

TEGAN JANE SCHETRUMPF

## *The Cotton Mill*

*for Elizabeth Gaskell*

Great spools of threaded white

hang in fine baleen curtains

like a feminine printing press.

Spidersilk and steel criss-cross.

One machine is like a woman's head,

fecund with curling pins.

Another, like a typewriter,

dispenses cotton pills rather than letters.

The jargon is a banquet:

willowing, carding, roving, mule spinning, lapping,

the fibre of each word, soft in the mouth

is tasteless candy floss.

The Moirae know this place.

They wait behind the woolly batts and turgid bales,

while working waifs breathe in the fuzzy air.

They smile and gulp.

The wadding pads their paining bellies out.

This is your world.

You couldn't live beside a monolithic beast

with its dragon puffs and grinding jaws

and not say something.

In one swooning love story  
you got away with treatises  
on economics, industry, religion, social welfare...  
thank God you married a minister!

In my world,  
the social novel's not in favour.  
We've forgotten how to fit the whole world in a book.

We live beneath the belly of a creature  
whose boxy metal feet are data refrigerators  
astride continents.

We spin its fibres too.  
Irukandji blue,  
brittle as spaghetti strands but capable of light refraction.

The iridescent net casts wide,  
a nuclear glow settles around the landscape's shoulders.

In this eerie twilight, we glimpse the creature's face:

It is a burgeoning horse,  
the canon and catalogue of human knowledge.  
Upon its back  
we were once riders  
now children, fleas, amoebae  
clinging to its hide.

The horizon grows.  
The air is filled with static, white ash,  
wisps of paper. We choke and splutter  
on fluff and fibre insignificance.

The story goes untold.

We feed the screen ideas,  
carpenters tapping at the keyboard, as though  
we're building something.