

The Cotton Grower

TILL: We walk through unplanted pathways between mixed crops of sorghum and maize that grow higher than our heads. There are no formal fences or boundaries between different kinds of planting or between different farmer's fields. We stop when Comfort, who's translating, says that the pretty pink and white flowering plants around us, are the cotton. The grower tells us that he begins each new season by digging up all the old cotton plants, then tilling his four acres of land.

Vast pillars of sharp and jagged stone spring upwards through the pale horizon, carving holes in the tender cloud and slotting neatly into place. Their rough skin is worn and ancient, a wrinkled monolith covered in a thick beard of green. Cursed to forever guard unending plains and flat-topped trees. Some things will never change. Swirls of opal and pearl blaze and recede like shadows on the retina wall.

RIDGE: When the soil is loose and ready to absorb the first heavy rains of the season, it's pulled up into rows and ridges for seed sowing and good irrigation. I don't ask about machinery, assuming that the *box ridges* are hoed into shape by hand – they are very neat but not absolutely uniform. It's February now and halfway through the rainy season. The dusty red paths we walk are heat-cracked, but the soil is damp in the shade, between the ridges of green, rain-fed plants.

A strange and lonely mattress collects spatters of brown dust as droning engines and tired feet pass on the corner. The memory of something warm and tender. Laughter tinkles in the night, a gentle embrace indented forever on the smooth quilting. Stains seep in coagulating droplets through the decaying skin, coiling round rusted springs while trails of blooming burgundy creep steadily like the spores of a new Pangea. Slime heads spread like a dense fur on pink plaster. Deep in the dark and forgotten corners of the old house, water flows in neat rows, and mouse holes flood.

SOW: In October, when the rainy season proper starts, seeds are planted into the ridges at double the final required amount. Germination happens quickly in the wet heat, and the cotton seedlings break through within a week. I ask if the farmer receives seeds back from the previous year's crop, after they are removed by an industrial *gin* – short for 'cotton engine'. He says not, he needs to start afresh each year by buying them from the company. Later I see the seeds, baled high in the ginnery shed.

Is it possible for things to be different? The fate of bright buds sealed by the cold metal cufflinks and crisp white shirt of uniform fortuity. The pills of bated breath turn over and over in a steel drum. Cascading and colliding in still and silent combat, the muffled ripping of transparent arteries pollutes the stagnant air. Pea, olive, and emerald ride like victors through the fleshy streets whilst caged strands look on in horror.

THIN: The seedlings and the weeds grow fast. When the plants are about six inches tall, they are thinned to sets of two; half are removed to make space for air circulation, growth, and the formation of flowers. The bi-coloured cotton flowers are creamy/white while immature, changing to a familiar vivid pink when fertilised. In *My Garden (Book)*, Jamaica Kincaid reminds us that cotton is a close relative of the pink Hollyhock, a beloved cottage-garden ornamental plant.

Asking why and forgetting how, returning from the dead used to be something you knew how to do. The blades twirl with the elegant dance of murder, moving closer as the young ones tremble, coiling and twisting round the legs and arms of their parents. Severed thumbs writhe and wriggle blindly in the pale evening light while viridescent indexes ascend to gilded awakenings. Families of factory flora predestined for painful metamorphosis. The tiles of cold clean green are purged of their wrongdoings.

SPRAY: The conversation is animated around the need to spray against the Cotton Bollworm; twenty-litre drums of insecticide have to be bought from the ginnery along with the seeds, and local women are employed to spray the crop seven times each season. The farmer opens a white bud and what looks like a caterpillar is curled inside, he calls it *The American Horse*. David Livingstone's 1859 letter in Chichiri Museum, described Malawi as; *a cotton producing country of unknown extent ...which offers facilities greater than America.*

The iron tongue laps at the spilled droplets of motionless poison. Suspended and glistening, the scales of mercury are poised in arches to be unleashed. Chocking on hardening rage and drowning in the heat of unfamiliar suns. A serpentine jester juggles recklessly with decaying uvulas that pop in bursts of squirming larvae. Burrowing through fluorescent bullet holes and gasoline trenches. Sitting quietly with hands folded in rows of ordered panic, suppressed in chalked equations and slates of gold. It was a pleasure to burn.

PICK: When ripe fruits open to expose the cotton seed-bolls, pickers are brought in from nearby villages. They take their full baskets and bags home each day until there is enough cotton to make twenty bales worth. Comfort tells me that, in colonial times and during President Kamuzu Banda's reign, sorting and grading the cotton was part of the pickers' job — this is now done by the ginnery. Payment rates are set according to the fluctuating cotton market, and often the grower must accept a very low price; if he can't afford to pay the pickers, they keep a bale each as payment.

All is still and quiet. A smooth beak breaks the surface tension. In the gloaming hours they come in droves, slowly first, then all at once. Bound eternally to the sweet organs of sickly ecstasy that herald the coming of ancients. Oblivious, the last remaining treasures lie together. Lovers in kemmer, entwined in the suffering of not knowing what is yet to come. A whirring hive clangs and clatters all around them. Antennaed columns pierce and disrupt, transporting the chosen embryos. The split yolks are set carefully aside, plucked from their leafy island and hastened away into the unfathomable night.