth": www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/texts/stein_tf/tf_6.html) and from Rose Cohen ("Nightmare of Survival": www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/)

texts/stein_ootss/ootss_ls.html) are taken from the “Documents” section of the web site entitled “The Triangle Factory Fire” prepared by the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations. This section of the web site provides excerpts from *The Triangle Fire*, edited by Leon Stein. New York: A Carroll & Graf/Quicksilver Book, 1962. Also referred to on the web site is another book edited by Leon Stein, *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy*. New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Company, 1977. The selected comments from Rose Freedman (“Remembering Rose Freedman, Last Survivor of the Triangle Factory Fire: Broadcast February 25, 2001”) are taken from Rose’s recorded interview on the CBC Sunday Edition web site: radio.cbc.ca/programs/thismorning/sites/people/triangle_010225.html. Also referenced on this web site is Annelise Orleck’s book *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States 1900-1965*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

6. This quote as well as the following poetry which I selected and lined out into stanzas are from W. G. Shepherd’s March 27 *Cleveland Press* article: www.auburn.edu/%7Elowrygr/fire.html.

7. This oxymoron is taken from William Butler Yeats’s poem “Easter 1916.” The text of the poem is available at *The Atlantic Online* web site—Poetry Pages, Soundings, “Easter 1916.” www.theatlantic.com/unbound/poetry/soundings/easter.htm.

8. This quote is taken from the Requiem Aeternam—Kyrie eleison of Verdi’s “Manzoni” Requiem. The text of the Requiem is available at “Verdi’s Requiem.” The Classical Music Web Ring, www.geocities.com/Athens/Agora/1985/analys.html.

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