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Mill Running, 1909

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MILL RUNNING, 1909

We have other names
than the men give us for the looms.
For the woof, a bark; for the warp,
we're wild geese. The skeins of cotton,
leash rods, and heddles we call by knots
and fits we make with hands—a dialect
like mother's mute morning chores.
Most of the time we don't speak,
like her, against the air stitched
so thick with noise it's a white freight,
a waterfall. The sign we make for *mill running*
is a fist as piston cranking the elbow
in small circles, like one-armed shadow boxing.
Or we whistle our way through
our cocked ears for wings.

Mother woke me up an hour earlier today
when the mist hung on the road like muslin.
May, and the dew on the new shoots
is a million fisheyes. My boots are slick,
black, and shine when I get here
where the cotton sucks the light
from the thirty-seven windows.
I punch into the dark.
I have no feet or hands.
I'm the black name the looms make
for us all. I'm a man.