In this week’s poem an elderly Maine woman tells such vivid stories about her early life, she transports her listener, poet Elizabeth Tibbetts of Hope, back to the past.

Eighty-Five
by Elizabeth Tibbetts

“Shoo,” she says and waves me away like a big fly, though she’s been happy to talk, her lipsticked mouth taking me word by word through her life: born in this town, never left, widowed once, divorced twice, one daughter—now dead—and forty years in the fish factory.

She and the girls loved every minute of it, racing—piece work, you know. Gossip swooping through the long room like a flock of starlings while their hands, separate animals, filled hundreds of tins day after day. Some days they’d lift a big icy fish from the crate, lay it on the boiler to steam, then eat it with their fingers. There was never anything so fresh. She fiddles with a button on her robe, her nails roughly painted to match her mouth, and no, she doesn’t need help with her shampoo, washing her creases, soaking her swollen feet.

She looks as though she never could get out of that chair, but somehow it’s easy to see how she would have stood on a corner in the South End, her feet in pumps, one hip cocked, talking to a girlfriend, and seeming not to notice the men from the shipyard loose on Saturday night in their clean white shirts.